

Dave Day, (2014). *The 'English athlete is born not made': Coaching, Amateurism, and Training in Britain 1912-1914*. Presentation at Sport and Leisure on the Eve of the First World War symposium, MMU Cheshire, Friday 27th and Saturday 28th June, 2014.

In 2012, Britain finished third in the Olympic medal table, winning twenty-nine golds, a performance unmatched since 1908. This success was partly attributed to the employment of elite coaches, signalling a shift in attitudes in Britain where coaching had been a substantially under-resourced area of the sporting landscape for over a century. This presentation explores the status of British coaching on the eve of the First World War through the lens of the coaching debate that followed the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, which epitomized the tensions between amateur idealists resistant to change and their more pragmatic colleagues who wanted to be more competitive.

The amateur ethos, coaching, and training

The Edwardian middle classes operated within a status hierarchy, at the pinnacle of which stood a public-school-educated professional class that distinguished itself through communal markers such as sport and its associated philosophy of amateurism. Antagonism towards commercialized sport encompassed an antipathy to paid coaches, reinforced by a contempt for specialization. The gentleman amateur was a gifted 'all-rounder' who played several games well with apparent ease while avoiding coaching, which undermined elegance of style, and intensive training. Gentleman amateurs also believed that lower-class trainers could not properly shape superior upper-class bodies, nor would they be able to understand the aesthetics of the style vital to rowing in a crew. The realities of elite sport, however, meant that amateur ideals were not always adhered to. After Edmund Warre urged a ban on foreign crews at Henley, Frank Lowe, captain of London Rowing Club, argued that if foreign crews were barred because they trained more rigorously than the universities then the universities should be excluded because they trained much more than metropolitan clubs and so were 'more nearly allied to the professional.'¹ What legislators overlooked was that the symbolic capital and feelings of personal satisfaction that some athletes received from winning persuaded them to seek professional advice. As a result, men like Spencer Wisdom were able to sustain coaching careers, especially as international opportunities proliferated before 1914.

American coaching and British reaction

Like their British counterparts, Americans defined an amateur as one who had never 'taught, pursued, or assisted at athletic exercises for money',² although professional coaches were routinely employed, especially in the colleges. This resulted in a highly methodical, coach-centred model emphasizing excellence and winning by adopting industrialized approaches to team organization.³ Outside the colleges, clubs recruited top coaches such as Michael Murphy, who trained the 1900, 1908, and 1912 Olympic teams,⁴ men who were respected and remunerated in a way that led to considerable criticism in Britain. British oarsmen were suspicious of the control afforded to the professional coach, 'to whom the impulse is to take advantage of everything', while athletic administrators objected to organizations subsidizing selected performers and providing them with professional coaching, a system 'radically vicious, and more likely to kill than to foster the genuine spirit of sport'.⁵ The *Daily Mail* highlighted the 'human training stables' in which trainers like Murphy employed a 'scientific process and professional bullying' while *The Times* supported a British approach which did not force athletes to specialize or put them under a 'paid professor of the dynamics of the human body'.⁶

Coaching and the Olympics

In 1908, Britons 'learnt that in speed and strength we are far behind the Americans' although amateurs remained sanguine,

Business-like methods may sometimes have results which, from our British and possibly insular point of view, have a tendency to spoil the game. After giving all due honour to the magnificent

¹ *The Times*, July 18, 1901, 7; *Baily's Monthly Magazine*, LXXV (April 1901): 226-227, 470-471.

² Cooke, *The Fourth Olympiad*, 774.

³ William H. Lewis, 'Making a Football Team', *Outing* XLI no. 2 (November 1902): 221.

⁴ Michael Murphy, *Athletic Training* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1914), Preface xiii.

⁵ *The Badminton Magazine*, October 1895, 419-420; December 1895, 574-592.

⁶ *Daily Mail*, March 28, 1903, 4; *The Times*, July 26, 1910, 21.

performances of the Americans...we have contrived to exhibit a very respectable degree of excellence, and so we shall not go far wrong, in the cause of true sport, if we stick to our antiquated methods.⁷

It was late 1911 before any coaching initiatives emerged, firstly through the formation of an Athletes' Advisory Club, composed mostly of Oxbridge graduates, to supply amateur coaches, since a gentleman athlete could only be 'properly coached by a man who was also a gentleman'.⁸ A second development was the AAA's appointment as chief athletic advisor of F.W. Parker, who accompanied the team to Stockholm along with journalist Sam Mussabini, an athletics coach, Harcourt Gold, who had coached the winning crew in 1908, and eleven professional trainers.⁹ An official system of counting points resulted in America heading the table, followed by Sweden, guided by Ernest Hjertberg, who had been coaching in America.¹⁰ Britain placed third, leading amateur coach F.A.M. Webster to express a 'feeling of shame that we should fall so low as to be beaten by even the lesser European nations, who for generations past have been our pupils in all sporting pastimes.'¹¹ *The Times* observed,

Our representation at Stockholm was deplorable, not because we do not possess abundance of first-class material, but because the arrangements made for...the training and the preparation for our athletes, and the care taken of them at Stockholm were almost pathetically farcical.¹²

For one *Spectator* correspondent, 'the failure was due to bad training, bad organization, and want of spirit...If men are representing their nation they should at least attempt to win...it is bad advertising...for a nation to send into the Stadium...a large group of men unprepared to do the nation honour'. Across the Atlantic, *Harper's Weekly* reported that British complacency had received a 'rude jolt'.¹³ Moss compared pitting the British athletes with the Americans as putting 'an army of untrained men armed with pikes into the field with a well-drilled force with every modern scientific implement'.¹⁴

The coaching debate

The 'tale of national disaster' at Stockholm,¹⁵ engendered a public debate about coaching. An anti-coaching rhetoric was evident in objections to the coaching and training practices of other countries, particularly of the Americans, whose system of specialization was condemned as 'a *reducto ad absurdum*' of the meaning of sport. Although Britain had taught the world to play games for fun, 'other nations now made it a business', and state sponsored programmes were emerging in Europe where different sporting histories and social contexts resulted in the widespread adoption of the American model.¹⁶ Austria engaged American coach Alexander Copland, Germany appointed four national athletics coaches, headed by Alvin Kraenzlein, formerly coach of Princeton University and four times Olympic champion, while France established long-term training camps under coach George Hébert.¹⁷ The publication of the British Olympic Council (BOC) *Aims and Objects of the Olympic Games Fund* in 1913, further fuelled the debate by asking NGBs to prepare schemes for 'the systematic preparation and training' of their available talent (Table 1). The BOC then

⁷ Caspar Whitney, 'The View-Point: Olympic Games American Committee Report', *Outing* 53, (November 1908): 248.

⁸ *Otautau Standard and Wallace Country Chronicle*, June 16, 1914, 7; A.B. George, 'An Athletes' Advisory Club', *Manchester Guardian*, December 23, 1911, 14; *Grey River Argus*, October 23, 1912, 7; *Straits Times*, August 28, 1912, 2.

⁹ For full details see Dave Day, 'Massaging the Amateur Ethos: Professional Coaches at Stockholm in 1912', *Sport in History* 32 no. 2 (2012): 157-182.

¹⁰ E. Bergvall, ed., *The Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912*, (Trans. Ray E. Adams, Stockholm: Wahlstrom and Widstrand, 1913), 289-303.

¹¹ University of Birmingham, *Britain in World Sport*, 9.

¹² *The Times*, July 27, 1912, 10.

¹³ W. Beach Thomas, 'Games Versus Athletics', *Spectator*, 109 no. 4388, August 3, 1912, 167; Edward Baynard Moss, 'America's Athletic Missionaries', *Harper's Weekly* July 27 1912, 9.

¹⁴ P.J. Moss, 'Britain and the Olympic Games. Our muddling system of management and general lack of esprit de corps. Four Years to Berlin', *Daily Mirror*, July 23, 1912, 14.

¹⁵ Duke of Westminster, letter to the editor, *The Times*, August 27, 1913, 3.

¹⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, July 23, 1912, 16; *Saturday Review*, August 17, 1912, 195-6; *Manchester Guardian*, March 14, 1913, 12.

¹⁷ Roberta Park, High-Protein Diets, "Damaged Hearts," and rowing men: Antecedents of modern sports medicine and exercise science, 1867-1928. In: J.O. Holloszy (ed.), *Exercise and Sport Science Reviews*, 25, Baltimore, MD: Williams and Wilkins, (1997), 141; Krüger, 'Buying Victories is Positively Degradating', 183-200; Forgotten decisions: The IOC on the eve of World War I, *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, VI, (1997): 85-98.

launched an appeal for £100,000 but the public were unresponsive and in January 1914 the appeal was closed, leaving only £3,850 to be distributed for training purposes.¹⁸

These initiatives resulted in a polarisation of amateur opinion. Some NGBs responded positively. The ASA strategy involved the engagement of seven professional instructors for twenty-five weeks, while the AAA proposed a national network of training sites, staffed by official trainers. In January 1914, they appointed Walter Knox, a professional who had acted as the 1912 Canadian Olympic coach, as national coach and plans were put in place for a network of supplementary trainers.¹⁹ By contrast, the ARA declined to be associated with the Olympic fund, arguing that oarsmen lost their amateur status if their expenses were paid by funds raised outside of their own clubs. One *Times* correspondent countered that, while some believed that giving professional coaching to an amateur turned him into a professional, everyone outside the 'charmed circle of the public school' should have similar opportunities.²⁰ For rowing coach Rudolf Lehmann, however, 'the scheme...means specialisation' and achieving success this way would make 'professional slaves' of the athletes. In defence of the proposals, it was pointed out that Britain would compete in Berlin and that it needed to be decided if, 'the British contingent is to consist of a keen but inglorious mob, or of a properly selected, properly trained team which will...do credit to the country.' The Southport Physical Training College principal argued that Britain had too much responsibility to 'throw up the sponge' so a National Olympic Society should be formed to find suitable physical material and train it.²¹

Much of the argument against professional coaching was directed against suggestions that Britain would benefit from adopting American methods. Within the Athletes' Advisory Club some argued for importing an American trainer while others believed that English training methods would be just as successful, 'provided men were willing to submit to them'.²² The *Daily Mail* added fuel to the fire by noting that university hammer throwers had improved by thirty feet after a little instruction from the Americans. With the right training and coaching, similar improvements could be achieved in other events. This drew a vitriolic response from 'Outspoken' in the *Daily Express*, who found it unbelievable that England, the home of athletics, the nursery ground of track and field sports, would take the 'degrading step' of employing an American college trainer for £2,000. This was,

...an insult to our own good men; a craven acknowledgement of weak-kneed legislators; a menace to our chances of again rising to our proper place; and a playing into the hands of our keenest (and I can safely say, not too scrupulous) opponents.

Although many 'professional masters of the art of training' had disappeared after being excluded by the AAA, Sam Wisdom, 'Cabbage' Perry, and Harry Ransom were among those still operating. Sadly, the AAA would never condescend to engage these experts in the 'trainer's art', even though most would be willing to work for out-of-pocket expenses and be happy to be paid bonuses for developing champions and international athletes. These men should be supervised by chief coaches, such as Charles Rammage, a 'scientist in everything relating to sprinting', who would form a professional advisory committee for the AAA, the BOC, and the 'Varsities. Their combined fees would amount to little more than one-half of the £2,000 suggested for the college trainer. Additional sectional trainers should be selected by an independent committee, rather than being left to 'amenable but innocent-members of the AAA and BOC'. The author concluded that if,

¹⁸ BOC, 1913, *Aims and Objects*, 1-44; *The Times*, March 14, 1913, 8; September 5, 1913, 11; August 18, 1913, 6; September 5, 1913, 11; July 23, 1913, 14; BOA, Council Meeting Minutes, 2 April 1913; *The Straits Times*, October 18, 1913, 12; *The Times*, August 18, 1913, 6; *Daily Mail*, February 1, 1913, 5; *The Times*, January 16, 1914, 9, 50.

¹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, October 14, 1912, 14; ASA Committee Minutes, October 13, 1912; *The Times*, September 27, 1913, 10; September 2, 1913, 11; Day, 'Massaging the Amateur Ethos', 17; *The Times*, January 16, 1914, 55; MCAAA Committee Minutes, 3 July 3, 1913; August 7, 1913; August 14, 1913; August 27, 1913; *Daily Mirror*, July 23, 1913, 14; *Manchester Guardian*, August 29, 1913, 8; Sports Council, *Coaching Matters: A Review of Coaching and Coach Education in the United Kingdom* (London: Sports Council, 1991), 10; *The Times*, January 16, 1914, 50; Lovesey, *The Official Centenary History of the AAA*, 119; Moon, *Albert Hill*, 22; *Manchester Guardian*, January 16, 1914, 9, 55; AAA Olympic Committee Minutes, November 21, 1913; February 20, 1914; Day, 'From Barclay to Brickett', 239.

²⁰ *Morning Post*, September 25, 1913, 5; *The Times*, October 22, 1913, 12.

²¹ *The Times*, July 21, 1912; August 17, 1912, 11; August 14, 1912; A. Alexander, 'Games Versus Athletics', *Spectator*, 109 no. 4388, August 3, 1912, 167

²² *Straits Times*, August 28, 1912, 2; *Otautau Standard and Wallace County Chronicle*, July 1, 1913, 2.

Varsity people want an American trainer so very badly, they are rich enough to have one on their own account. Let them try him by all means - and note results if they come up against the English-trained men, if the right trainers - as is so seldom the case in this unfortunate country - get the job.²³

Many others resisted the 'outcry for the importation of American coaches and trainers for the purpose of teaching us what we had originally taught them'. Concerns were expressed that a horde of Americanized trainers, employing their purely empiric craft, 'based upon a smattering of physiology and a vast self-assurance, will march onward through many failures to some rare success'. Another foresaw 'an army of professional coaches' over-running the country',²⁴ and there were dire warnings about adopting an American model,

Americans are obsessed with pot-hunting. Runners are set upon by paid coaches so that while they were still plastic they could learn the machine-like characteristic of American champions and of those of no other country. They become semi-professionals who cheat just as they did in Stockholm. American athletics keep the athlete from being a good all-round man and he has all the defects of a premature specialist. We should be thankful that the recent appeal for the formalising and perfecting of our athletics on the American model fell on deaf ears.²⁵

The Aftermath

In many respects, the elite British amateur sportsman was faced with a difficult dilemma if he wanted to be competitive before the First World War. Amateurism implied that winning needed to be kept in perspective but the coaching debate suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the fluid nature of Edwardian amateurism because this philosophy was interpreted differently according to social class, playing status, or local traditions. Most countries were less class based and much more flexible about how amateur values should be interpreted than Britain. In America, amateurism was rapidly modified in a society which rejected class theories based on hereditary attributes and the result was a highly systematic coach-centred model,²⁶ which brought consistent international success. While there was a grudging acceptance in Britain that Olympic success increasingly required a commitment to coaching and training, amateur unease with this approach was reflected in the master-servant relationship imposed on professionals in contrast to the coach-centred system adopted in America. Actually, it seems that for some critics it was not the idea of training and coaching that remained an issue but the prospect of engaging too closely with American methods, which undermined the amateur values inherent to British sport. This reluctance to grant a controlling role to professional coaches was connected not only to the amateur ideology but also to a broader nationalism, especially when it became clear that the American paradigm was being adopted elsewhere.

There were signs before 1914 that the amateur hegemony could become more pliable when placed under pressure and that the combination of poor performances in Stockholm with increasing concerns over national decadence generated a willingness to consider more pragmatic approaches to coaching and training. However, any potential legacy was short-lived, partly due to the outbreak of hostilities in July 1914, which, coupled with the general indifference of the British public, meant that the strategies proposed by those involved with the BOC, AAA, and the ASA, were not revived after 1918. Debates over coaching subsided and amateur administrators, many of whom felt that Britain had little to learn from foreigners and continued to believe in the natural superiority of the British sportsman, reverted to type. They became defensive over their failure to compete effectively and reacted by insisting that they were more interested in playing fairly than winning and by placing even more emphasis on the place of the volunteer, as administrator and coach.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. Although the individuals associated with the BOC report were challenging the status quo, the barriers of amateurism remained strong. Altering years of tradition would require a change in mind set and this had not been fully achieved in 1914. These men were invariably Oxbridge graduates and students, many of whom had enlisted in the Officer Training Corps, and the evidence suggests that mortality within this group in the Great War was much higher, percentage wise, than in the other ranks. The deaths of this 'Lost Generation', thousands of educated and wealthy individuals who

²³ *Daily Mail*, February 1, 1913, 5; *Daily Express*, February 26, 1913, 8.

²⁴ *Daily Express*, September 19, 1913, 5; *Manchester Guardian*, August 28, 1913, 7; *The Times*, August 27, 1913, 3.

²⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, February 25, 1914, 8.

²⁶ Day, 'Massaging the Amateur Ethos', 1; *Professionals, Amateurs and Performance*, especially chapter 6.

could potentially have become the nation's sporting leaders, significantly affected moves for reform.²⁷ There is also a hint within the post-Stockholm coaching debate, and indeed in the discourse before the Games, that there had been something of an 'us' and 'them' confrontation between some university men and amateurs from other sections of society who were inclined to take different attitudes to their sport. It seems possible, therefore, that the coaching argument subsided somewhat after the War because this privileged class was replaced with men who had not shared their perspectives on sport in the immediate pre-War period. Huggins and Williams have also highlighted a degree of 'conservatism in sport.' The experiences and loss of war caused many individuals to view the pre-War era as a time of security and reason and this may explain a nostalgic desire to return to a world that supposedly existed before 1914.²⁸ The wider community, for the most part, had been generally ignorant of the debates surrounding coaching schemes and had other things on their mind at that point so, for the majority, it was natural to desire a return to the traditional values of sport in which amateurism continued to provide a philosophical direction. It might also be worth considering the broader relationship between Britain and America in the immediate post-War period and what affect that might have had on coaching perspectives in both countries.

While the War undoubtedly had a major impact, the virulence of the debate surrounding coaching proposals in 1913 and 1914 suggests that these initiatives were never going to remain uncontested. For the rest of the twentieth century, amateur values continued to take precedence over any residual coaching legacy left by the post-Stockholm initiatives, demonstrating just how fragile those initiatives had been and emphasising the power of resistance inherent among those who adhered to traditional perspectives. Although the 1936 BOA report conceded that devoting more time to specialist training would improve standards it also queried whether this would 'demonstrate anything of national importance' while, in 1938, Bevil Rudd praised the work of amateur coaches who 'nobly tackled the spade-work that an army of paid coaches undertake in America and on the Continent'.²⁹ Seventy years later, this legacy of voluntarism and amateurism remained a pervasive influence in Britain where three-quarters of the estimated total of 1,109,000 coaches surveyed in 2004 and 2007 were unpaid volunteers.³⁰

²⁷ Grace Horseman, *Growing up between 1900 & 1920* (Devon: Cottage Publishing, 1996), vi; Jay Winter, "Lost Generation" of the First World War', *Population Studies* 31, no. 3 (1977): 449; Reginald Pound, *The Lost Generation* (London: Constable, 1964).

²⁸ Mike Huggins and Jack Williams, *Sport and the English, 1918-1939* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 75.

²⁹ BOA report for 1936; Bevil Rudd (1938)

³⁰ MORI (2004) *Sports coaching in the UK* (Leeds: Sportscoach UK); Townsend, R and North J (2007) *Sports coaching in the UK II* (Leeds: Sportscoach UK); UK Sport Sports Coaching in the UK III: A statistical analysis of coaches and coaching in the UK January 2011. All reports available at sports coach UK website (www.sportscoachuk.org)