

'The Committee is not in Favour of Professional Coaches'¹: Preparing for Paris in 1924.

Dave Day

D.J.Day@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

The debates over coaching and training that followed the disappointing performance of the British team at Stockholm in 1912 suggested that the ethos of amateurism, which had, at least superficially, informed the practice of the nation's elite athletes for over forty years, was at last being challenged. Disappointingly, though, for those progressives arguing for professional coaching support for international athletes, the First World War interrupted their attempts to modernise and post-war elite sport was characterised by a resumption of traditional amateur attitudes among National Governing Body officials. In the twelve months before the 1924 Paris Olympics, however, the debate was revived by individuals concerned about Britain's lack of competitiveness in the international arena, most especially in throwing and jumping events. In late 1923, the British Olympic Association (BOA) initiated an investigation into the state of British athletics and this paper considers the evidence presented to the short-lived BOA Decies Commission, which was active throughout December and which interviewed coaches, athletes, and administrators. Using original transcripts of these meetings, this paper highlights the key concerns of these witnesses about coaching and coaches before drawing some conclusions about attitudes to professional coaches in Britain in the 1920s.

Keywords: Decies Commission; Amateurism; Coaching; Olympics; Athletics.

Introduction

The First World War interrupted attempts to modernize British coaching² and post-war elite sport was characterized by a return to traditional amateur attitudes among sporting administrators. An upper-middle class and aristocratic British Olympic Committee (BOC) firmly believed that maintaining British sporting prestige could best be achieved through continued participation in Olympic competition but they were faced with a dilemma between adhering to amateur principles or adopting the systematic training approaches operating elsewhere. Following Antwerp, where Britain's fifteen gold medals placed them well behind the forty-one won by the Americans, the coaching debate re-emerged and intensified. While American 'scientific training' clearly produced results, many amateurs believed it better to lose 'rather than to risk the stigma of semiprofessionalism' through coaching,³ and Eustace Miles doubted whether Britons would ever go in for the serious training needed to produce athletic specialists, rather than all-rounders.⁴ The *Manchester Guardian* objected to the over-self-confidence of the Americans, whose methods were 'wholly alien to ours' with good athletes, selected by a professional coach, receiving specialized training. Although Americans were more successful,

¹ 'Athletics: What the NCAA contemplate doing. Preparing for Paris', *Athletic News*, September 10, 1923, 2.

² Dave Day, *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 27 and Saturday 28 June, 2014.

³ F.A.M. Webster, 'Scientific Application of Brains to Sport,' *Baily's Magazine of Sport and Pastimes* 710 (October 1919): 163.

⁴ 'Mr Eustace Miles on the Games' *The Scotsman*, Thursday August 26, 1920, 6

English sportsmen, without 'such strict training methods and, without the autocratic coach', had more enjoyment.⁵ The *Observer* pointed out, however, that almost every foreign country had its Director of Athletics, usually an old army or university man, and Britain needed to appoint a man of 'good education and social position', supported by expert coaches who toured training centres around the country.⁶ This dichotomy between traditionalists and progressives presaged a British Olympic Association (BOA) special commission, appointed to take 'evidence on matters of far-reaching importance to the athletic future of the country' in late 1923. The constitution of the committee, which sat daily for a fortnight under chairmanship of Lord Decies, reflected the core membership of the BOA and, at its first meeting on Monday 15 October, the commission agreed that evidence should be taken from coaches, athletes, and administrators through a process of question and answer.⁷ While these interviews covered all aspects of athletics, this paper deals only with evidence relating specifically to coaching.

The Decies Commission, October 1923

Professional coaches

The commission interviewed a number of professional coaches starting with sixty-year-old Ernest Hjertberg, Swedish by birth but a naturalised American, whose career had included coaching both the Swedish and Dutch national teams. Hjertberg assumed that a chief coach would be selected and that, since athletic potential was so scattered, that he would be supported by assistant coaches. After being instructed by the chief coach these assistants should carry out their duties at White City and Crystal Palace and this approach should be replicated throughout the country wherever the best athletes lived.⁸ The commission was concerned about conflict with coaches who had different methods, but Hjertberg suggested that the chief coach should use his judgement in working with coaches, not changing anything without good reason. If he was appointed to this role and there were four main centres around the country he would travel around the country keeping in continuous touch with the coaches.⁹ He then outlined a proposed programme. For the next month he would have athletes concentrate on their techniques, especially in the field events, before taking a month-and-a-half of rest. They would recommence work on 15 January, doing the same sort of preparatory work as before the break on about three days a week, and easy work would be carried on for about two months before intensive training commenced. This would give at least one month for preparation before the County and District championships. The commission questioned the notion of winter training and struggled to see how working men could train to this extent, particularly if Sundays were involved.¹⁰ Through its questioning, commission members exposed other amateur concerns. Surely a more intelligent athlete could be developed more quickly and was specialization essential in producing an Olympic athlete? When asked whether the Olympic athlete was the product of training or was 'one of nature's aristocrats', Hjertberg replied that, all but one of his athletes had been 'hand-made champions', who had been successful through perseverance and coaching.¹¹

⁵ 'American Athletes. How Oxford and Cambridge Team were welcomed', *Manchester Guardian*, August 10, 1921, 9; 'University Sport in England & America', *Manchester Guardian*, May 16, 1922, 5.

⁶ *Observer* April 27, 1924, 22.

⁷ 'Terms of Reference', British Olympic Association, October 9, 1923, 2-3.

⁸ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Monday 15 October 1923, 1.

⁹ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Monday 15 October 1923, 10-11, 14.

¹⁰ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Monday 15 October 1923, 2.

¹¹ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Monday 15 October 1923, 5-9, 14.

The British professionals interviewed had much less to say than Hjertberg, although whether this was the result of their ongoing master-servant relationship with commission members or the way in which the minutes chose to record them is hard to say. Alec Nelson, then coach to Cambridge University, thought that there should be centres established around the country with coaches at each centre. He suggested a system of having registered trainers and educating them up to the chief coach's standard, although some might not be happy about having someone supervise their work.¹² Bill Thomas, who coached the RAF,¹³ struggled to give any real advice and revealed his relationship to commission members by using 'Sir' in his replies. When asked what he thought about another professional being appointed as a 'super-coach' he replied that 'if he could teach me anything, I am always ready to learn'. Thomas believed it was difficult for a professional coach to earn his living by coaching in Britain and he believed that professionals should be paid 'about £6 or £8 a week, according to his ability, and if a man gave his whole time to it'. Mr Edwards, trainer for Derby County Football Club, was questioned about his work as athletics coach to Shrewsbury public school and, like Thomas, he showed his deference by responding with a 'Sir' when questions were posed to him.¹⁴ Sam Mussabini was also much less insightful than might have been expected given that the commission recognized his 'wide experience as a trainer'. While he was positive about having the White City and Crystal Palace available, he was far less amenable to the idea of having to negotiate with an 'expert coach', since 'He would probably be in conflict with my ideas. No doubt he would hold strong opinions of his own, as he should and I too hold strong opinions and I think we should clash'. He would listen to his views on field events but only 'If he were a gentleman'.¹⁵

Athletes

The commission interviewed both past and present athletes. Joe Binks, ex-mile record holder, thought there was enough work for a professional trainer to be employed at the White City for six days a week but he was 'rather afraid of a foreigner' and thought employing a foreign coach would be unfair to British coaches like Alec Nelson, although he recognized that Nelson could not coach field events.¹⁶ Albert Hill, the current British mile record holder, coached by Mussabini and later to become a professional coach, was asked if British athletes would be prepared to undergo so 'organized system of training as in force in the United States, Sweden and other countries' and replied that an ambitious athlete would do anything he was told. When asked if he would accept advice from someone like Alec Nelson or Harry Andrews, he said that an athlete should normally listen to his own coach but, if his coach thought the head coach's methods were better, then he would follow that advice. Hill would not put himself 'under a foreigner however good he was because his ideas would be entirely different from mine',¹⁷ but British high jump record holder B. Howard Baker had learned a lot from Walter Knox, the Canadian coach appointed by the AAA in 1914, and said that a good coach, irrespective of his nationality, would always be accepted by the majority of athletes. A chief coach should appoint the best available men in each district to work under his instructions, and have frequent trials to assess progress. When asked if his own coach would take instructions from another, 'superior

¹² Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Wednesday 17 October 1923, 33-35; 'Athletic Coaches: Training Centres Urged for Olympic Games', *Daily Mail*, Saturday October 20, 1923, 6.

¹³ David Colquhoun (Ed.), *As if Running on Air: The Journals of Jack Lovelock*, New Zealand: Craig Potton Publishing, 84; AAA Olympic Committee Minutes 11.06.1912. Birmingham Special Collections AAA/1/2/4/1; OUAC minute book, 16 October 1928, 19 June 1930, OUAC archives.

¹⁴ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Friday 19 October 1923

¹⁵ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Monday 22 October 1923, 86-93.

¹⁶ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Tuesday 16 October 1923, 20-22.

¹⁷ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Tuesday 16 October 1923, 23-26.

coach', Baker was sure he would be only too glad to do anything he could.¹⁸ Percy Hodge, winner of the steeplechase at Antwerp, recommended that a first-class coach be engaged immediately at the White City but he thought that perhaps amateur trainers might be best and he agreed with instituting an Advisory Board if professionals were engaged.¹⁹ This perspective found another supporter in P.J. Baker, team captain from Antwerp, who considered coaches 'good but not essential' and proposed structural ways to 'do away with undesirable professional training'. He went on to argue for the appointment of a 'small committee of amateurs' who had sufficient 'time to give to the task of supervising the general work of any local trainers and of the chief trainer'.²⁰

Administrators

The athletics administrators interviewed had various perspectives on the need for a chief coach. Mr Eckersley from Manchester believed that amateur trainers would readily accept the advice of an expert professional coach although, like the majority of interviewees, he was certain that a chief coach should not interfere with the athlete or his trainer but just set general guidelines. He agreed with commission members that a well trained 'educated' man with wide world experience would be a better Director of Athletics than a professional coach like Alec Nelson.²¹ David Scott Duncan, from the Scottish AAA, said a chief coach with comprehensive knowledge should be appointed to supervise instruction and training throughout the United Kingdom,²² while Bert Ives was in favour of having a 'super-coach' who would co-operate with club coaches and visit different centres to advise trainers as to the best methods. Ives felt he would be accepted by local coaches if he were 'of the right type' but much would depend on his personality.²³ In contrast, W.W. Alexander from Birchfield Harriers, thought 'no trainer in the world can teach what a man can find out himself' and he would not recommend a professional trainer, although he exempted Alec Nelson because he had 'practically sprung up from the amateur ranks'.²⁴ A. Fattorini, an AAA vice president, agreed saying that the Northern Counties AA already had capable coaches and trainers who were, 'if not entirely honorary, very nearly' and he did not think a super-coach necessary.²⁵

Amateur coaches and medical men

Leading amateur coach, A.B. George, believed that centres should be established in the main towns and a chief coach, who had a 'comprehensive knowledge of field events', engaged to implement a centrally organized plan. Although he would meet opposition, he should get the coaches together, to help them work 'in harmony', and not interfere with a coach if he found he was doing well, even if his methods were different. Commission members were keen on 'a man of education, tact and an expert knowledge of sport' and George was asked whether a professional trainer would be as good as a gentleman amateur. Could he 'talk to the men and get their sympathy in the same way as a man of their own class could?' George thought it better to have a 'man of education' if possible but, if professional coaches were employed, they could be

¹⁸ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Thursday 18 October 1923, 58-63; see also 'Britain and the Olympic Games', *Manchester Guardian*; October 22, 1923, 5.

¹⁹ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Thursday 18 October 1923, 56-57.

²⁰ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Tuesday 23 October 1923, 105-118.

²¹ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Wednesday 17 October 1923, 27-32.

²² 'Athletics: Scotland and the Olympic Games', *The Scotsman* Friday October 26 1923, 3.

²³ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Monday 22 October 1923, 81-85.

²⁴ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Thursday 18 October 1923, 48-51.

²⁵ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Tuesday 23 October 1923, 97-100; 'Preparing for the Olympic Games: British Prospects Brighter than Ever', *Guardian* Oct 27, 1923, 15.

supervised by an Advisory Committee.²⁶ The traditional amateur perspective was articulated most clearly by Dr Adolphe Abrahams, founder member of the Athletes Advisory Club in 1911 and Medical Adviser to the British team in 1912. He emphasized the influence of tradition in Britain and the existence of class distinctions that were not present in America or in Europe. He accepted that a few working-class athletes were gentlemen by nature, but the 'usual type is uncultured, with unpleasant mannerisms, and it is nauseating for the gentleman to mix with that type'. Adolphe also sympathized with those not willing to try field events since 'that sort of specialisation is a most tedious and uninteresting business'. On the question of whether it would be better to appoint a man of the 'Varsity type as an athletic director or to employ a chief coach like Hjertberg or Nelson, he was unequivocal. Speaking 'in confidence', he said of both men that it was 'difficult to say whether their ignorance or their conceit is the greater. Certainly I have never found that they possess any of the knowledge they are credited with'. An amateur type would be preferable and, although his athletic attainments were important, 'I would not omit personality and education, as one is accustomed to do'.²⁷

The work of the commission came to an abrupt conclusion after

members learnt with 'surprise and regret' that their status had been questioned and before continuing they agreed that their proceedings should be formalised.²⁸ At a subsequent BOA meeting it was decided that 'the action taken by the Chairman of the BOA with regard to the Commission be now confirmed by the Council, that a report on the evidence already taken on Athletics be submitted, and that no further evidence be taken by the Commission except at the request of the Council'.²⁹ While it is unclear why BOA members decided to terminate the commission's activities there were signs in the AAA minutes from January 1924 that athletics administrators may not have been entirely happy with their sport being publically discussed in the media by an organisation other than their own.³⁰

Paris and beyond

Athletics received £2,250 in grants from the BOA in 1924,³¹ enabling the AAA to consider engaging trainers, something of a contentious issue after an NCAA meeting in September 1923 had resolved that 'The committee is not in favour of professional coaches'.³² The AAA, however, proposed that professional trainer Harry Andrews should be engaged at Crystal Palace while amateur coach, A.B. George, should go to the White City. A field events coach should be appointed at each ground and a 'first-class coach for field events' should be engaged immediately on a long term basis while district associations were asked to appoint honorary advisors with coaches, honorary coaches, and honorary advisors meeting periodically.³³ In January 1924 it was agreed to appoint Andrews until the Games for £7 a week³⁴ and in February,

²⁶ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Tuesday 16 October 1923, 15-18.

²⁷ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Friday 19 October 1923

²⁸ Minutes Book, BOA Commission on Athletics, 1923, BOA Archives, East London 14 November 1923.

²⁹ British Olympic Association, 12 December, 1923, item 6.

³⁰ AAA General Olympic Committee, 8 January, 1924.

³¹ BOA Minutes of Council and AGM 26/5/25-19/12/28; 'British Olympic Fund: how the Money will be Allocated - Fine Response to Appeals', *Daily Mirror*, December 15, 1923, 14

³² 'Athletics: What the NCAA contemplate doing. Preparing for Paris' *Athletic News*, 10 September 1923, 2.

³³ AAA Olympic Committee 27 August 1923; AAA General Olympic Committee, 18 December, 1923.

³⁴ AAA General Olympic Committee, 18 December, 1923; 8 January, 1924.

the AAA agreed terms with A.B. George for him to act as an honorary coach and to deliver 'lantern lectures' around the country.³⁵

The major concern now for the AAA was to find a suitable field events coach. The direction the Decies commission had taken in the questioning of Hjertberg hints at an interest among BOA members about engaging him for the Games, an interpretation reinforced by an *Observer* article which recalled that when fund raising had first been discussed there had been an opportunity to secure the services of one of the 'greatest coaches on earth' for a reasonable sum but the chance had been allowed to pass.³⁶ Irrespective of whether or not this was referring to Hjertberg, the AAA clearly lacked a field events expert and it seems they were not particularly keen on allowing F.A.M. Webster, founder of the Amateur Field Events Association, to fill the gap. He declined their request to act as honorary field events coach at the White City and Crystal Palace and when he subsequently asked to be appointed honorary field events coach for the British team the committee were 'unable to entertain his proposal'.³⁷ The AAA already had its eye on their preferred candidate. Decies Commission members had recommended Sergeant Starkey, champion weight putter and hammer thrower of Scotland, and, after receiving permission for his appointment from the army in March, and with the support of the BOA, the AAA earmarked £100 to cover his expenses, and including a gratuity of £50.³⁸

The AAA subsequently took some of these men with the team to Paris.³⁹ Athletics trainers Andrews, Claydon, McKerchar, Parrish, Starkey, and Wright, each paid £7 per week, were accompanied by masseurs Battley, Johannson, and Smith,⁴⁰ who each received a gratuity of £10.⁴¹ A.B. George and J.F. Wadmore went as team manager and assistant team manager respectively while Captain J.G. Skeet from the RAF went as medical adviser.⁴² Despite this support, Britain finished fourth in the medal standings and had only nine Olympic champions as compared to fifteen at Antwerp.⁴³ In the field events, Nokes came third in the hammer but the only other top-six finisher was Macintosh in the long jump. As in previous post-Games periods, disappointing performances led to a degree of self-analysis with suggestions, for example, that a scheme of honorary coaches be introduced so that Games preparation could in future take place over three or four years rather than a few months.⁴⁴ The *Observer* noted that the quality of British coaches and masseurs was poor in comparison with the men of 'standing or education' seen abroad and argued that 'it would not be a national disgrace to employ a foreigner to coach our men in these events that we are hopelessly outclassed'.⁴⁵ Since amateurs did not have enough

³⁵ AAA General Olympic Committee, 5 February, 1924; 26 February, 1924; 15 April 1924; *Manchester Guardian* April 19, 1924, 12; April 30, 1924, 3

³⁶ *Observer*, June 29, 1924, 21.

³⁷ AAA General Olympic Committee, 5 February, 1924; 26 February, 1924; 18 March, 1924; 27 May 1924 Birmingham Special Collections AAA/1/2/4/2

³⁸ Transcript of BOA Special Commission on Athletics Thursday 18 October 1923, 63; Tuesday 23 October 1923, 97-100. *Manchester Guardian*, April 14, 1924, 11; AAA General Olympic Committee, 26 February, 1924; 18 March, 1924; 27 May 1924 Birmingham Special Collections AAA/1/2/4/2; 23 June, 1924; 15 April 1924; 16 September, 1924.

³⁹ AAA General Olympic Committee, 6 May, 1924.

⁴⁰ *BOA Official Report 1924*, 14, 18.

⁴¹ AAA General Olympic Committee, 6 May, 1924, 27 May 1924 Birmingham Special Collections AAA/1/2/4/2 AAA General Olympic Committee, 23 June, 1924.

⁴² AAA General Olympic Committee, 15 April 1924, 6 May, 1924.

⁴³ Matthew P. Llewellyn, "Olympic Games Doomed", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28: 5, (2011) 780-790.

⁴⁴ AAA General Olympic Committee, 16 September, 1924.

⁴⁵ *Observer* April 27, 1924, 22.

time to devote to coaching, a professional chief coach and assistant coaches should be appointed to tour the country, a system that had been 'extraordinarily successful' elsewhere in Europe.⁴⁶ Another commentator recognized the success of the American system, where elaborate training quarters were staffed by a 'caste of men who specialized on training', but doubted if it was worthwhile studying 'athletic arts' to this extent. In Britain, 'when we are soundly trounced at some game or another, it is a real explanation, if not an excuse that we play too many games well to be able to play any one game supremely well'. The truth was that 'we play more games than other people and play them more light-heartedly',⁴⁷ a perspective that continued to dominate future British Olympic preparations and resulted in even more failures in Amsterdam in 1928.

⁴⁶ *Observer*, May 11, 1924, 21.

⁴⁷ 'How Games Are Won', *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 29 September 1924, 14.