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Abstract

Britain's athletes and swimmers prepared for the 1948 and 1952 Olympic Games in a landscape of ongoing defeats across all sports by foreign competitors from America, Europe and the Empire. This was not a new phenomenon and merely represented a continuation of the sporting disasters of the pre-War period, the result of a combination of factors including lack of government support, the arrogance of amateur sporting officials, and, in particular, half a century of resistance to the employment of professional coaches. During those fifty years there had been a number of intermittent attempts to establish a British coaching culture and, although these had failed to embed the position of coach into the elite sporting environment, there were signs in the late 1930s that National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of sport were becoming more receptive. This openness extended into the post-WWII period and had led to the appointment of national level coaches by 1948. The Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) appointed amateur Harry Koskie to lead them into the London and Helsinki Olympics while the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) appointed professional coach Geoff Dyson. This paper explores the coaching lives of these men through archival material, newspapers, family records and census data and utilises minutes from NGBs and other organisations to put their coaching practices into the cultural context of the period. The author compares and contrasts the experiences of these two coaches as they tried to make Britain's representatives more competitive with their European and American rivals, and concludes that the structural constraints imposed on them made their tasks almost impossible.

Introduction

When the middle classes took over control of British sport towards the end of the nineteenth century they imposed their amateur values onto the sporting landscape through their voluntary associations, reflecting their preference for the 'volunteer', rather than the paid advisor. As a result, professional trainers and coaches were increasingly marginalised, although never entirely eradicated since it was recognised that elite sportsmen might benefit from specialist advice. The key was to ensure that professionals conformed to accepted social norms and willingly adopted a subservient role in their relationship with their superiors. These attitudes persisted into the second half of the twentieth century when British coaches, in contrast to their counterparts in America and the Soviet bloc, remained at the margins of elite sport. This paper illustrates that reality through the use of biography. Sport occurs not only at 'macro-social' level but at the 'micro-social' level of the individual and social positions such as coach cannot be understood independently of the personal development of their occupant. To uncover the history of coaching we need to study individual lives and this paper utilises family papers, census and governmental records, army records, sporting archives, contemporary texts and newspapers, to explore British coaching in the late 1940s through the careers of two men, Geoff Dyson and Harry Koskie.

Post-1945

Following World War II, many working-class people wanted 'an end to the tradition of "privileged" and "leisured" classes'¹ and this was reflected when the Labour party achieved a 126-seat majority in the 1945 General election.² The anticipated social revolution in the British class system was not forthcoming, however, partly because victory had appeared to confirm that the social order was 'basically sound'.³ Sporting structures returned to their pre-war arrangements and administrators reverted to a sporting philosophy based on their traditional amateur values and a proposal to import foreign coaches was quickly rejected with F.A.M. Webster observing, 'we shall lose more in prestige than we might possibly gain in performance by going hat in hand to some foreign country for a so-called expert'.⁴ The prevailing view

remained that employing foreign 'scientific' systems of training and coaching would inevitably result in athletes being willing to cheat to achieve success.

However, developments put in place before the end of the war, in particular the 1944 Education Act, offered opportunities for the development of home-based coaches. Both athletics and swimming responded positively, although they also created significant difficulties for their coaches, mainly because their coaching schemes focused on producing volunteer coaches rather than on supporting exceptional athletes. In 1947, the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) appointed Geoff Dyson to run coaching courses, coordinate the work of honorary coaches, and act as chief coach at the annual Loughborough Summer School.⁵⁶ While it was not stipulated that his duties included the coaching of elite athletes, the AAA were 'keen to hold our own from a prestige angle'.⁷ It quickly became evident that his workload was too demanding and that the AAA was struggling to pay his salary.⁸ When the Ministry of Education granted the AAA 80 per cent of the cost of three national coaches in August 1947, it stipulated that they had to focus on the training of teachers, organizers and club coaches rather than 'polish up a few stars'⁹ so, when the AAA used this funding to subsidise Dyson's wages, the idea of using him to prepare the 1948 Olympic squad became obsolete.¹⁰ The Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) were also keen to organise support for its Olympians and appointed amateur coach Harry Koskie as 'Chief Swimming Advisor' (not 'coach') to visit districts to see 'trainees in action', and to discuss training with coaches, while training facilities were provided at 'Summer Camps' at Loughborough College. Unlike the AAA, the ASA had raised enough funds to support Koskie and, since he was not controlled by the conditions of a Ministry grant, they were able to use him specifically to coach elite athletes.

Dyson and Koskie

So, we have two men from different backgrounds employed in similar positions with prominent National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in the period before the London Olympics in 1948. Let us take a look at these men, their careers and their experiences in this period.

Dyson

Major Geoffrey Harry George Dyson, sometimes labelled as the 'father of modern British athletics coaching',¹¹ had a significant influence on the sport until his resignation in 1961. He was born in London but he ran away from home in 1930¹² and a year later he falsified his age to enlist with the military, eventually becoming a teacher in regimental schools.¹³ In 1933, he requisitioned a high hurdle, which he trained with every day until achieving his army colours in 1936. Dyson later commented that 'choosing a technical event like hurdling and having no coach made me begin to examine the how and why of athletics.'¹⁴ Dyson was recruited to the first Loughborough Summer School in 1934, where he mixed with several prominent foreign coaches, and, after Webster established the School of Athletics, Games and Physical Education at Loughborough, Dyson joined his staff in 1938 as chief instructor for athletics. Webster described him as an excellent lecturer and a 'very good demonstrator' in both running and field events and Dyson later referred to this period as the time when he 'learnt so much about the coach's art.'¹⁵ His own athletic career had now ended, the AAA removing his amateur status because he had been a lecturer in athletics, an incident that probably influenced his subsequent confrontations with AAA officials.

Dyson was recalled from the reserves to serve in the war in 1939¹⁶ and he gained a reputation for 'brilliant organisation combined with hard discipline.'¹⁷ After being promoted to sergeant, he joined the regular army and he was posted to one of the King's African Rifles battle schools in Kenya, where he became Major in charge of Physical Training.¹⁸ Dyson created physical training and athletics centres everywhere he served,¹⁹ enabling him to continue coaching athletics as part of the PT programme, experiences which help to refine his coaching skills. In 1945, he returned to Loughborough where he began to apply principles of engineering and mechanics to the movements and actions of athletics.²⁰ After the AAA appointed him as national coach in 1947, Dyson having been the only Englishman on the shortlist,²¹ his first six weeks were

spent at Oxford University, where he was warned 'not to speak to the athletes unless they speak to you first,'¹²² and his 'ebullient almost aggressive personality collided with the traditional Oxford approach.'¹²³ One positive was his discovery of Maureen Gardner, an accomplished sprinter who Dyson switched to the 80m hurdles, an event in which she equalled the World Record and won a silver medal in London.²⁴ Dyson and Gardner were married after the Games.²⁵

Dyson believed in directing athletes to previously neglected events and starting them from scratch. John Disley, for example, was a promising middle distance runner in 1947 but Dyson coached him in the steeplechase and he achieved a bronze medal at the 1952 Helsinki Games. Dyson had met the 6ft 7in. John Savidge in 1949 and, after Dyson directed him the shot put achieved 55ft 2in., becoming the first British man to throw over 50ft. Dyson later commented that it was his 'coaching eye', the ability to differentiate between a 'fundamental movement, a mere idiosyncrasy and a fault,' that made him such an accomplished coach in this respect.²⁶ His coaching success also stemmed from his belief that to be successful required a coordinated effort between coach and athlete combined with the incorporation of science and international expertise. Conscious that Britain was the 'last of the great sporting countries to turn to coaching,'¹²⁷ Dyson asked to visit Sweden in 1949 to improve his own expertise in events in which the Swedes were considered leading experts. The AAA and the Ministry of Education refused to fund the visit so Dyson got backing from Swedish organisations to visit Sweden in 1950. The consensus was that 'great benefit had been brought to the coaching scheme from his visit,'¹²⁸ although this did not persuade the AAA to any future financial support and these initiatives, as with most aspects of British coaching in this period, continued to rely on personal drive and enthusiasm.

Dyson gradually refined his knowledge of human movement and engineering and this incorporated this into his coaching work through the use of slow motion 'loop' films to analyze an athlete's technique and plotting films onto a graph so that he could establish the athlete's acceleration and deceleration or the angle of release in throws. Athletes were encouraged to purchase 'peepsopes' so that they could study his analysis²⁹ and he used a wooden doll, nicknamed 'His Nibs' by the athletes, to demonstrate in real time the correct position athletes needed to adopt during a particular movement. Dyson believed that a coach could analyze the technique of an athlete with almost mathematical precision and he collaborated with academics in universities,³⁰ a dialogue unusual in Britain during the 1950s, in contrast to the American situation where coaches and universities were inextricably linked. Dyson also wrote *The Mechanics of Athletics*, first published in 1962, a widely translated text that ran to eight editions.³¹

One commentator noted of Dyson in 1949, 'there is no greater enthusiast or keener student of athletics...Continental experts who have seen him at work have said that he is undoubtedly among the finest athletic coaches in Europe',³² but the disagreements between Dyson and the administration had reached such a pitch by 1961 that he felt compelled to resign. It was widely believed that he had been forced out because AAA officials had never fully appreciated his coaching knowledge and had been unwilling to compromise. As Brasher noted there were 'still too many officials at the top who are jealous of his influence and the authority which his great knowledge gives him' and, until these barriers were broken down, coaches with Dyson's vision would never be welcomed in British sport.³³

Koskie

Leon Henry Koskie, 'Harry', was an amateur 'coach' not a professional, although he was just as rigorous in his approach as any professional and 'Mr Koskie', a phrase that emphasised his amateur status, had a different relationship with his sport and with the ASA. Koskie's working life was spent in management at Blythe Colour Works in Staffordshire where his position as a director allowed him to amass an estate worth over £400,000. Harry officiated for Britain at five Olympic Games and managed British teams at Empire Games and European championships. He served on the Northern Counties Committee, was twice President of Staffordshire ASA, and became President of the ASA in 1962, making him, somewhat ironically, the

leading figure in an organisation that had previously marginalized professional coaches. However, Koskie was not cut from the same cloth as other officials and he brought a wealth of coaching knowledge to the role.

By the mid-1940s, he was among the leading amateur coaches in Britain and in August 1946, he accepted the offer of the ASA to act as chief advisor for the 1948 Olympics. The position was an honorary one, emphasising his amateur status. Shortly after his appointment, Koskie addressed Olympic hopefuls and noted that 'swimmers who wish to attain the highest honours should be prepared to accept reasonable guidance,'¹³⁴ signalling to everyone that he intended to directly supervise their training. It is not clear whether this was said to reassure athletes that they would receive support or to prepare athletes to accept direction since, for each athlete who wanted coaching there was often another who was wary of allowing a coach to 'tamper' with their training. Koskie also immediately pushed for the acceptance of the butterfly arm stroke in breaststroke events, which had not been allowed in Britain, although it was in widespread use elsewhere. The ASA legalised the technique in 1947 and Koskie began persuading breaststroke swimmers to practise the stroke, even though he realised this would upset some traditionalists. Talent spotting was a critical part of the advisor's role and the identification of suitable Olympians was left to Koskie who used his 'coach's eye', rather than scientific measurements or physiological testing, to make his selection and he spent the two years following his appointment conferring with swimmers and coaches all over Britain. While Koskie was an amateur coach, he clearly shared many of the working methods of his professional predecessors. His coaching practices certainly relied on his own experiences as well as the broader traditions of the coaching community. His involvement in working with international teams brought him into contact with a wide sphere of influences and he connected with the professional coaching community through individuals such as Professor Jack Laverty of Manchester who ran coaching clinics, organised by Koskie.

By appointing Koskie, the ASA were beginning to address some of the coaching issues that had plagued British swimming and this was supplemented by the extension of training opportunities with a two week 'Special Course' at Loughborough College in August 1947. Forty-seven swimmers and seven coaches, all recommended by Koskie, were invited to attend, although pool time was limited and, on average, each swimmer could only train for approximately two hours a day. Koskie therefore prioritized the creation of a good team spirit. Koskie subsequently recommended that the whole team should train together for one month prior to the Games, although he recognized that 'as we are all amateur, I realise this cannot be considered but it also does not prevent one from wishing it was possible to complete the job.' For Koskie, the amateur environment clearly had a frustrating impact on the quality of British swimming and, while arguing that a Loughborough school should be held every year as it 'could not fail to raise the standard of British swimming', he requested that he 'not be invited to be responsible.'¹³⁵

The 1948 Loughborough School marked the final phase of Koskie's two-year plan to prepare for the Games. This course incorporated medical monitoring and physiotherapy and helped identify potential Olympians, many of whom Koskie had been nurturing for some time. Central to his hopes was Cathie Gibson, and even when she failed to find her form at the ASA championships, Koskie, who had been giving her special training for three weeks, remained optimistic.

Koskie was faced with a number of problems before London, not least the placing of the national championships only nineteen days before the Games making it difficult for Olympians to hold peak condition. Koskie instructed them to keep out of the water for a week in order to rest and then they reported for training at Loughborough before moving to their London headquarters two days before the Games. Koskie had required everyone to keep a complete record of their daily swims and times in a special logbook and he used these to decide who needed only light training and who needed something more strenuous. Although Wembley Pool was available for practice for a fortnight before the Games, Koskie

thought it psychologically better for his team to spend most of this time away from the pre-Olympic excitement.

Arrangements made by the ASA for the Games prevented Koskie's initiatives from achieving their full potential and in his post-Games analysis, Koskie observed that the resources had been unsatisfactory. Even though he accepted that it was customary to segregate the sexes when housing Olympic competitors, he deplored a separation of seventeen miles, an arrangement which had reversed the team spirit that he had sought to build. The two groups were unable to train together in the final stages before the Games and, as a result, the female chaperones had taken on the responsibility of preparing the women's team. The female swimmers had been billeted on the eighth floor of a building without a lift, while the male swimmers had faced difficulty in organising training. An arrangement had been made to use Uxbridge Pool but, because this was privately owned, the favourable weather meant that the pool refused to close to the public and it was 'swamped with bathers.' Koskie commented, 'after all the hard work of preparing for the Olympic Games, it will readily be understood just how we all felt about the final set-up.' These arrangements had taken the 'edge' off the whole team, and, although numerous British swimmers managed to reach finals, the best placing achieved was Gibson who won Britain's sole swimming medal, a bronze in the 400 metres freestyle.

Nevertheless, commentators considered that 'Uncle Harry', as he was known among swimmers, had done much to raise standards, partly by fostering the best team spirit in British sport. In reviewing the Games, Koskie commented that 'with all things considered the team put up a very good performance.' Recognising that 'world beaters cannot be developed in a few months', Koskie's forward thinking attitude allowed him to 'profit from the experience' and 'plan for the future.' Reflecting what is now common practice, he suggested that Districts should bring together their most promising young swimmers to train under one chief coach and he made recommendations about 'spotting' promising young swimmers.³⁶ The Loughborough School should become an annual event and a 'top-class' American coach should be invited to attend to teach technique and supervise training. He noted how successful the American swim team had been at the 1948 Olympics and argued that if Britain was to attain similar levels of performance then they would need to learn from, and adopt, some of their principles.³⁷ Matt Mann, later to be American Olympic coach for the 1952 Games, and his Michigan State University team subsequently visited in August 1951,³⁸ although, once again, this was the result of a private initiative and not organised by the NGB. Koskie's planning for the Loughborough swim school consisted of three phases over a period of ten years and the 1956 course saw the culmination of his drive for the introduction of new methods of training and coaching, all of which was justified when Judy Grinham achieved the first British swimming gold medal for thirty-two years in Melbourne.

Nice Stories but 'So What?'

Human beings like stories but the key task for the historian is to situate those stories into their context and I would argue that the historical study of coaching figures such as Dyson and Koskie can both inform our understanding of the development of coaching and explain its contemporary form in different cultural environments. Accounts of coaching experiences located and understood in context, the combination of behaviours, meanings and mores within which coaching existed and was meaningful, also allow the chronicler to illuminate the influence of expert coaches. Using biographies can help illustrate continuity over the course of generations, as well as demonstrating the way individuals respond to the changing demands of their social, political and economic environments. Although Bourdieu described biographies as illusions, arguing that lived lives were chaos, these coach's life courses emphasise the constraints within which they operated but also hint at the impact that an individual can make in influencing the course of history. As C.W. Mills pointed out, *Every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society...he lives out a biography ...within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes,*

however minutely, to the shaping of his society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.

The biographies presented here suggest that elite coaches found their own path through the tensions between the amateurism and the needs of elite sport but that the traditions of British sports administrators exerted powerful constraints on their practice. Although Koskie had been appointed in 1946 to 'lay foundations for the future,' including preparations for Helsinki in 1952,³⁹ the ASA reserved the right to make selection decisions.⁴⁰ Similarly, Dyson noted in 1958 that the British team coach had attended selection meetings only once throughout his eleven years and suggested that the desire of amateur administrators to remain in control was due to their belief that if the 'influence of professional coaching increases it will dominate athletics to the detriment of the sport.'⁴¹

The evidence suggests that, even though British sport was gradually becoming more accommodating to coaching in the immediate post-war period, NGBs remained wary of losing control so they continuously placed restrictions on the activities of national coaches. Even so, coaches were gradually being allowed to work directly with athletes, implying a gradual loosening of amateur constraints and emphasizing the fluid nature of amateurism. This late start for British coaches, however, meant that they were constantly outstripped by coaches from abroad, especially from America, who had been applying systematic coaching methods to their sport for over fifty years. In athletics, amateur administrators continually refused to accommodate the views of professional coaches even though the emergence of the Soviet Union, with its use of the Olympic Games as a way of demonstrating national superiority, was leading to a significant increase in the appointment of professional coaches abroad. Dyson and his colleagues were aware that these individuals were receiving a salary commensurate with their status and that they had the respect and support of their officials, in contrast to British amateur administrators who believed they understood the 'simple' mechanics of coaching. One British team manager, Les Truelove, often referred to coaching as '90 per cent kidology' and outwardly expressed the view that he did 'not believe in coaching', an opinion which probably reflected the majority opinion of administrators.⁴²

Despite these reservations, amateur officials 'recognized that they didn't know an awful lot' about the technical matters of their sport so they appointed coaches to manage this,⁴³ although they approached them with a certain degree of superiority since they saw themselves as the 'masters' and the national coaches 'as a serf, a sort of creature.'⁴⁴ It was unsurprising, therefore, that they were not willing to take direction from their coaches.⁴⁵ When Dyson suggested to Rowland Harper, a member of the Coaching Committee, that he should be referred to as the 'Director of Coaching' because that was essentially the job he was doing, Harper replied, 'Oh, the Coaching Committee would never agree to that, for we cannot be directed by anyone.'⁴⁶ Dyson suggested that the way in which sport developed in Britain meant that a culture had developed whereby coaching was never fully accepted and, because they had been cherished for so long, the traditions of amateurism had become difficult to challenge. It was only by the late 1960s, Dyson believed, that these attitudes were beginning to be diluted.⁴⁷ By the late 1960s, Dyson was arguing that 'there's no reason now in this day and age, why coaching and officiating should be divorced'⁴⁸ but that, even after a number of years of engagement with professional coaches, there remained an assumption amongst British administrators that they could continue to offer mediocre salaries and contracts and still entice individuals who had the ability and knowledge to implement change. As a result, athletes from track and field and swimming, faced an uphill task against well-coached competitors from around the world. In the end, the drivers for future change in British coaching were external, rather than internal, and it was the adoption of 'scientific' approaches to coaching and the structural changes wrought to British sports administration under pressure from foreign competitors, and the intervention of the British government at the end of the century in the form of lottery funding, that eventually changed the coaching landscape.

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