

Chair's Report - SRC ACM 2022

We have just returned from the MacGregor paddle competition 2022 where the positive atmosphere and the willingness of paddlers to participate was exciting. The K4s and C4s brought together crews that I'm guessing might not paddle with each other at any other time of the year. The mixed gender crew races are growing in popularity and elsewhere it was inspiring to see eight heats for some classes. Athletes newly returned from the European Sprint Championships were rubbing shoulders with under twelves. That inclusive, warm and celebratory atmosphere where so many levels of paddlers can compete alongside each other is almost unique among sports.

We are fortunate too, to have so many volunteers and volunteer Officials on the Regatta Committee and beyond who are willing to organise and run the National Regattas. Those behind the scenes (and there are around 40 - 50 at each regatta) are all doing it in their spare time for the love of the sport. Many are parents, or ex paddlers giving something back. Please do contact Ann Hoile @ regatta.volunteercoordinator@britishcanoeing.org.uk if you can help.

We owe a huge debt of thanks too to Paul Dimmock who stepped down from the voluntary role as Chair of the International Panel this summer. The IP has far reaching selection responsibilities that can significantly impact the lives of paddlers and Paul's professional leadership has navigated calmly through challenging times. His love of the sport and expertise as a coach have underpinned a contribution that should not be underestimated.

Internationally the GB para sprint team continue to dominate topping the medal table at the World Championships by some distance. For the sprint team GB it feels like a new era on the Olympic stage as the 200m paddlers who have held the headlines for many years are now retired and we are looking to the next generation in a new set of Olympic events. We wish all our international paddlers inspiration and success.

We hope that a long term philosophy of building supportive and inclusive training environments to nurture paddlers and develop them as people at all levels and particularly at the elite end will be the priority. In the past such an approach feels as though it has been jettisoned for a short term grasp for Olympic medals particularly when the pressure from UK Sport and its associated funding built up as we approached the end of an Olympic cycle. There are multiple articles being written about the damage a myopic focus on medals can make. Success on the international marathon stage this year could be partially attributed to marathon being like a family peopled at the elite end by those who care and support athletes and have known them all since they were precocious juniors. It feels like a safe environment.

We have a new era in management too and we wholeheartedly welcome the new CEO, Performance Director and Pathways Manager. The Sprint Management Team are unique among national governing bodies in having a pyramid of six roles all staffed by people from sports other than our own (golf, slalom, snow sports, cycling, squash, and cricket). They are all good, enthusiastic and smart people with the best intentions. Even if they do not have a background in flat water racing and the understanding that brings with it, we are trusting them to look after our sport and its people. If they can oversee the creation of buoyant, happy clubs who willingly embrace sprint racing and feel empowered by British Canoeing they will all have the genuine gratitude, admiration and love of all.

At a recent significant appointment it appears there were two interview stages and two panels in which neither the Clubs and wider grass roots Community were consulted at either stage and even the number of people on the panels who had ever been in a boat appears to have been limited. I believe those in power have acknowledged that this may have been unwise and appreciate the knowledge within the clubs and knowledge about the sport does have intrinsic value.

Those who come from outside of our sport can bring unique experience and expertise, but they can also see canoeing as a stepping stone up the career ladder to roles in a different sport after a few years. The time and effort the Community voluntarily put in, in their spare time to educate new appointments to understand the sport is effectively lost if paid staff move on to other sports. If we voice concerns around the overwhelming number of appointments from other sports we are told we are not being supportive. If we keep quiet we are complicit in supporting a direction of travel that feels uncomfortable. The solution to empower clubs and make them responsible for helping to shape the direction of travel solves this. Letting go of power has never been seen as an option by BC but we hope we can guide them to curb their natural instinct to create unwieldy structures and frameworks to measure and assert control.

The Junior Development Squad (JDS) continues to go from strength to strength and is a good example of a healthy power balance. The JDS is run jointly by the SRC, MRC and Talent Department - each with an equal input ensuring the Clubs and Club coaches can significantly influence its content and delivery. More recently the Talent Department have simply looked after the admin. This balance of power feels healthy and we can learn from its successful structure. The JDS has run skills days (covering sprint and marathon skills) and a successful camp for 26 juniors coached by volunteers. There has been an emphasis on crew boats. The joint delivery by the three different bodies is a relatively new development and is clearly sensible as it puts paddlers interest first. Its structure can be a blueprint for other initiatives.

There is exciting news about BUCS (British Universities and Colleges Sport) with the inclusion of Sprint Canoeing firmly in the calendar for 2023 and an inaugural event scheduled for March 18th/19th in Norwich. It has been a long road to get to this point and huge thanks to Anna Grey at BC who has helped spearhead this major success. Richard Stacey Chapman and the BC Events Team have also significantly supported the bid and their incredible 'can do' attitude continues to make an awesome contribution both with BUCS as well as with many other competitions.

Congratulations to the SCA for developing the 5K Hooley (22nd October 2022) into an event with a buzz. The SRC are indebted to your enthusiasm. Do please enter!

As we move forwards the SRC seeks to make a major change that we hope will kickstart a new era for sprint racing. We propose that qualification for the Macgregor paddle is through participation in locally run club 'regattas'. It's vital to emphasis the flexible nature and multiple formats club regattas might take: the main components simply need to be a standing start and side-by-side racing. Distances do not need to be exact, progression (if there are finals) can be through places rather than using any form of timing. If Clubs can use boat numbers, club colours and set start times then that would be a bonus as it helps skills learning in preparation for Nationals Regattas. The proposed levee on the entry fee that would come to the SRC can subsequently be partly used to subsidise international trips for selected GB athletes which we hope would be a massive step towards equality. At

present Sprint trips are expensive and more accessible to those with financial security and we seek to change this as a matter of urgency. A levee to enter local sprint events (a model used by the MRC with Hasler racing) seems to make perfect sense. Part of the levee would also be invested back into supporting local sprint events.

And now a really sad note. The passing of James Smythe in the spring has left a major sense of loss. James had a knack of shaping new ideas and implementing them while bringing everyone along with him. His positive, spirited, firm but non confrontational approach made him friends everywhere. As a sport we are all fortunate to be able to reap the benefit of his legacy. On personal level many will deeply miss a friend.

And very recently we had more sad news about David Green. David's gentle, generous and kind nature coupled with his unstoppable enthusiasm for the sport were infectious. He always had a mischievous twinkle in his eye and a smile at the ready. He documented the development of the sport in this country in a book he co-wrote with Molly; *From Long Distance Canoe Racing to Canoe Marathon* which also highlights their enormous contribution. We will miss a pioneer and a true gentleman.

And finally, below on the next page is one of the many articles now being written acknowledging the misguided emphasis across all sports in promoting a chase for Olympic medals at the expense of athlete inclusivity and a thriving, happy culture. Take note of the astonishing quote from Peter Keen who was Performance Director of UK Sport during the 2012 Olympics.

Please always feel free to get in touch with ideas, suggestions or offers of help - the SRC are there to represent you; canoesprint.chair@vol.britishcanoeing.org.uk

Tim Scott SRC Chair September 2022

'Win-or-die system must change'

Owen Slot

Chief Sports
Writer



A year ago, before the start of the Tokyo Olympics, the BBC broadcast a three-part documentary, *Gold Rush*, about how Team GB had gone from 36th in the medal table at the 1996 Atlanta Games to second in Rio, 20 years later. One of the most important figures in this stratospheric rise declined to be interviewed. He emailed in a truly astonishing quote that happened to hit the cutting-room floor, probably because it said so much it would take so long to unwrap.

This is what he said: "I have been asked to sum up how I feel about what has been achieved during the National Lottery-funded era of British global sporting success. The conclusion I have come to is I would happily trade it all — the medals, the records, the Super Saturdays, the gongs — for a thriving, safe and inclusive national competitive sport system."

The quote is from Peter Keen. He was performance director of UK Sport from 2004 to 2012, which were the prime years when new Lottery money was rolling in. If John Major, as prime minister from 1990 to 1997, was the most influential person in redesigning the UK's high-performance sports structure by releasing that money, Keen is probably the second most influential because he designed how it would be spent.

Keen, now a high-performance consultant, is fiercely intelligent. It was he who brought in the "no compromise" era — a catchphrase that was widely misinterpreted but lately led to the debate over cash for medals and the extent of and dangers in the system's "win-at-all-costs" culture. It is exactly ten years to the day since the London

The 2012 Games remembered



Victoria Pendleton in the keirin at London 2012, main, where she won gold, left. The Briton retired after the Games and was deeply critical of British Cycling, saying the corrosive culture forced her out



trade it all", we should be listening. Firstly, he gives context. It isn't only the UK system that he thinks needs to adapt; it certainly isn't just here where the high-performance sports system has been rattled by scandals, particularly of bullying. What we know about malpractice in British gymnastics has been reflected widely in other nations. Not that that makes it OK, of course.

He paints a picture of different nations chasing each other to the top. "My experiences of talking to and looking at New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the UK is that the issues are pretty consistent," he says. "Who followed who we can debate but there is a communality of language and movement of

Olympics and we are reassessing the value of those glory days. So when Keen drops a quote like "I would happily

staff. We're all trapped in the same paradigm, which is constantly trying to defend the budget by keeping the government happy by winning medals."

Keen points to the British team at the World Athletics Championships last week and the fact that there was no men's 4x400m relay team. "Yet we've got an immense pedigree in 400m," he says, "and we've invested millions and millions in this sport. I just can't get my head round that."

He sees two worlds: the sporting world where the vast majority of us play and compete, and from where those 400m runners should emerge, and the high-performance world that selects the best 400m runners, coaches them, pays them a grant and hopes they qualify for events such as the World Championships. Yet the grassroots system cannot deliver four decent 400m runners.

He says: "If you operate a high-performance investment system that so marginalises your mainstream sport to the point where you lose that

connection between the two, you've damaged the essence of what your sport is all about. We've been distracted by the success in high performance. If it can't do something positive for that first world, if it isn't connecting and adding value to it, then why are we doing it?"

The status quo is that, for most Olympic sports, their prime source of income is from high-performance funding. "As a consequence," Keen says, "the majority of executives in those sports are increasingly focused on accounting for, managing and protecting that income."

If Keen were in charge now, he would stop funding serial medallists who are dependent on UK Sport grants. "If you are that serial gold medallist, somebody else who could have been in that boat, on that bike, in that lane, isn't there. They are queuing up, waiting. We ought to have a steady throughput of people to get the medal and get on with their life. Not hanging around for 20 years doing the same thing over and over again.

"That's not growing sport. And that's not growing people. That's sustaining one person until they've finished. I think we have a culture [that says] I will keep you performing at the highest level because it keeps me in a job."

He describes this as "a world sustaining coaches rather than athletes" and "a perform-or-die model as opposed to a human development model".

How this need to sustain income streams influenced behaviours further down the chain is a question with which UK Sport has been wrestling. Did it create pressure which, in turn, was a catalyst for bullying?

Keen has no regrets about the scrutiny to which he held the different sports and the extent to which they were made to be accountable for the vast sums being invested. "To constructively challenge something that isn't performing is absolutely critical," he says. "But I don't think that makes a high-performance environment inhuman. The idea that the only way to win is by brutalising people and threatening them — that's utter bollocks. I don't get that."

Where there was malpractice, he says, "maybe" UK Sport was "very naive" about it and "blinded to it because sports weren't telling and we weren't looking. Did we know at the time what we had signed up for? Probably not. Should we be talking about it now, thinking about the implications? Yes, I think we should."

The priority for Keen is to make the system sustainable, so that there are no longer shocking drop-out rates of teenagers from sport, particularly girls, and so that it starts naturally producing 400m runners, for instance, again.

In the next decade, he says, athletes' funding should come with "duties to do with connecting with the community". These obligations should involve working regularly with schools or clubs.

He adds: "If I have a regret, it's that I wasn't able to influence that sort of pivoting of thinking and looking far deeper at where all those people come from, to build sustainability. I don't look back and think it was wasted time or have deep regrets. I just feel that when I look at it, now I can see that things need to change — pretty radically."