

Meet the England manager: Jon Whittingham on coaching cerebral palsy football

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Nobody can ever accuse Roy Hodgson of having it easy.

The nation demands success from the England football team – and yet they have only ever delivered once. We will celebrate the 50th anniversary of that sporting milestone next year.

Expectancy levels are cranked up before every tournament as world football's famous underachievers inevitably flop on the big occasion. As the man charged with breaking that cycle of depressing failure, Hodgson has to put up with extreme levels of pressure that most people would find impossible to bear.

But in some ways, Hodgson has it much easier than another England football manager, his St George's Park cohort [Jon Whittingham](#).

Whittingham is in charge of the England cerebral palsy (CP) football team. And when he takes his squad to a major tournament, his coaching staff's meticulous preparations can be thrown into disarray before a ball has even been kicked due to the player classification process. The best-laid plans can count for nothing.

Which is exactly what happened at the last European and World Championships.

'The disability world around classification is like a labyrinth,' says Jon. 'You try to work your way through it, but there is never a light at the end of the tunnel. It basically comes down to interpretation.

'You try to hedge your bets as best you can, but until you've gone through it, you're never quite sure.'

Those who have been through the classification process a couple of times will already have a ‘confirmed’ status for a tournament. If they have not been seen before, they will be deemed ‘new’, while ‘review’ status is the term given to those who have been seen just once before. Both new and review status players must undergo a classification assessment a few days before a tournament kicks off.

Jon explains: ‘The biggest challenge for us compared to Roy Hodgson, where he picks a squad and knows who he has when he starts a tournament – barring injuries – is that the classification process can disrupt the whole dynamics of our 14-man squad.

‘In the CP game, you are only allowed one class eight athlete (more minimally impaired) on the pitch, and you have to have a minimum of one class five or class six athlete (where their impairments are more severe).

‘At the last World and European championships, when the first game came around, we only had a squad of 13 because a player was classified out. All it takes is for one player to be reclassified as a class six from a seven and you have to completely change your tactics and your formation as you have an entirely different dynamic to work with.

‘It can be quite a stressful environment in that sense because the players get very concerned by what’s going on around classification, as do the medical team.’

Success story

Losing a player at that late stage may have thrown a hefty spanner in the works, but it did not dismantle England’s overall progress in either the 2014 European Championships or this summer’s World Championships. They finished fifth in both tournaments.

It was their highest finish for 22 years in the Euros and their best-ever result in the Worlds.

Jon attributes the team’s success to a new structure that was put in place shortly after the London 2012 Paralympic Games, aimed at changing the whole ‘culture and mentality around the team’.

‘As the host nation, the GB CP and blind squads both qualified automatically for London,’ he explains. ‘They probably didn’t do as well as they should have done and have both undergone change in terms of their structures from 2012-2013 onwards.

‘The idea was to freshen things up a bit and give a change of direction.

‘There are new head coaches involved with both squads and a new set-up that is a more conducive environment for the players to be able to learn, develop and move forward on the world stage.’

That they were able to produce the best two finishes in recent memory is testament to the hard work of all those involved.

Childhood memories

Jon’s interest in coaching disabled footballers can be traced back to his childhood and his close relationship with his uncle, who suffered from multiple sclerosis.

Spending time around a family member with a debilitating neurological condition brought him into regular contact with a variety of disability groups.

‘I do still coach mainstream athletes but the reason I got involved in disability sport was partly because of family background.

‘My uncle had multiple sclerosis when I was a kid. I remember playing with him in the back garden of what was then the family home. As his condition worsened, he started to use walking sticks and frames and then started using a wheelchair.

‘For me, I got to see that spectrum all the way through from the early stages of disability to the point where you are reliant on a wheelchair to move around.’

Jon says his uncle was an active sportsman who played football and cricket but, as his condition worsened, he had to find other activities that were a little bit more sedentary, like going out to the theatre.

‘At the time he started using a wheelchair, there weren’t really that many sporting activities he could participate in,’ he adds.

‘The opportunities that are now available are extremely different to when he was older. Now, there are opportunities across all the impairment groups to get involved but even 10 years ago that wasn’t the case. It is now about ensuring we keep expanding our provision.’

Football CV

After taking his coaching badges, Jon started out as a Football Association (FA) County Development Officer for disability football in 2007.

In 2011, he joined the England learning disability (LD) squad, helping them finish third at the 2012 European Championships.

A move into the higher-profile CP squad (there is no GB qualification pathway into the Paralympics for the LD team) followed in August 2013.

This was after the InterContinental Cup, when the coach and manager of the CP team, who had been in place at London, stepped down.

Working as a development officer within the FA talent pathway, Jon was involved with coaching disability players from the regional talent programmes into emerging talent camps and from there into the England set-ups.

Reflecting on his career progression, Jon explains: ‘Working with the county FA around disability gave me a real opportunity to start focusing more on an area where I’m genuinely interested in working.

‘What makes it most interesting is that it is very different every single time. You can be working with the same group week in, week out, but the things you do in a session to challenge them, either mentally, physically or communication-wise, can be very different.

‘You have to think up new and innovative approaches to practices, delivering them so the players can pick up on the information you are trying to convey to them, and retain that information.

‘Sometimes, you’ll adapt practices but other times you need to completely start from scratch because of what their limitations may be due to their impairment, coming up with lots of different scenarios in your mind for appropriate situations.’

Toky-oh, no!

The fact the job is so demanding is what appeals to him. The bigger the challenge, the greater the reward.

‘In a professional sense, it allows me to be able to support individuals coming into sport who maybe haven’t had that opportunity before, because it hadn’t existed or because people hadn’t known how to support them.

‘In a coaching sense, I like challenging myself. No session is ever the same.’

I ask him if there are enough disability coaches to cope with the demand as opportunities for disabled people to play football continue to grow.

‘It has steadily been improving over the last few years,’ he says. ‘We are certainly seeing more and more people coming through who want to take qualifications. This is partly through interest – they are curious about the different versions of disability coaching qualifications out there.

‘It’s about finding the right opportunity for the individual before filtering them into the process where appropriate. So CP football is about challenging the players as you would any other group of players or athletes.

‘You alter the environment and challenges appropriately to meet their physical requirements. CP players have physical impairments, but you still keep very much within the constraints of the game.

‘With the blind game, you might need to be a bit more specialised in terms of your knowledge base and understanding.’

CP and blind football both have GB pathways, whereas the LD team pathway finishes at England level, meaning there is no Paralympic qualification possible.

Looking ahead to the Paralympic Games in Rio next year, the CP squad qualified as a result of their success at this summer’s World Championships held at St George’s Park. Unfortunately, the blind squad will be conspicuous by their absence after not finishing high enough in their European Championship qualification competition.

The bad news for the CP squad is that, as things stand, they will not be going to Tokyo for the 2020 Paralympics.

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) made their choices for the 22 sports that will be part of the Tokyo Games, and CP football was not included. An appeal has been lodged by the International Federation of Cerebral Palsy Football (IFCPF).

‘There is a congress being held in November, which the IFCPF are attending,’ explains Jon. ‘Essentially, the IPC can have 23 sports in Tokyo, and they have only filled 22 spaces so the intention is to go along and lobby the IPC to put CP football, or seven-a-side football as it is called under the IPC terminology, on the roster.

‘As it stands, Rio is the last Paralympic cycle for the game, but there will still be world and European championships and the InterContinental Cup.’

It would be a real shame, after all the great strides the game in England has made in the last few years, if the IPC upheld their decision, thereby preventing the Great Britain squad from going for gold in Tokyo.

Jon’s top tips

1 It is no different to coaching any other player or athlete – differentiate the

session according to ability and the challenges planned.

2 Develop your own awareness and understanding of the impairment group(s) you are working with – do they need more rest or water breaks? How will you set up the training area?

3 Players or athletes will tell you what they can or cannot do as you go – they know their limitations, but keep pushing them to improve as you would other players or athletes.

4 Get to know their backgrounds – some may have never had specialised coaching before, and their experiences may not have been positive.

5 One in five people in the UK have a disability so you are likely already working with a player or athlete with a disability in your session – embrace the opportunity to develop yourself, working with them.

6 If in doubt, ask the player or athlete about their disability and how you can work together to increase their enjoyment of practice and to improve their ability.

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