

# Examining the multiple challenges of preparing an athlete for the Commonwealth Games

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**The countdown to the Commonwealth Games in Australia has flown by for me. Getting Hollie Arnold ready, steady and all set to go for gold has involved painstaking preparation, with nothing being left to chance. This is my coaching notebook on the build-up to the big event.**

With the Commonwealth Games in the Gold Coast almost upon us, my coaching brain is very much focused on my forthcoming journey Down Under with 2016 F46 javelin Paralympic champion and world record holder Hollie Arnold.

Last year [ConnectedCoaches published an article on our successful IPC World Championships campaign](#), but this year we will be travelling a lot further than London and will also be (almost) in the back yard of Hollie's greatest global rival, 2017 World Championships silver medallist Holly Robinson, from New Zealand.

For those who are not familiar with disability athletics classifications, the F refers to a field event (ie, javelin); the first number refers to the type of disability (so a 4 means the athlete has a limb impairment); and the second number relates to the severity of the disability (with a lower number signifying a greater level of impairment). In Hollie's case, she was born without a right arm below the elbow.

On a day-to-day basis, Hollie chooses not to wear a prosthetic, however during competition she uses a prosthetic, which acts as a counter balance. In true Hollie style this is covered in Union flags.

For me as a coach there are several new aspects of this challenge that are new to me, so I felt an article about how I am preparing for these challenges would be useful to share with other coaches – and even to help me collect my own thoughts.

I feel these challenges break down into three key areas.

1. Training and competition challenges
2. Travel & location challenges, and
3. Multi-sport games challenges.

## Spring into action

The first challenge is the most essential of course, but is in many ways the easiest part because training and competing is the bread and butter of sport.

There are a few key challenges for which we have had to prepare for in the build-up to the Commonwealth Games. The most important has to be that Hollie's championship is taking place in early April. This is a big change for an athlete who is used to peaking for September. It means she has had very little time off at the end of last season. That in itself causes challenges to a weary body and mind, but these things have to be managed.

Thanks to her status as a funded athlete, Hollie is able to receive access to outstanding medical, psychological and physical support services. Whilst as a coach I want to be able to hold my own in any conversation and need to be able to manage the inter-disciplinary team, I do have to defer to the knowledge of the support staff in their areas of expertise – some of whom have been working with Hollie longer than I have.

If people think that coaches don't get the credit they deserve then, blimey, you wouldn't believe the terrific impact the support services teams have. They are the real unsung heroes and heroines. Gemma Jefferson, Sam Heathcote, Matt Archer and Joy Bringer are just some of the team that deserve a special mention. I should also single out for special mention Paula Dunn, the Para-athletics Head Coach. Paula has been a fantastic leader and has supported Hollie through so many trials and tribulations. For those who think people in these roles only care about medals and not the athletes' welfare, well you should see Paula at work.

It would be remiss of me not to point out at this juncture the potential impact of declining National Lottery sales. The fact is that without that National Lottery funding, the support I mention above would simply not be possible. I really do encourage all coaches to play the National Lottery as every little does help. I call it sport tax, and it is one tax I'm happy to pay!

So, the logical thing for me to do when planning for an April Championship is to be clear on where we need to be physically and technically on competition day and work back from there in terms of where we need to be at the end of each block of training. Every coach is different, but I usually operate on five-week blocks of training, with the fifth week being what I call resting, testing and fun week. You'd have to ask the athletes if the fun part is accurate.

### **Tweaking run-up in run-up to Games**

There was one thing I was absolutely crystal clear on from the start of this process: that we could only change a very limited number of technical and physical things in this time, so I had to prioritise.

I decided to look at two small but important focused technical elements, whilst also developing a new competition run-up, with an emphasis on rhythm. The proof will be in the pudding, but I do believe that keeping to these two limited technical factors has helped create a very clear focus for Hollie on what she needs to improve to throw well in Australia.

As Hollie's major championship for the year usually falls at the end of the summer, there is traditionally a large array of competitions from which athletes can compete in to ensure they are on top form come the showpiece event. Not so this time. We had the UK Winter Throws competition at the end of February, and Hollie's next competition will be a test event in Brisbane in late March. So we do not have the opportunity of a traditional run-in to the Championships.

But when you know these things in advance we can plan around them. Hollie moved to Loughborough at the end of the 2017 season, and is now able to train with me daily and, thanks to the wonderful athletics facilities at Loughborough University, we are able to train hard outdoors and indoors if required – even having the ability to throw real javelins indoors.

In terms of the competition itself, this is where Hollie has proven she can perform many times over.

Whatever you do, there will always be last minute challenges. Last year it was Hollie's world record-breaking javelin not being allowed into the World Championships at the last minute because it had the wrong sticker on it. Whilst we want to try to plan for every eventuality, it is equally important that the things that take us by surprise can be dealt with in a calm and considered manner.

To be told the javelin was not going to be allowed into the competition one hour before it began was an error on the officials' part in 2017, but that was not the time to get angry. At that point in time there is already enough emotion in the athlete and it is more about remaining calm until you need to use it.

### **Sleep tight: Combating jetlag**

We cannot plan for absolutely everything, it seems, but what I plan to do is ensure her build-up in

Australia is as smooth as possible and she is in the best place she can be on the day, both physically and mentally. Which moves us to the next key challenge: getting to and competing in Australia.

Hollie will be part of the Welsh team for these Games, and the team at Welsh Athletics – Scott Simpson, Emma Wiltshire, Adrian Palmer and their colleagues – have done a brilliant job of trying to think of literally everything that could go wrong between Heathrow and the Games, and trying to put plans in place to prevent and mitigate the risk.

Perhaps the most important of these is how to combat the jetlag from a journey that takes 24 hours. That type of journey is hard enough for a coach, never mind athletes who have to perform at their best not long after.

The Welsh team have planned their flights with mathematical precision to minimise the time it will take for athletes to be on Queensland time come their arrival in Australia. The team have gone to great lengths to prepare everything, from instructions on when to eat, when to not eat, when to sleep and when to try to stay awake.

Nothing is being left to chance.

The athletes have been given advice on food hygiene as they will be self-catering in the Sunshine Coast holding camp. There are even athlete packs being provided at the airport with products to minimise the risk of contracting an illness during the flight and a small device to stimulate the calf muscles and minimise the risk of deep vein thrombosis. It shows just how seriously the team are preparing for this adventure.

With this level of planning and preparation it is hoped the athletes will be ready to hit the ground running when they arrive in Australia. I hope the coach is too!

### **Take some of the heat off**

Once in Australia I anticipate there will be one thing that is quite obvious – that is a fair bit warmer than Blighty. I have been to Queensland before in the Australian summer (our winter) and I can testify that the heat can be painful to a Northerner such as myself. Thankfully, this will be the Australian autumn and the Gold Coast is in the south of Queensland, so the climate is sub-tropical. We will be looking at average temperatures in the low 20s Celsius. This should not affect competition day for Hollie, but does mean precautions need to be taken during training, and as such we will be training in the morning or early evening when we train outside.

The final challenge I feel we need to prepare for is that of the multi-sports Championship, or if I'm blunt, an athletes' village with thousands of athletes and almost as many distractions: 24-hour catering, noise, athletes who finished competing before your competition has even begun, rooming with another athlete, a BBQ open half of the day, tight restrictions on family and even coach access and, my absolute favourite, an ice cream truck parlour in an athletes' village! Who comes up with these ideas?

These are all part of the experience for athletes of course, but are also distractions and the athlete can easily make some poor choices.

Whilst I wouldn't wish to pretend this is not going to be a wonderful few weeks for the athletes, it is important to make the point that Championships come with lots of challenges and coaches need to ensure athletes are prepared for the array of 'good distractions' that come with a Games of this nature, and not just the bad things like homesickness and long flights.

The great thing about Hollie is that, though she is still only in her early 20s, she is a bit of a veteran in competition terms. I have full confidence in Hollie's ability to stay focused at the Championships, and a

great comfort to Hollie will be knowing that her travelling fan club of parents Jill and Graham, boyfriend Josh and family will all be there to watch. These little things really do make a difference to an athlete.

### **Going for gold on Gold Coast**

Another challenge linked to the multi-sport Championship experience is that for many coaches their access will be limited. The Welsh team only have four full athletics coach passes, so as a personal coach and not a Welsh athletics employee I will only have very limited access. I won't even be able to get access to the athlete training facilities. As such we will have to travel to another venue to train in the run-up to the Championships.

Whilst this is not ideal, knowing these things in advance does mean you can plan around them and minimise the disruption.

Well that is the story our journey so far towards the Gold Coast. I cannot wait for us to get out there and get the job done.

For those who will be watching on TV, Hollie will be competing on 9th April and Queensland time is 9 hours ahead of British Summer Time. For those who are making the journey down to the Gold Coast, I look forward to seeing you then in what is truly one of the most beautiful places on earth.

**Thank you again to everyone who has supported us along the way and we will do everything in our power to bring home another gold medal.**

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