

A conversation with UK Sport's Head of Coach Development Diccon Edwards

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A key figure in the hierarchy of the nation's high performance sports agency, Diccon Edwards gives an overview of his influential role, reveals how preparations are shaping up for Tokyo 2020 and talks candidly about the flurry of high-profile athlete welfare controversies that prompted a wide-scale investigation by UK Sport.

We all appreciate the struggles international athletes must endure and the sacrifices they must make to see their dreams come to fruition.

In the era of 24-hour news, the stories of our medal hopefuls are played out under the intense glare of the media spotlight. Their hopes and fears, challenges and anxieties, setbacks and successes are forensically analysed to satisfy the public's insatiable appetite to be kept abreast of every twist and turn in their lives.

Coaches may be relieved their own lives do not come under the same kind of public scrutiny, laid bare for all and sundry to pore over and comment on.

But what goes unnoticed by those peering in from outside the bubble of high performance sport, is that coaches go through the same emotional crests and troughs as their athletes and encounter a similar spread of psychological pressures. They are, after all, on the same journey, having forged a dynamic partnership where each party lives and breathes an identical quest for success.

It is the coach's job to support their athlete on this journey, helping them negotiate the many road bumps, assuage their anxieties and maximise their performance potential.

But it begs the question: who is looking after the professional development and personal needs of the coach? Or, put another way, who develops the developer and nurtures the nurturer in the high-pressure upper echelons of professional sport?

Trainer, mentor, facilitator



Diccon heads up a dedicated team of coach developers at UK Sport who fulfil this very role (plus a lot more besides).

If coaches are the unsung heroes of Team GB's success on the international stage, then what catchy title might we use to describe the People Development team at UK Sport – within which influential think-tank the Head of Coach Development sits? The unsung heroes behind the unsung heroes, perhaps, or the team behind the team, behind the team.

As Head of Coach Development, Diccon defines and delivers the strategy for the World Class Programme, providing optimal support to those coaches working with Olympic and Paralympic athletes on trajectory for Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024.

“The key purpose of my role is to ensure that those individuals are as supported as best as they possibly can be, ultimately for the benefit of the athletes, so that they are given the best possible opportunity to maximise their potential and go and deliver inspiring performances for the nation.”

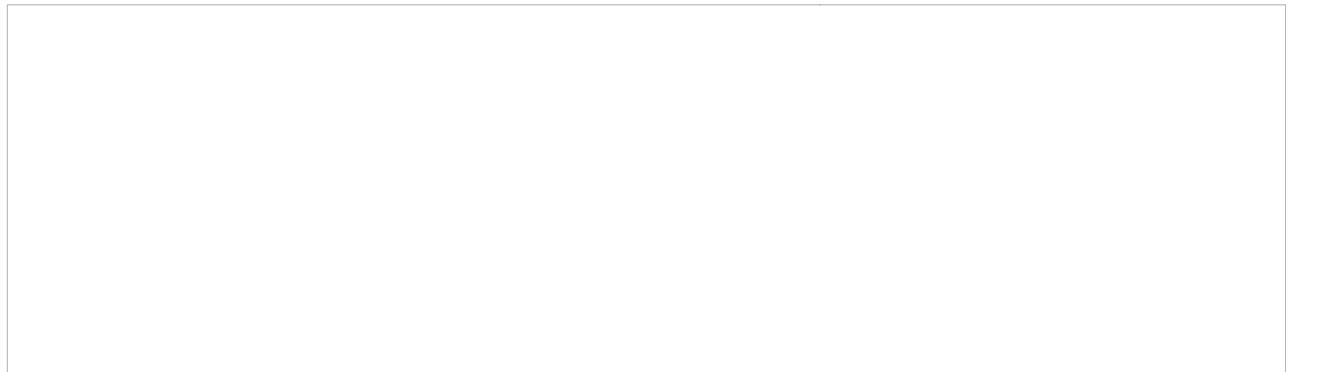
Building effective mentoring relationships is a fundamental part of the role of every coach developer, which involves passionately embracing a person-centred philosophy.

“Absolutely, there is a large mentoring component to my job,” says Diccon, “in terms of talking to individual coaches about practice – which is obviously pertinent – but also about getting to know them as a person in their own right and understanding what motivates them and how they are developing and thriving in the environment.”

And if the word *mentor* would feature heavily in any job description, then so would the word *facilitator*.

“We build strong relationships with individuals to really empower them to drive their own development,” adds Diccon. “And we also help facilitate that learning experience by supporting them through questioning and by providing a sounding board, while at the same time bringing in other experts to focus on core topics.”

Developing key links in the chain





Embellishing on his day-to-day role, Dicon runs through his department's three-pronged approach to actively engaging with organisations, coach developers and those world class coaches operating on the Elite Programme.

"We look to engage at three different levels. At a sport level, in terms of talking with a national governing body (NGB) about their sport, and how they are setting up their infrastructures and processes of coach development within their world class programme.

"We will also work with individuals responsible for delivering that. You might call that person a coach developer. A number of world class programmes will have a lead point of contact responsible for developing performance programme coaches. We will support those individuals, and again help them develop and thrive."

UK Coaching deliver the [Performance Foundation Coach Support programme](#) in partnership with UK Sport, and lead on the [Women into High Performance programme](#) in collaboration with UK Sport.

"The third element is working with individual coaches," adds Dicon, "both on a one-to-one basis in the field, while also running slightly broader programmes of support for cross-sport cohorts."

In terms of one-to-one support, Dicon and his team spend a significant amount of time with coaches to form a deeper understanding of the learning space they operate in and the athletes they are working with. Regarding the broader programmes, groups of coaches from different sports are brought together to learn about specialised topics, share experiences and seek out transferable learning techniques.

Coaching in the eye of a storm

The introduction stated that coaches traditionally fly under the public radar, with all the attention and acclaim reserved for the athletes, while the influence and impact of the coach largely goes unnoticed.

Things changed dramatically post Rio, when coaches suddenly became the centre of unwanted attention as several governing bodies became embroiled in high-profile controversies, prompting a period of soul-searching from those working in high performance programmes.

Phrases such as 'climate of fear', 'medals over welfare' and 'win-at-all-costs' were used to describe some elite programmes, and the governance and culture of the entire high performance sector was called into question amid a backdrop of bullying allegations from disgruntled athletes.

Governing bodies and coaches came under unprecedented scrutiny and the national storm of debate engulfed UK Sport too.

They were forced to confront some tough questions, but they did not flinch from their duty. They listened and they learned.

Commenting on a four-month UK Sport investigation in 2018, UK Sport Performance Director Chelsea Warr described the focus on athlete welfare as a wake-up call: "This generation, the I generation, they want to be communicated with differently, have different life goals, and we have to change."

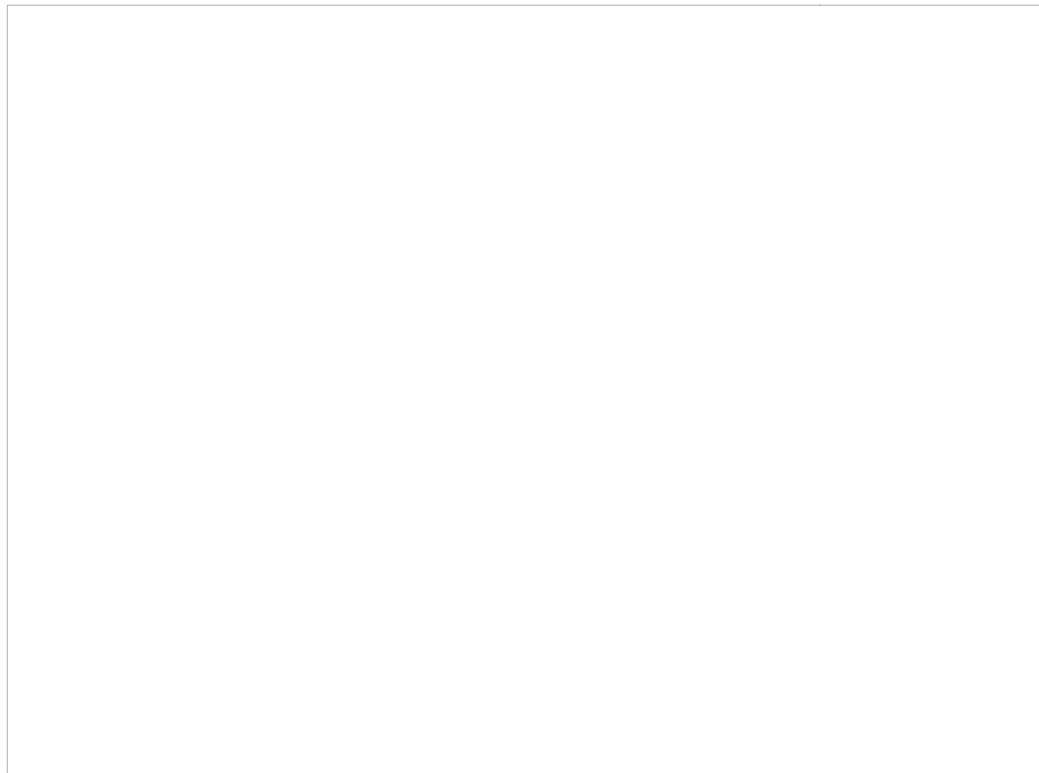
And the then UK Sport Chief Executive Liz Nicholl reflected: "We need to create a system where the quality of the discussion is improved and the athlete's feedback is as valued as the coach's advice and support."

Some expressed the opinion that Britain's position as an Olympic and Paralympic superpower would be weakened by any radical overhaul of strategy in response to the fall-out, but Dicon has allayed those fears, firmly believing that by adhering to a high challenge, high support philosophy – working WITH the athlete to support improvement – welfare and winning can be happy bedfellows.

"You will only ever get true sustainable success and peak performance through happy, healthy athletes – and happy, healthy coaches," says Dicon.

"I think we've all recognised that creating an environment where people can thrive, where people can get excited about what is possible, where people can work hard because they see the opportunity, and where they are also supported at the same time, are key performance components."

New professional body to represent coaches



A point lost by many outside the coaching industry, amid the furore, was that it is imperative not to overlook the welfare of the coaches. Their interests must also be protected, and they too should not feel isolated and vulnerable in the event of any disputes or grievances.

The repercussions of working in an environment where athletes are regularly pushed outside of their comfort zone have been brought into stark focus but, as Toni Minichiello said at the time: "I don't think people appreciate the huge pressure that coaches are under as well as athletes. There is a lot being discussed about the welfare of athletes but fairly seldom about the welfare of coaches."

Representing UK Sport, Dicon has been involved in the formation of the [UK Performance Coaches' Association \(UKPCA\)](#), a membership organisation that was set up in response to the controversies to represent the coaches who work with high performance athletes. Two of its main aims are to

improve coach welfare and raise professional standards.

And UK Sport has itself made coach well-being a strategic priority.

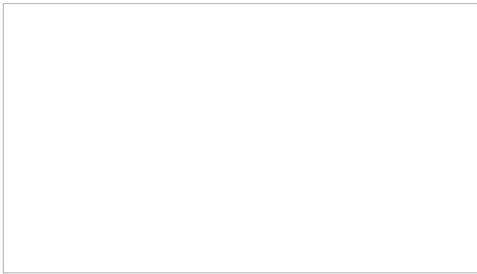
“A significant piece of work for us that will be undertaken over the next 12 months is to ensure that every coach has a personal well-being plan in place that will allow them to go into Tokyo in the best possible head space: excited, energised, confident and looking forward to the opportunities that are there.

“Because I think, just like athletes, coaches need to prepare themselves to be able to deliver at their best, and actually the strains and stresses and anxieties around what’s to come take as much toll on coaches if they are sat in an environment that is not supportive of them.”

I ask Diccon if the high performance coaches he works with feel under any more scrutiny now, in the current climate, than they did before Rio?

“If you’d have asked me that question 18 months ago, I think the answer would definitely have been yes. I don’t think there is any point hiding from that fact. I think what’s happened is that through such focus and challenge you start to generate a new way of operating that is probably more beneficial. As we stand here right now, I think that coaches are confident in their ability to truly engage with the athlete, understand their needs and drive performance WITH the athlete.”

The percentage game



Triumph and turbulence are all part of the job. And regardless of whether there are more brickbats to deflect over the course of the next 12 months, Diccon will not allow his focus to be distracted from Tokyo 2020, and the mission to win as many medals as possible to inspire the nation – which, after all, is the overarching purpose of UK Sport.

And he needs no reminder that Great Britain finished second in the medals table at the Rio Olympics and Paralympics.

No pressure then!

But while the clock is ticking down to Tokyo, it is not the sole focus of the development team.

“Probably 70% of our work over the next 12 months will be Tokyo-focused, but that doesn’t mean we will be taking our eye off the ball in that there is a longer-term development strategy that sits alongside that,” says Diccon.

“So, 30% of our work will be continuing to support coaches who are working with athletes who are on track to go to Paris, improving infrastructure, developing the professional standards of both coaches and coach developers and trying to professionalise coaching and develop coaching as a profession in the UK.”

It is an unrelenting challenge, but the high-pressure world of high performance sport, which comes with high hopes and high expectations, also yields high rewards.

Diccon says the sense of gratitude that he gets from seeing someone else benefit from his and his team’s support is immensely fulfilling.

“What is so personally rewarding is when you talk to a coach and they are so excited about the different range of experiences you have been able to create for them, or so thankful for the support that you as a collective have provided – in terms of the direction given and the increased skills, knowledge, awareness, confidence and flexibility they have developed to engage with different people to enable them to prepare effectively for major competitions.”

He laughs when I ask him if his job is full-time (duh! I know, silly question). Attempting to vindicate myself, I query a coaching link with Leicester Tigers, where he spent time as a player. I had also read that he was reluctant to give up coaching entirely, having enjoyed spells as head coach at Leeds Carnegie and Otley RUFC following a successful dual-code playing career.

“I coach at Leicester Tigers Academy,” he tells me, filling in the gaps in my knowledge. “I think maintaining my involvement in coaching is really important. I’m passionate about coaching and passionate about talent development and I think it is really important to establish a really strong supportive foundation for athletes at that level to give them a platform and a springboard.”

But how does he find the time?

“Let’s just say I have a very understanding wife,” he jokes.

UK Performance Coaches' Association

In a unique partnership with UK Coaching and UK Sport, the UKPCA is exclusively for coaches working with high performance athletes – established to give a member-led voice to coaches working in this demanding environment. If you are interested in applying, [take a look at the bespoke eligibility criteria](#).

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tags : talent, high-performance, coach-development, coach-developer, olympics, uk-sport, welfare

