

Multi-disciplined Performance Strategies

Published 04/01/20 by [Kelvin Giles](#)

During the last 30 years, The Australian Institute of Sport was one of the first sporting organisations to create a centralised high-performance environment. Opened in Canberra in 1981 the Institute grew from a gathering of 8 sports in one building to a multi-disciplined operation where Coaching, Strength & Conditioning, Sports Medicine, Performance Lifestyle and Sports Science were integrated.

It took a good 10 years for this operation, coupled with a de-centralising out to the States and Territories, to have a distinct influence on Australia's performance in the international arena. By the Barcelona Games of 1992 and on to the resounding success of the Sydney Games of 2000 many sporting commentators remarked on Australia's ability to 'punch above its weight internationally'.

As the years unfolded from those early, simple days of a group of experienced coaches plying their trade in one facility; using a local GP for health services; and doing everything from technical / tactical work, fitness work and rehabilitation, the influence of other performance services grew.

Doctors and Physiotherapists were recruited into the pathway and Sports Science began to ask what role it could play in the performance continuum. It seemed that the evolution of a multi-disciplined approach was taking some sensible steps in its growth. Starting with coaching the first add-on was sports medicine. As coaches, we now had a skill-set offered to us that not only mended the broken athlete but guided us towards thinking about injury reduction and injury rehabilitation.

Sports Science was in its infancy and slowly began to offer services that helped in understanding the effects of the training we were prescribing. The 'science' started to fragment into physiology and biomechanics support and while the service was supportive to our needs it was less of an influence than some may think. By the late 1980s things were growing fast, and the Institute commenced its de-centralisation.

Not every athlete found it suitable to relocate to Canberra and break the coach / athlete cycle they were in. State governments alongside the Australian Sports Commission began to create their own integrated operations and so the State Institute and Academy system (SIS/SAS) added another layer of multi-disciplined delivery.

Now the complexity of achieving performance enhancement nationally while being serviced regionally raised its head. Now national squads would be prepared 'at home' in each state for good periods of the year before entire squads came together for periods of 'camps' – usually as a lead up to a major world event.

This system has served Australia well and although international performance has waned it is still a good example of how to weave a national strategy together while having a regional effect.

What can we all learn from this? What traps await the country that wishes to 'institutionalise' its performance operation? I have been lucky enough to work extensively in Australia's SIS/SAS network as a Head Coach; an Athlete Services consultant; a Head of S&C service provision and a general consultant with coaches, doctors, physios and scientists. I have also conducted a number of 'operational reviews' for sections of this system and there are some rhythms that stand out as being worthy of comment.

One distinct weakness of such a journey is the advent of more and more specialist service providers whose view on the overall performance model can be very narrow indeed. I still yearn for the days when,

as a Great Britain National Athletics Coach, I was charged with delivering all aspects of the program to the athlete. It placed me in a position where I had no choice but to learn as much as I could about each of the four pillars of performance – Technical, Tactical (Arena Skills), Physical and Mental. This was achieved by using every spare moment to seek out experts in their field and learn from them. I was fortunate to have within my field older coaches who were built to share. I learned about exercises that trained the body from ‘toenails to fingernails’ from Wilf Paish; the balancing of training modules from Russian, East German and Finnish coaches; the journey from junior to senior layers from visiting specialist Gymnastics schools in Moscow. What I also ensured was that I needed to see others coach and teach. In the early days being a PE teacher allowed me daily opportunity to see others at work in the gym and in the classroom. When coaching I would sit for hours watching some ‘masters’ handle their charges in endurance, jumping and throwing cycles of work.

Slowly (it took about 35 years!) I managed to arrive at a place where I had a decent snapshot of all four pillars of performance and, hopefully, could impart this knowledge into a sound coaching environment.

The trap today, when there are very few coaches who have this ‘snapshot’ of all-round performance management, is micro-management. It seems that without much stimulation a coach will deliver their known aspects of technical and tactical work and then, with little thought, hand their athlete over to the specialists that surround them – and then pray that it works. If you want to be known as a ‘coach’ then you must be able to deliver all four corners of the growth of the athlete. Certainly, recruit the assistance of a specialist but remain steadfast in ‘how and what’ you want them to deliver – as long as you know all the detail.

Even within certain ‘specialist’ areas – Strength and Conditioning services for example – there now appear ‘specialised’ specialists. Some S&C coaches are focused solely on the strength component which has led to the advent of the ‘Strength Scientist’ within the profession. None of this is healthy although it does allow decision-makers to feel that they are doing the right thing because the ‘title’ they are recruiting sounds right in the total scheme of things. I see this in areas such as Nutrition, Conditioning, Biomechanics, Physiology, and Performance Lifestyle (ACE) and so on.

When all these services have to be coordinated into a performance solution for an individual athlete then it is no wonder that performance preparation itself can become fragmented. Add to this the cost of the management and administration of such a multi-layered operation and things often accelerate downhill. Layers upon layers of bureaucracy have been developed to train these specialists, recruit them and then coordinate them into a viable performance delivery.

Whatever funding governments accrue to deliver into sports performance is often eaten up way before it reaches the athlete. We now see an array of specialist administrators such as Athlete Services Managers, High-Performance Managers; along with their regional and area counterparts. The framework may look sexy but in essence, little performance enhancement takes place for every cent that is available.

Many organisations involved in assembling these multi-disciplined performance structures pride themselves on the strategy and infrastructure they have created but in truth, the key is not the numbers or the wonders of the infrastructure but the effect on the athlete. Often an organisation will roll out the (now tired) statement that they are ‘athlete centred, and coach driven’ when in real terms they are ‘infrastructure centred’ and ‘administrator’ led.

The world of coaching has done little to arrest this decline in recent decades as it failed to create coaches who understood all facets of their performance responsibilities. Coach education content revolves around the technical and tactical elements of the contest and little on the other factors in the process (Physical, Learning and Mental). I am sure that most National Governing Bodies (NGB’s) will dismiss these claims and claim that all is well and that their coach education platforms are holistic and well balanced. This is not the case out in the ‘field’ where the majority of coaches deliver technical and tactical work by relentlessly delivering sports-specific drills – and sports-specific, contest-specific activities and nothing

else.

When asked about their coach education strategy many NGB's tell me the number of coaches they have qualified this year or the number of certificates they have given out. The questions they simply must answer is – what effect are your coaches having on performance? Is the sport better in the international arena? Are your athletes technically better? Are they fitter, stronger, faster? Have they the psychological fitness to make a difference? Are your Development layers delivering an accurate, holistic 'journey' to high performance?

Strength and Conditioning appears to weave most of its efforts around weightlifting. S&C coaches get qualified by being able to teach and coach the 'Clean' movement. What of all the other elements of the Physical Preparation journey from the tiny tot through to the senior, high-performance athlete? What about the development of a general movement vocabulary that opens the door to other locomotive, non-locomotive and manipulative skills?

Another 'trap' that awaits the unsuspecting nation is the competitive nature of each service provision sector. Rightly or wrongly each sector feels that they are the 'key' to performance improvement and as such often embark on a sustained quest to obtain rich resources. Huge layers of resources (human, physical and financial) can easily be absorbed by each sector which unfortunately leaves little over for the real centre of attention – the athletes/ coach interface. Add to this the advent of 'spells, potions, gadgets and gurus' that often accompany the release of funding from governments and, again, the athlete and coach are often left wanting.

This competitive nature can also lead to a bias in service provision where the decision-makers often get recruited from all but the coaching fraternity. Put a scientist in charge and you will probably get 'science'; put a doctor in charge and you will probably get 'medicine'. Too often I have seen large, expensive facilities devoted to laboratory-based research, staffed by layers and layers of scientists and bureaucrats while the coach and athlete remain where they are in their simple, and often limited, training environment.

A multi-disciplined approach to performance attainment is a very worthwhile process to consider. It works. It works best when strategy, infrastructure, processes, protocols, knowledge and facilities start at the coach / athlete level. Once this focal point is fully serviced and measurably successful, consistently and permanently, then consider what administrative layers need to be put in place. Then ask this bureaucracy to manage the service and resource provision. Seldom, if at all, do we see such a 'bottom-up' strategy. The 'top-down' approach prevails which is a strange choice. Why start the other way around with a sexy, all-consuming bureaucracy that once in place 'eats all the cake', leaving the coach and athlete where they started?

In Australia and in other countries that have experienced the institute / academy rise and fall it has become evident that the aforesaid coach / athlete interface has finally started to reject the system. More and more small squads or individual coach / athlete units are being created by enlightened coaches who can no longer wait for support. They are rejecting the bureaucratic paper-chase and jargon-based 'hoops' to jump through that often come with the support being offered. There appears to be an increase in the sharing between these enlightened coaches as they try to assemble a more straightforward, consistent journey for their athletes. For some this is working. For others, it is a restricting decision to make because they are not availed of the support they so desperately need when things like injury arise.

Like all strategies, at some stage, all assumptions must be questioned as to the efficacy of the system. Unfortunately, once the career bureaucrat latches on to the process there is little one can do to obtain much change.

[You can find out more about me by visiting my coaching profile](#)

If you enjoyed this you can find all my other ConnectedCoaches blogs [here](#).

Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? [Join for free now.](#)