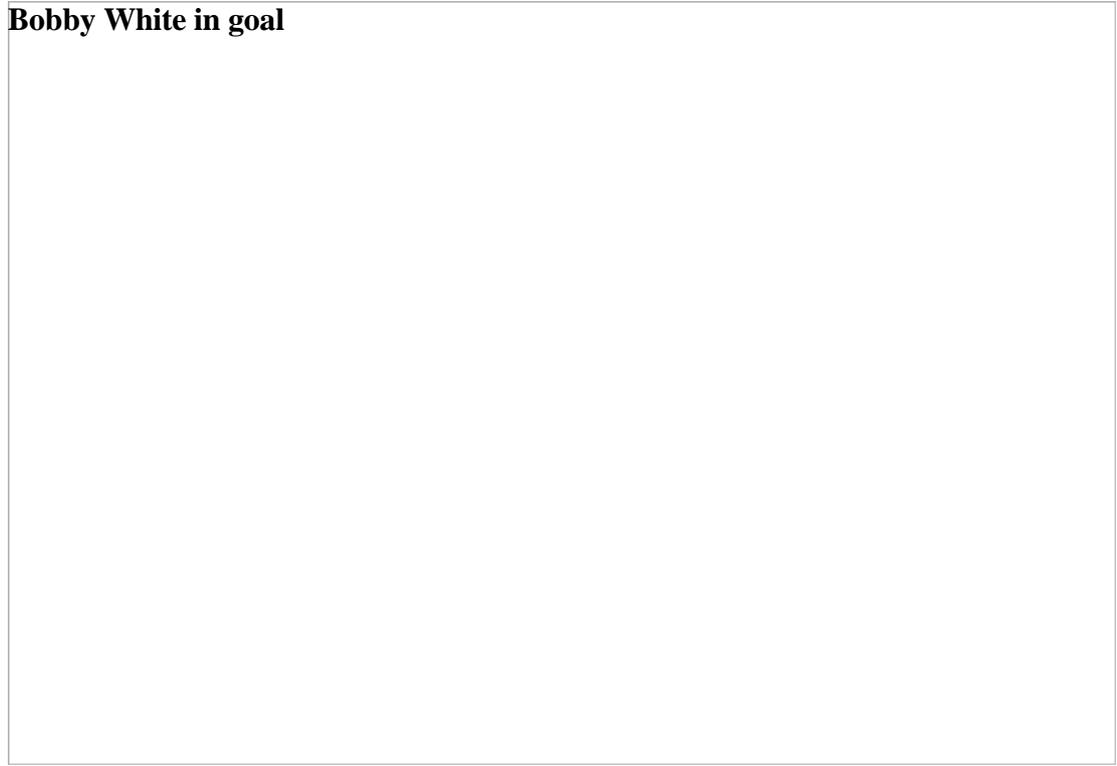


Bill Baillie's Olympic lessons

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Bobby White in goal



As Rio prepares to play host to sport's greatest festival, and the youth of the world gathers in the full glare of the media, members of one British team will be watching and remembering their moment in the sun, and knowing their sport is building for the future. Tim Hartley reports.

The Copperbox was billed as the 'box that rocks' at The London 2012 Olympic Games – the atmosphere electric, the crowds ecstatic. It was the venue that hosted the sport of handball, and for many in the London crowds, it was their introduction to the high-speed sport, which is massively popular across the globe, but has sometimes struggled to gain attention here.

As host, Great Britain had a team at London by right, and in the run-up to London, and the period since, the sport has been on what England Handball Performance Director and ConnectedCoaches member [Bill Baillie](#) admits is 'a real roller coaster'.

The awarding of the Games to London sparked the Sporting Giants initiative, which aimed to find young sportsmen and women with potential in sports including volleyball, rowing and handball, sports in which height is considered a possible advantage. Four men and two women progressed through to compete in the Games, including skipper [Bobby White](#), but the coaching journey the players went on is perhaps just as much a legacy as the facilities in Britain's capital.

All roads lead to...Denmark?

Players were sent to Denmark, a stronghold for the sport, for training at the academy.

'We found 18 people who agreed to move their life to Denmark,' says Baillie. 'For the women's programme, it was more of a challenge to find people prepared to move their lives, perhaps understandably, but we made real progress.'

‘At the start of the Olympic cycle, our funding was cut again. The biggest expense was the academy in Denmark, that was cut, but what was amazing was none of the players decided to go home. They all took jobs over there to make ends meet and to keep themselves playing and training over there. The Danes helped too, it showed a real generosity and was brilliant.’

The next chapter on the roller coaster ride was when the national association was given six places at a German Bundesliga team that had hit financial difficulty. Again, the players grasped the opportunities, and all six made it to the London 2012 squad.

‘We made sacrifices,’ said Baillie. ‘I had given up my job at a local authority, and had to take a voluntary redundancy.’

The Olympic tournament itself was really seen as part of a learning experience, the men gaining respect but losing all five games against France, Sweden, Argentina, Tunisia and Iceland, while the women’s squad lost out to Montenegro, Russia, Brazil, Angola and Croatia.

But as Baillie says:

‘The important time was not the Olympic Games, it was the day after. We have become a true legacy sport. Iotia. experience, the men gaining respCopperbox momentum has been lost, but for us, it’s about looking onwards and investing in age group handball – boys 18–21 and girls 17–20.’

And a huge part of that future is the coaching structure, with elite coaching at Napier University in Edinburgh.

‘There’s no point in having 900 schools playing the game if there is no pathway through the sport so part of the project is [mentoring](#) coaches. Our vision is that we want GB teams to qualify for tournaments more often.

‘It could be four years or 10 years, but we want our under-20s to compete for world championship qualification.’

Inspiration from defeat

Baillie insists that defeats in London were inspiring rather than depressing and helped give players (and the next generation of coaches) more experience.

‘It was a terrific experience, and I don’t think any of the staff or players will forget it for various reasons, but it was also a stressful time. We knew it would be a tough tournament. The strongest region in the world for handball is Europe, and we knew that the best six teams from Europe were in that group. As it transpired, our opening two games were against the eventual finalists, France and Sweden.’

‘There are some very good people who have been in the system for four years since London in 2012. The task now is to attract more athletes. Before, we were often just thankful for new players in the sport, but we have now seen the potential of cross-transference of athletes.’

‘We’ve already mentioned Bobby White, he was a football goalkeeper, so the potential for this is huge. He joined through the Sporting Giants programme and, after two years at the Great Britain Handball Academy based in Denmark, went to on to play professionally for clubs in Greece and France.’

White isn’t the only one, as Ciaran Williams was part of the squad at the London Games and has relocated to Oslo to coach.

He maintains the move to Scandinavia has shown him a different side to the sport and says: ‘In Norway, as with the rest of Europe, you just can’t escape handball. Crowds here often average between 2000 and

5000 per game.

‘It was amazing to be able to showcase our sport and for it to be so positively received by people, many of whom were watching for the first time. Since the (London) Games, the coverage has reduced significantly, which will happen when a (senior) national team disbands, but in terms of participation, it remains on the increase.’

The future is participation

And it’s the participation that Baillie says is where all efforts are now, for coach recruitment as well as player recruitment. He says that sports teachers are massive for the future of the sport, and many are training as handball coaches.

‘As a sport, we know we can’t compete with the “big hitters” such as football, cricket and rugby, but we are an alternative, and I’d be very happy to be the second favourite sport of a lot of people. Transference from rugby, for example, is huge. The defensive skills are often the same, and the two sports can complement each other.’

Numbers are growing massively, with Baillie citing the number of competing schools in the national championships. In 2012, there were 35 taking part, while last year, there were 900 schools in the competition.

‘When it comes to coaches, we have a lot of Level 1 and Level 2 coaches. Now, our challenge is to develop the Level 3s and 4s, which is where Napier University comes in, as well as links to top European clubs.

‘I’ve been in the sport for 40 years,’ says the man from Cumbernauld. ‘Right now, I feel we are on the cusp of something really special.

‘We have been to the Olympic Games, we’ve tasted it. Now, it’s about how we raise the level of our clubs, and get more British players to the top, utilising some of those players from London to help coach. We need more like Steven Larsson (still Britain’s only professional player) and Ciaran Williams!’

Bill’s top three coaching tips

1. Be like a sponge, but focus on specifics not general impressions. Capture concrete facts – what are the critical factors? What do they do differently from you?
2. Coaching for me is about ABC – always being consistent.
3. Don't look for the big, quick improvement. Look for the small marginal gains one at a time. That, for me, is the way to make it stick.

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