

First 6-months back in Australia

Published 03/07/17 by [Kelvin Giles](#)

After 8 years working 'back home' in the UK I have returned to Australia which gives me the opportunity to evaluate how each of these nations approach their sporting strategies. This blog highlights my first impressions of being back in Australia with some reflections on my UK experiences.

In a recent presentation, my colleague Steve Myrland stated, "*Culture (writ large) is largely built on unchallenged assumptions and that assumptions are the rust that forms in the absence of critical thought*". These next few words are my clumsy attempt to again highlight some issues that have arisen through some of this "rust" taking hold in the world of physical activity and sports performance. The aim is to create some thought that allows people to question their assumptions on a few of the elements in these cultural infrastructures.

I returned to Australia last November after working in the UK over two Olympic cycles. I was fortunate to have been able to work across the full performance spectrum from Development right through to the Championship / Medal Table end of things. I met many great practitioners from teaching, coaching, sports-science, sports-medicine and administration and it didn't take me long to realise that what I had experienced in Australia was being duplicated in the UK in terms of that same continuum. My concern was that while inroads were being made in the 1% gains (where Olympic team members were improved to being finalists and finalists were being improved to being medalists) the same effort was not being seen in the development of the next generation. There was a cry for 'legacy' at the London Games where the word on the street was that the London Olympics would create a nation of active people; a healthier nation; and a reduced Health Service budget. It was obvious that this was a false lead by the bureaucracy as all the 'eggs' were being put in the 'basket' of high performance and the legacy was just a hope. Now I like hope and hopefulness but I am clear that unless you add some structure and action to a dream it will remain just a hope. The UK is hurtling towards a high-performance downturn in the future because it continues to fail the 99%.

I had no expectations of what I would see when I returned – just a hopeful feeling that Australia was continuing to look ahead and break new ground with its usual down-to-earth passion. The reality was different. Almost immediately I witnessed the start of the fight to see who actually 'owned' Australian Sport. The decline in Olympic medals that had started in Athens and continued to drop through to the Rio Games appears to have opened a sore in the sporting psyche of the nation. This examination (or attempted coup to put it another way) illustrated to me the power struggles that go on behind the scenes as the decision-making bureaucracies of sport go about protecting their fiefdoms (and their salaries and power base). I watched potential coups and counter-coups going on that ate up energy, time and resources that could have and should have been better used for others. There were polarised views on who should control and spend all the public and corporate dollars involved in Australian Sport which did little to help the 99% of the sporting community that volunteer their time and energy.

Next thing I know is that a politician is asking for submissions for the creation of a National Sports Plan which frightened the life out of me. Here was another chance for the bureaucracy to spend time, energy and money on another expensive gesture. To me any such review should be one where the decision-makers spend a lot of time shadowing all the volunteer coaches and administrators (the 99% of our coaching manpower) who are responsible for the pathway of every athlete whether the aim is well-being and participation or a journey to high performance. Find out what these people really need for them to be effective. What knowledge do they need? What training and mentoring do they need? What coach to athlete ratio do they need? What tools do they need to keep the athletes engaged? What encouragement

do they need to keep turning up? What support from Physical Education do they need?

Can't go past this PE implication without recommending some changes. A change to a movement (mechanical) and fitness (metabolic) curriculum that sees a competitive games element being a result of the former instead of being the centre of attention would seem to be in order. Add to this a school day that sees 'movement breaks' occurring at the end of each lesson where the aim is to finally achieve the recommended 60min of moderate exercise each day for all growing children, and things might improve a little physically, behaviourally and academically.

While all this energy, bluster and political manoeuvring is going on it is interesting to see that all the coaches, athletes and administrators (the 99%) at the early stages of the journey, the participation level of sport that covers the age range of 8-18 years, continue to turn up and do their jobs. In this world of 'Development' little has improved in the last two decades in terms of knowledge, support and reward and it is clear that little will improve in the next two decades unless some like-minded people start to make some much smarter decisions. Unfortunately, once the dust has settled politically and all the power-brokers are again secure in their positions I expect that the status quo will prevail.

I expect that there will continue to be a dissonance between health and well-being and the pursuit of elite performance when it is clear that you cannot have the latter without the former. There will continue to be a reliance on honorary, poorly prepared, poorly serviced, poorly regarded, poorly appreciated manpower in the coaching ranks of the Development layers when the direct opposite is required. The huge resources that are devoured at the bureaucratic layers of sport will continue to elude the coaches, athletes, administrators and infrastructures of the Development layers. Decisions will always be a 'Top-Down' happening where the vital human, physical, information and financial resources are first spent on the bureaucracy and elite layers while the rest of the strategy gets what is left over. One can only dream that we may see some 'Bottom-Up' action where appropriate attention is paid to the layers where the rubber meets the road – the masses of athletes and teachers / coaches working at the level where young people take their first, faltering steps along the journey to (a) continued well-being (b) high performance.

It is always sad to see energy and resources going into a new endeavour that is titled in such a way that the 99% actually get some hope only to see the usual suspects arrive on the scene e.g. either 'too little, too late' or a new plan that simply papers over the cracks while being fan-fared as the 'new solution to all problems'.

The true test of the success of any review and subsequent action is that in 10 years from now you won't have to have another review – maybe some small adjustments but certainly not another one from the ground up. The true test of the efficacy of your coaching strategy is that 10 years from now you won't have suffered another participation decline or further mechanical, metabolic and behavioural limitations to the progression of well-being or performance.

Time to stop the re-cycling of ineffective reviews and interventions and make some positive changes once and for all.

"While efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things." Steve Myrland

Time to re-write and integrate the journey from well-being through to high performance. Time to stop regurgitating tired strategies by tired people and create an appropriate and effective strategy that is created and administered not by career bureaucrats but by those who have trodden the pathway while knowing and delivering best principles. Let the final model start at the cutting edge – where teachers and students and coaches and athletes work every day.

If you enjoyed this you will be able to find all my other ConnectedCoaches blogs [here](#).

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

