

Secret to a perfect partnership: Exploring the relationship between mentor and coach

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Watching brief: England Athletics coaching mentor Matt Wood

- **Goal setting is a two-way process between coach and mentor. The mutual sharing of information is what makes the concept so successful.**
- **While remaining professional is important, a friendly and informal approach to mentoring always trumps a formal approach.**
- **Athlete performances are not the main yardstick used to measure the success of a coaching mentor.**
- **It is not the mentor's job to coach the athletes.**

Three years after the phenomenal success of our Olympic athletes in London, the usual suspects were giving the country an action replay in Beijing this summer.

This is a golden generation for English athletics. Take a bow, Jessica Ennis-Hill, Mo Farah and Greg Rutherford, as these stars of track and field once again replaced Wayne Rooney, Sergio Agüero, Alexis Sánchez et al on the back pages of the national press.

And take a bow too, their coaches.

Athletes invariably make a point of paying tribute to their coach in the post-race trackside television interviews, an indication of the vital and valued role they play.

But if coaches are the unsung heroes of athletics, what about the coaches who mentor the coaches?

You won't run into their names in articles heaping praise on the success of Team GB – until now.

Coaching mentors are another important cog in the well-oiled machine, and the role they play is invaluable to the overall success of their sport.

And by no means are they unique to athletics. For this feature, I spoke to [Matthew Wood](#) who is coach mentor for speed and physical preparation for England Athletics, and fellow ConnectedCoaches Community Champion [Matte Hart](#) who is a British Gymnastics Level 5 coach and mentor to a number of coaches at 1066 Gymnastics in Bexhill, East Sussex.

Together, they provide a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at how coaching mentors work.

The framework is reaping rewards in the performance stakes at international level, even if the mentors themselves are far removed from the celebrations of the athletes.

Job description

Wood's role as speed mentor covers sprints and hurdles. He is responsible for mentoring five coaches out of around 100 on the England programme for speed alone.

There are also a group of mentors for throws, jumps, endurance and one for combined events (heptathlon and decathlon).

The ethos of the programme is coach development. Wood explains: 'England Athletics has invested heavily in coaches over the last six years, and that investment has led to athlete development and the development of the sport. It is quite a visionary thing to do.'

Wood mentors coaches who work mainly with developmental athletes and the under-17 to under-20 age groups.

'It is a nice age group to work with because the coaches are encountering a lot of variation and diversity in their own coaching experiences.'

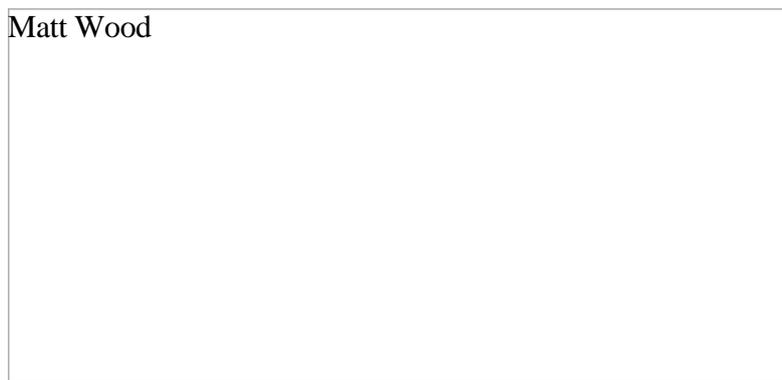
Hart, meanwhile, who works as an assessor within the British Gymnastics coach education programme, says you can tell immediately if a coach buys into the mentoring ethos.

'There is a big difference between a learner who has been allocated to a mentor for the purposes of going through a qualification and who thinks of it more as an assignment, and those who are willing and interested in the mentoring process.'

'For me, I remember being a young coach and having a really good mentor, and I remember how much confidence that gave me. It set me up for my future coaching, and I really appreciated it.'

'Starting a club from scratch, we needed to have lots of coaches, and I felt a responsibility to build that team. If you are willing to roll your sleeves up and get stuck in, the rewards you get are huge.'

Matt Wood



Life in the fast lane: Wood offers some words of wisdom to sprinters

Making a meal of it

The first thing I was keen to understand was how coaching mentors measured the success of their job.

And it was interesting to discover that athletes' performances are not the main barometer they use.

‘We can track a coach using the ranking system so we can see how those athletes that our coaches work with move up the rankings,’ says Wood. ‘And we can track our event group to see how standards generally are going up in terms of performance times and championship selections. But it’s not the be-all and end-all.’

‘There was a survey a couple of years ago by Birmingham University. Everyone who was part of the programme was surveyed, and nine out of 10 coaches said they would want to continue on the programme, and the same high percentage said they would recommend it to another coach, and that it had changed their coaching and made them a better coach. That’s the sort of data we use to measure the success of the programme.’

Another abstract measure took place at August’s Under-15 and Under-17 National Age-group Championships. Coaches and coaching mentors gathered, at the request of the mentees, for a meal one evening, and the informal social setting served as a welcome team bonding and learning exercise.

‘A lot of great sharing takes place in an informal environment,’ says Wood. ‘The mentees prompted that, and it’s great that the stimulation is coming from their side.’

Hart mentors coaches working towards their Level 1, 2, 3 or 4 gymnastics coaching qualifications. This involves observations in training sessions, reflections on coaching sessions, planning and discussion around theoretical content, and providing mock assessments before they take their final assessment.

‘Outsiders looking in will measure the success of my mentoring by how my coaches fare in exams, and if they pass them to gain qualifications,’ says Hart.

‘But what I also like to do with the coaches I mentor is performance reviews three or four times a year. There is a lot of [self-reflection](#). It is important to take the time to log their growth and personal development as they become more confident in certain areas so you’re not just relying on qualifications as a gauge of success.’

A perfect match

It goes without saying that the mentor must strive to build a close [relationship](#) with the mentee, investing time in order to build friendship and trust. Support, guidance and personal development are all watchwords.

But what does the day-to-day job entail exactly?

‘My five mentees are all across the North of England,’ Wood explains. ‘Tomorrow evening, I will be driving to Bolton to meet up with a coach for a coffee before they coach their session. I will have a chat about what they want to get out of their session and a general catch-up. I’ll then sit back and watch them coach, and have a quick debrief later in the evening before catching up with them again later in the week.’

‘The real beauty of the programme is that it is all coach-led. Over a period of years, we will look at areas to develop, be it communication, planning, in-session coaching interventions, areas where their knowledge may be weak – such as technical or biomechanical knowledge.’

‘On our visits, we are not there to coach the athletes. There is a clear line there. There may be an opportunity sometimes to use an athlete to illustrate a point or to make some suggestions, but they are few and far between.’

The focus, Hart agrees, should be on the person as much as, if not more than, the sport.

‘When you mentor, it’s not even about gymnastics a lot of the time, it’s more about helping individuals develop their personal skill sets and interpersonal skills, class control, time management. Yes, often, the

focal point will be on the technical coaching points within the gymnastics sessions they are conducting, but it's more about developing them as a person.

'Mentoring will vary from sport to sport, and also club to club. For me, I do it quite formally, but in a friendly way. I feel I have to formalise it and put it in timetables just to plan my time to make sure I'm seeing everyone as much as I need to for it to benefit them.'

Mentoring has given Hart the opportunity to develop his sport and his gymnastics club by bringing through new coaches, helping it grow from six staff and 50 members to 25 staff and 500 members.

But [building a good rapport](#) with your coaches can bring other rewards for the mentor, not least:

- a motivational experience
- a chance to review your own coaching beliefs and practice
- a chance to develop key coaching-related skills, such as questioning, listening, analysing and providing feedback
- a chance to develop self-reflection skills.

Time is a key factor for Hart. He is currently mentoring seven gymnastics coaches, and juggles it with his multiple coaching roles, so being meticulous with your weekly schedule is essential in order to give coaches the quality one-to-one time they deserve.

'You have to make yourself accessible and give the learner the time they need. It's important to make sure you give them your full attention,' says Hart.

'It is a big undertaking, and you've got to be patient. Often, they are head coaches too, such as myself, and it is a big ask, but it is possible with good planning.'

'In terms of what I get out of it, it feels like you are giving someone the tools to go out and do something worthwhile, and helping them to better themselves and create better gymnasts.'

Thank you for sharing

Back to athletics, and Wood chuckles when I ask him naively if he sees his coaches as his protégés in the same way the coaches see their athletes.

Bearing in mind his mentees have coached at a high level for a number of years, I should have anticipated his response.

'One of the guys I mentor in Leeds is in his 70s. I'm in my early 30s. There's a lot I've learnt from him, probably as much as he's learnt from me. That two-way experiential knowledge, that sharing, is the beauty of it and what makes the programme so successful and is why I jumped at the chance to get involved.'

There is a big sliding scale of how much critical input Wood will have with his mentees. If he is meeting a younger coach who hasn't coached anyone to international level, it could take the form of a question-and-answer session, while a more experienced coach may just want to offload in a chat with someone who understands and empathises.

There is a framework that each athletics mentor uses. It is a loose syllabus where they will look to develop a coach's observational skills, their ability to coach movement, and offer holistic advice and guidance, but [the use of technology](#) in their planning is also encouraged. And this is getting slicker every year.

'When I first came on the programme, we were all supplied with a small high-speed camera from Casio

and taken through different training scenarios of how we could use that,' explains Wood. 'Now, with iPhones and iPads being so good, we use video footage from them to upskill athletes.'

Wood also uses Skype and Dropbox in his mentoring role and will even film personal tutorials, offering guidance and overviews, and including some key points. This is done to drive conversation and stimulate thought processes as opposed to instructing a coach to correct certain faults.

Under the radar

To the casual observer then, a mentor may appear to be a peripheral figure. Unsure exactly of their job description, or even that they exist, the layman identifies only with players and coaches.

To the initiated, and those who have benefited from working alongside a coaching mentor, they are central figures in a sport's make-up – unsung heroes who can never aspire to be in the sporting limelight, but who do aspire to be guiding lights in their sport.

Matt Wood's top tips

1. Start out with some knowledge about the mentee, assess strengths and weaknesses, and then come up with some concrete goals set within time limits.
2. Set expectations of each other – this can be very informal, or you could add it to the goal-setting process.
3. Keep in regular contact – find out how the mentee likes to be contacted (text, email, phone or in person). Everyone is very busy, especially coaches, so try to make things as clear and easy as possible – remove the hassle.
4. Plant seeds that grow in the mentee, try to avoid solving problems or simply providing the answers. (This sometimes is needed, but this is in the minority.)
5. **Listen** – the longer you stay quiet, the more they develop.
6. Be yourself – avoid acting a particular role, other than professional.
7. Share – the brilliant part of mentoring is your own personal learning and growth as a coach. Share ideas, experiences, knowledge, problems.
8. Network – develop a group of contacts who can assist you in developing your mentees. These can be specialists in key areas linked to the goals, or they could simply provide a level of expertise and knowledge you do not have.
9. Don't be too serious – this is an enjoyable role to have, enjoy it and look forward to the next meeting or contact you have with your mentee.
10. Keep someone close to you who can be very honest – this will help you develop but also keeps your feet on the ground. Sometimes, it is easy to forget that the mentor is also a mentee in a different relationship – it is good to have this

outlet.

Matte Hart's top tips

1. Give it due time. Make appointments and be prepared for each mentoring session. Plan in advance.
2. Be accessible, and encourage questioning and approaches from those you are mentoring.
3. Put yourself in the learner's shoes. Often, they are young and have college, exams, other pressures etc. Remind yourself.
4. Let the learner lead. Developing self-reflection is key to developing as a coach. A good mentor will pose a question and then step back. Don't rush in and tell them everything all the time.
5. Use and encourage questions. Give them confidence to ask why and challenge things. Get them to think creatively.
6. Signpost external resources. Don't let them rely solely on you.
7. Keep a record. This will help you record progress and measure success.
8. Adopt a positive style. Learners need encouragement, and a mentor must be a positive person that a learner enjoys working with.
9. Set the example. Remember that learners often aspire to be like their mentor so lead from the front.
10. Share your own journey. Relate to your learners where you can. Share your beginnings, your mistake and the lessons you learnt.

This blog is also available as a podcast on a number of platforms including iTunes. [Listen here.](#)

Next Steps

The UK Coaching's (formerly sports coach UK) 'A Guide to Mentoring Sports Coaches' workshop is a great way to develop your skills in the area of mentoring other coaches. [Visit the UK Coaching website to find out more about this workshop.](#)

1st4sport PE Confidence series

1st4sport have developed a new eLearning suite called [PE: Confidence](#). The courses are for teaching staff in primary schools, who would like to learn tactics to overcome the challenges of teaching PE. And for

coaches who would benefit from learning strategies and techniques to deal with the challenges of coaching in a school environment. You 'learn by doing' by making decisions in real-life online scenarios and seeing the consequences of those decisions. One of the courses in this suite that might interest readers of this blog in particular is the [PE Confidence: Mentoring in PE](#).

Do you have any tips to share? What do you think of this post? Let us know by leaving a comment below.

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