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Professional Association of Directors of Sport in Independent Schools

Developing Twenty First Century School Sport and Exercise

Combining Performance with Participation

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BACKGROUND

Sport in UK independent schools has a long history. It traces its origins to the modernisation of the public schools, led by Rugby School, in the first half of the nineteenth century. The codification of the sports played in these schools in the second half of that century allowed the spread of sport into wider society, and then around the world. The industrial revolution, accompanied by the development of railways and other infrastructures, all contributed.

From its origins, school sport had twin ambitions. Its first, and original, function was to keep large numbers of pupils occupied. Although begun as an instrument of social control, its growth was fuelled by what came to be an unquestioned assumption that participation in such activities developed 'character'. The second, later, purpose was the pursuit of high performance amongst a small number of 'elite' performers. Their achievements were measured in the results of competitive encounters with rival schools, which came to be seen as a reflection of the wider merit of the institution. The participants in such matches were rewarded with considerable status, including special clothing and privileges. The ribboned blazers and tassled caps endure unchanged in many schools today. Athletic achievements were acknowledged in endless rituals, songs and books, led by the 1857 bestseller, 'Tom Brown's Schooldays'. Henry Newbolt's 1892 poem, 'Vitae Lampada' captured the mood of the times in overtly connecting qualities learned in Cricket with those that brought success on the battlefields of the Empire.

This history remains relevant, as it explains the foundation of sport in schools into the twenty first century. Many attitudes, rituals and assumptions have remained unchallenged for 150 years. Principal amongst them is the tension between the dual functions of school sport: to accommodate wide involvement, whilst at the same time pursuing reputation-enhancing triumph in inter-school matches and competitions. It has come to be summarised at 'performance and participation', presented as polar opposites and often regarded as mutually exclusive.

The landscape of school sport has shifted in the last decade. Ambitions have broadened, with pressure for inclusivity and a rising awareness of the uncontroversial (though historically overlooked) assumption that all children might be entitled to a relevant, high quality experience of physical activity. Meritocracy has been challenged by democracy, with the inevitable confusion that is, largely, unresolved.

Other influences have exerted pressure. The arms race of capital developments in the late twentieth century provided facilities for indoor games and activities, which led to questioning of the assumption that outdoor team sports should be compulsory for all. The majority of historic boys' schools have become co-educational, eroding the expectation that classroom teachers coach games teams. Alongside this is a growing awareness of the importance of healthy, active lifestyles. This is particularly relevant in an increasingly sedentary society, where the principal leisure activities of teenagers have moved online. An expression

popularised by the then Sports Council in the 1970s – 'Sport for All' – has become the misapplied, simplistic mantra of many school programmes.

And yet, at the same time, inter-school sport has continued to dominate the resources and energies of most organisations. Rugby went professional in the 1990s, and other sports 'professionalised' themselves with performance pathways and quasi-vocational opportunities available for the first time. This brought a changing workforce in schools and a growing Stakhanovite obsession with preparation, led by the cult of conditioning. The internet has made sports results more easily accessible, with scores and awareness of winners and losers more public. There have emerged more 'national' competitions than ever before, and performance in these remained a default criteria by which the quality of a school's sport is assessed. Standards have escalated. Fun and playing with friends have been usurped as the primary purposes of school sport.

The first attempts to assimilate performance and participation, in the decades either side of the Millenium, were to add more of the same. The competitive opportunities in traditional games, which had long been available to the best athletes on a meritocratic basis, were broadened. The alphabet game proliferated. Lower ability teams sprouted everywhere, as traditional inter-school fixtures often doubled in size. The big boys' boarding schools led the way, with enormous block fixtures, and the number of teams became a new metric of programme quality. With smaller, specialist, workforces, girls' schools often struggled to match these volumes.

The resources demanded by this expansion were enormous. Transport costs doubled. Travelling times increased in the thirst for opponents with similar numbers of teams. The simultaneous nature of these fixtures, usually on Saturdays, meant that more people and pitches were required than ever before. This was exacerbated as the staffing ratios demanded by some girls' sports (notably Netball) were less favourable. A supplementary workforce of part time, external sports coaches came into existence, not always housetrained in the traditional values of school games.

This phase was based on an assumption that the features that motivated the athletically inclined pupils, principally rivalry in team sports, were applicable to all. The science that clearly showed that only about 50% of children are driven by competition was largely ignored. The honour of selection was not shared equally by all, reflected in uneven willingness to get on the bus to distant destinations for a match of 50 minutes duration. Or a Cricket fixture in which neither batting nor bowling were guaranteed. Or a Rounders game of 25 balls per innings. The assumption that all boys wanted to play in Rugby matches, and that all girls wanted to play outdoors in January, turned out to be flawed. Many did so, and participated enthusiastically, benefiting enormously. However, to make this programme work a significant number of conscripts was required to fulfil the necessary critical mass. It emerged that there never was a golden era when all boys loved Cricket and all girls loved Lacrosse. Plenty did, and in the schools where the programme was exciting and the culture strong, these numbers were – and remain – high. But it was never 100%, and never would be. So, what about the others?

THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOL SPORT AND EXERCISE

Any attempt to broaden engagement in physical activity in schools demands the addition of two programme dimensions. In order of significance, they are variety and choice. This is entirely consistent with the academic life of a school, where – after a period of compulsory curriculum – a range of subjects is offered, and selections are made by pupils, according to their interests and ability. Fishermen have long been aware that bait are specific to breeds of fish: the greater the range of bait, the wider the catch.

Performance and participation are not mutually exclusive. It is not helpful to think of them as binary alternatives. Both are integral dimensions of an inclusive programme, which has as its foundation the uncontroversial ambition of providing an appropriate and engaging experience of physical activity for all children.

It is surprising how infrequently schools have clearly defined success criteria for the outcomes they seek, in any meaningful way. In the absence of such clarity, the default measure reduces to how many goals are scored against local rivals in seasonal fixtures. Those schools who do analyse their ambitions more forensically always come up with a broader range of outcomes, often concluding with a dimension of lifetime impact (eg *"to build skills and attitudes which lead to a lifelong positive relationship with physical activity"*). Wider consideration always brings a pluralisation of the success criteria: high performance does not have to be undervalued by the additional ambitions. Others can be added. It is impossible to prioritise whether it is a greater triumph for 11 girls to win a national title, or to have all pupils in a school able to swim. Any school would want both. This leads to plural success criteria – none more important than the other.

If it is rare that schools have clearly articulated aims for what they seek to achieve, it is even more unusual that the programme, resources and communications are aligned behind this. In a shifting landscape, this has become more important than ever, though not more frequent. The purpose of the programme is often overlooked in the constant maelstrom of activity. This is the principal reason why so little has changed in 50 years.

It is instructive that even the nomenclature is unsatisfactory and confusing. Schools describe their 'sports' programmes, and have a Director of 'Sport'. However, 'sport' – defined by the dictionary as *"an occasion in which people compete in various athletic activities"* – is in itself limiting and incomplete. Other expressions such as "Physical Education" and "Games" are equally unsatisfactory, and are burdened for many by negative, inter-generational, baggage. This is acknowledged in recently changing job titles, where positions such as 'Director of Sport, Health and Fitness' have become more frequent, and have sought to capture a wider ambition.

In order to establish a programme which might impact upon all pupils, and build enduringly positive attitudes to being active, four specific areas must be included. School sport and

exercise can be likened to a four legged stool: if any of the legs is missing, too short or too weak, then the stool falls over and its purpose is failed.

These four areas are not discrete, or independent. They are integral parts of a single whole, aimed at providing an appropriate, positive experience for all pupils – throughout their school career, and beyond. The activities, approaches and expectations may vary between schools, sexes and year groups, but the overall ambition remains the same. All failings of engagement can be traced to deficiencies in one or more legs of the stool.

In equal order of importance, these areas are:

High Performance

This is the part that schools usually do best. Staff appointments are often made with performance coaching a priority: the same teachers then identify most closely with the pupils who are like them. These are usually the robust, resilient, athletic pupils who thrive on competition and tolerate discomfort. Disproportionate investment has been made in supporting these programmes in the last ten years, with previously unimaginable provision for specialist coaching, conditioning and analysis. They impact, however, on a very limited number of pupils.

The activities of a small number of athletic pupils dominate the resources and the communications. The recognition mechanisms – special clothing, status, honours boards, announcements in assembly and on the website – are well-established in most schools. This creates the impression, sometimes unintended, that what the school values most is the competitive achievements of a small number of pupils, usually in traditional games.

There is no doubt that the pursuit of high performance, at an appropriate level, is an important dimension of any school's sports offering. Its long history has made it a sector expectation, and the evaluation of sport in a school remains, for many, tied up in its results in school fixtures. These aspirations are important to pupils, parents and staff. A cup run, or victory over a local rival, can boost morale in a school. They are undisputed high points for many.

There is a darker side, however. The elevated status according to the best student athletes dates back to Victorian times. At its worst, this leads to a bunch of alphas conducting themselves as if normal rules and expectations don't apply to them. Toxic cultures around sport have become unfashionable, though schools have sometimes struggled to eradicate them. Privileges accorded to the top athletes have recently been diluted: however, this can then be misinterpreted as an initiative to undervalue sport.

Professionalisation has given birth to a profusion of 'academies' and 'pathways', whose interface with education is not always comfortable. Their ever increasing demands can result in clashes

with the wider purpose of schools and delude otherwise intelligent parents about their children's prospects of sporting greatness.

The idea that an elite sports tour to the southern hemisphere is a legitimate recipient of whole-school fundraising has fallen out of favour: in many environments, the concept of an exclusive, selected tour itself is no longer comfortable.

For a small number of schools, elite sports provision has become an overt focus. This has made them a magnet for the most able and dedicated athletes (though not always as full fee payers), and enabled them to maintain a breathtaking standard of sport: inevitably, they dominate national competitions. Their performance support mechanisms compare favourably with professional environments. However, this brings its own problems. It can alienate schools from their traditional, local rivals, presenting new difficulties of finding comparable and like-minded opposition. Inevitably, this involves greater travel, with accompanying cost and disruption.

The challenge for the future is to establish a programme and resources that allow dedicated athletes to pursue their ambitions to excel, but within the context of education. This will be relative to each school's situation. Support mechanisms, competition programmes and a culture of aspiration are all a part of that. By definition, however, this will only impact on a small minority of pupils. It cannot, therefore, be at the expense of other legitimate, and wider-reaching, programme ambitions.

Retention in Traditional Games

The number of Sixth Formers playing competitive team games is at an all-time low. Lesser ability senior teams are in a decline which appears terminal in many schools. The glory days of the alphabet game, with a profusion of teams in every year group, including multiple Sixth Form teams, are largely over. Retention of a critical mass of willing and enthusiastic team members in traditional games is the greatest challenge facing school sport in the modern era.

This has crept up on the sector as the inevitable, though not always anticipated, impact of increased choice. The demise of compulsion to participate in games teams, and the downwards revision of the age of choice, have diminished numbers playing. It is too early to judge the impact of the suspension of school sport during the pandemic, though the early signs are not encouraging. Schools are still judging what their sustainable numbers of future teams will be – with the biggest challenge in the senior years. The historic primacy of Rugby Football and Cricket is, ironically, under the greatest pressure from rising safety concerns and unfashionable time demands. They, alongside boys' Hockey, are threatened most by the irresistible rise of Association Football as the game of choice for boys, and, increasingly, girls.

The number of pupils choosing to remain engaged with team sports and fixtures in each year group is the most significant metric that schools need to consider. These should be an issue

of annual interest, scrutiny and concern, alongside a keen awareness of the critical mass to which the school aspires. This issue will be greater in smaller schools, where a higher level of retention will be necessary to sustain a traditional fixture programme.

Creative approaches to competition will be part of the solution. The prep sector has already seen a partial departure from the head to head fixture, driven by shorter games under New Rules of Play. A festival approach, bringing several schools together for a series of abbreviated encounters can increase involvement, make it easier to manage mismatch and detract from focus on the result. This could profitably be extended into the senior sector. Similarly, departure from obsession with the full version of the game provides additional flexibility to create a more attractive, and appropriate, experience. Smaller teams, and adapted rules, all promote this outcome. The historic block fixture will have a place in the competition offer of the future, especially between big schools. However, it will no longer be the sole model, being complemented by additional solutions to the challenge of providing meaningful, and appropriate, competitive experiences for all pupils. There is greater collaboration between schools that any previous time as practitioners work creatively together to improve the pupil experience. Inevitably, some schools are more innovative and open-minded than others.

The challenge is to replace compulsion with a strong culture and to establish an environment and quality of experience with which pupils wish to engage. Not because they have to, but because they want to. It is necessary to create an atmosphere in which pupils feel connected to each other and linked to a bigger purpose, in which they feel safe and valued. Teamship, commitment and selflessness need to be built carefully and deliberately, communicated widely and reinforced at all levels of the school.

Behavioural nudges and messaging will both have a place, but, ultimately, the number of pupils keen to get on the bus to the most distant destination against the strongest opponents will be a direct reflection of the strength of the culture of sport. The inflection points are the stage at which choice is first offered, and then again as pupils enter the Sixth Form. Schools must be particularly sensitive to retention levels at these stages, and have campaigns to address the potential challenges.

The future will be with the carrot, not the stick. Most schools have a quasi-compulsory experience of traditional games in their junior years. This is an opportunity to build engagement by leveraging the factors that are known to influence retention. These include the relationship between the players and their teacher, the style of delivery, level of opportunity, encouragement and appropriateness of the competition offer. A nurturing, inclusive environment where all get a chance to improve and compete at their own level is proven to improve retention.

The strength of the sports culture in a school shares characteristics with a General Election. It is not determined by the extremes. The games-facing pupils will always been keen, and, at

the other end of the continuum, there will always be those who are hard to reach. Like voters who unthinkingly vote the same way every time, these pupils don't determine the result. It is the floating voters in the middle who have the greatest influence. In schools where it is cool to be involved, to sweat and to get on the team bus, the culture remains strong and 'normal' behaviour is to be involved. Without this, only a small number of enthusiasts will be regularly involved, and competitive sport will be marginalised in the life of the school.

The promotion of the benefits of team games has not kept pace with the articulation of the risks, and this is something that schools (and National Governing Bodies) will need to address in the future. Games have had an unquestioned place in schools for 150 years, and the benefits have been tacitly assumed: it will be necessary to be much more overt in identifying and communicating these. The capacity of games to develop desirable personal qualities, such as selflessness, commitment and empathy (the 'character' of the Victorian era) has been a received wisdom for nearly two centuries. The evidence to support these conclusions has always been limited, validated only by repetition and unquestioned conviction. Research to confirm these impacts is overdue.

School publications regarding sport, either in print or on websites, are strong on features. They describe and illustrate what happens and dwell on eye-catching facilities. What is too often absent, however, is the articulation of benefit: the 'why' of school sport, its purposes and outcomes.

Where schools appoint heads of sports to manage individual games, they should be overtly accountable for retention levels. In annual reviews, these should be the first metrics considered. A programme designed with this in mind will not necessarily look the same as one driven only by performance.

Meaningful Variety

Traditional games had a significant head start in the sports programmes of all schools. Although leavened by some athletic activities (typically cross-country 'steeplechases') and with court games such as Fives, the diet was fairly unrelenting. When girls' schools emerged at the start of the twentieth century, they largely adopted the boys' model, basing provision primarily on compulsory, outdoor team games.

Facility developments, social changes and 'Sport for All' pressures conspired to broaden the programme, especially for older pupils. It was reluctantly accepted that engagement might be increased by wider opportunity. This brought first variety, and then choice.

The quality of sports opportunities provided beyond team games have not always kept up with the quantity. As a result, the potential of a broader programme has not always been realised.

Most schools have a fixed experience of compulsory, usually traditional, activities for their younger years, and finish up with free choice in the Sixth Form. What varies is the stage at which variety is introduced, and the place of choice within the infrastructure. The age of this has been revised downwards in recent years, and is now, on average, in Year 9.

It is sometimes felt that the alternatives to traditional games should not be made too attractive, for fear that they will negatively impact retention. In practice however, this turns out not to be the case; it is the quality of the team games programme that is the biggest influence on retention. Where this is poor, children exercise the choice to leave it, regardless of the alternatives. Where culture is weak, and the experience of teams uninspiring, even able athletes sometimes seek to abandon teams. It is tempting then to look for the solution in reducing choice and increasing compulsion, when the real answer is in improving the experience and building a stronger culture.

Variety and choice are more evident, therefore, in the sports offer for older pupils, typically from years 10 or 11 upwards. This often coincides, especially in the Sixth Form, with a timetabling model that has the largest number simultaneously scheduled for 'Games', and therefore puts greatest pressure on resources. At this stage, quality control often fails, and the experience of some pupils – almost always those not involved in traditional games teams – can become unacceptably low.

The most significant test of quality assurance is to walk around the games provision at the stage of the week when most children are simultaneously active. For many schools, this is a Wednesday afternoon. A subjective assessment of the quality of each experience viewed provides an approximate measure of quality control. Few are the schools where all sessions, for all pupils, could be judged excellent. More frequent is the youth club environment featuring low intensity activity, passive supervision and complete lack of progress. Senior games afternoons are rarely occasions for pride in provision. More often, there is a wide contrast between the experience of the most able athletes in school teams and the alternatives available to other pupils. The greatest scandal of the sector is those schools who charge lower ability pupils extra to participate in off-site activities during curriculum time, which run alongside lavishly funded school teams.

These occasions are the inflection points for staffing. A shortage of able enthusiasts often means that some teachers are pressed into service less willingly, providing passive and uninspiring supervision.

Variety and quality control are a delicate balance. The greater the range of activities from which pupils choose, the more difficult it is to maintain consistently acceptable standards. Meaningful variety requires a careful evaluation of how many activities can be operated without uncomfortable compromise of quality.

Modern schools are well equipped to offer variety in their programmes, with better facilities for a wider range of sports than at any time in history. Lists of sports on offer look impressive in the prospectus: the challenge is to make all these opportunities meaningful.

Culture of Health, Fitness and Physical Wellbeing

The biggest area of opportunity for schools is the improvement in the level of exercise undertaken by all pupils. Creating an active community (which includes staff and parents) is a challenge which is arguably more important than scoring more goals than a rival in a school match. The explosion of concern for wellbeing establishes a new priority for health-promoting physical activity. If culture reflects the normal behaviours in an organisation, then the challenge is to normalise exercise in the lives of all pupils, including those not motivated by 'sport'. This is especially significant in the senior years, when research shows that children are most likely to become inactive, and when pressure of exams intensifies. The latter presents a dilemma for school culture: is exercise seen as something that takes time away from academic work (and therefore a waste of time), or something that is seen as complimentary to learning and thus of value ? The game-changing science that shows that exercise improves learning, memory and concentration at a cellular level is curiously invisible in many schools. It might be a priority of the pastoral system to understand the level of activity undertaken by all pupils, within and beyond school.

Building a culture of health and fitness has three dimensions. The first is education: understanding the influence of physical activity and diet on wellbeing, as well as the impacts of various types of exercise. The second is the opportunity to take part in health-promoting activity. This has its own complexities. Access to facilities at suitable times, including flexibility to schedule exercise at different stages of the day is a starting point. Other factors such as kit requirements, single sex sessions and appropriate classes/equipment are all important. If gyms are set up for alpha athletes, and constantly used by them, it is correspondingly less likely that more self-conscious pupils will choose to use them. The third cultural dimension is recognition. Mechanisms are required – formal and informal – that acknowledge and reward involvement, especially amongst the 'hard to reach' constituencies.

This important area of exercise provision needs dynamic leadership. The trend towards appointing a 'Head of Strength and Conditioning' misses this opportunity. It suggests a clear priority of conditioning for athletic performance, with which many pupils will fail to identify. A title of 'Head of Health and Fitness', or similar, could broaden this role beyond the preparation of the best athletes: it should seek to impact positively on all pupils. A legitimate aim of this position would be to raise the profile of physical wellbeing and providing a suitable range of opportunity and encouragement. Health and fitness should be positioned as a generic whole, of which athletic conditioning is a sub-division.

Facilities for functional conditioning have never been better in schools. Many, however, have been set up with undue focus on elite performance, with equipment and environment that are potentially forbidding. It is important that these are developed with the requirements of all pupils in mind. The instinctive reluctance of some constituencies of pupils to be involved in exercise will be unwittingly reinforced by an unwelcoming environment.

A significant cultural shift would be to acknowledge that health promoting exercise does not have to be maximal to achieve benefits. Most adults who exercise do not do so to exhaustion, unlike competing athletes. This is undoubtedly a disincentive to reluctant exercisers, especially those who have previously had negative experiences of school 'PE'. A nurturing environment which encourages appropriate exertion can have a major impact on building an active community.

Health and fitness is a whole school issue. It is the focus of a modern PE programme: in more forward-thinking organisations it has largely replaced indoor games. However, its presence needs to be wider than a single curriculum area, overlapping with the pastoral system, and reflected in the messages in assemblies and on the walls of schools. Creating active adults, who have a positive relationship with exercise and an understanding of how to achieve fitness outcomes, is a twenty first century priority for school sport and exercise.

WHAT DOES CO-EDUCATIONAL SPORT REALLY MEAN?

The history of education in the UK is firmly rooted in single sex provision. The only secondary education in the 19th century was for boys, and the opportunities which emerged for girls in the early 20th century were deliberately separate. When maintained secondary schools emerged, many were single sex; even when comprehensivisation brought co-educational schools, provision for physical activity and sport remained resolutely distinct – often with separate facilities, and certainly with gender-specific staff. There were – emphatically – sports which were for boys, and others that were for girls. There was no overlap.

Almost all mixed independent schools were boys' schools which took girls. In the early years of this process, small, pioneering groups of girls operated a limited games programme alongside the established, and celebrated, activity of the boys. Several years were necessary to establish mature co-education, with stable numbers year to year. At that stage, equality of provision become possible, but was often slow to emerge. Sport remains the final challenge for the co-educational process.

National competitions reinforce the legacy that boys and girls play separately. Regular school fixtures, and almost all cups, are firmly single sex, and inevitably therefore drive the programme that they are intended to support. In an era when inclusion, equity and diversity are a major focus of school life, physical activity has lagged behind. In many schools, there remains distinct provision, separate departments, and gender-based management. The Head of Girls' Games remains alive and well in many environments: this is not consistent with a co-educational school.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that confusion remains about exactly what co-educational provision for sport and exercise should look like. A variety of interpretations exists. At one extreme, all sports teaching is in mixed groups; for others it is all pupils introduced to the same sports. Some feel that it is equivalent opportunities, but in different sports, where others assume that having girls in boys' teams ticks that box. The higher the school's profile of inter-school sport, the greater the gender separation, reflecting the character of the competition programme. In these environments, teams of boys and girls get on separate buses to different destinations every match day: only those pupils who have proved beyond reasonable doubt that they have no role in sports fixtures might encounter dual-gender sessions. The unintended consequence then is that mixed exercise is confined to pupils of lower ability and interest.

No-one planned it to be this way. Other areas of school life have found a meaningful, mixed environment easier to achieve. Drama and music have a comfortable accommodation of the sexes, as do academic subjects. Physical activity, and sport in particular, has found it more difficult to accommodate.

There are unique obstacles, that go beyond tradition. Established gender differences impact upon physical activity. These include maturation rates, attitudes to competition, influence of peers and NGB regulations. Engagement of both sexes with mixed sessions varies: body-consciousness and clothing expectations also impact upon enthusiasm for participation. There are well-known barriers at different ages and stages, and the environment is one of them. Gender dysphoria complicates the issue further.

So, what might a successful co-educational programme of sport and exercise look like?

Some dimensions are uncontroversial, and should be relatively easy to achieve. These include a commitment to equality of opportunity, where this means both quality and quantity of provision. Parallel mechanisms of recognition, communications and structures are relatively straightforward to achieve: special clothing and tokens of achievement are easily standardised. Opportunities to take part in competitions, tours and cups can be regulated and measured. If boys play at weekends, girls should do the same.

Other issues are more complex. Establishing a comparable culture of commitment, and ambition is a more subtle aspiration, and one less easily measured. Equal expectations on Saturdays are still controversial in some schools. Encouraging gender-blind dedication and pupil enthusiasm requires a level of leadership that not all school sport enjoys. However, until this foundation is achieved, tinkering with programme issues is irrelevant. Co-educational attitudes, expectations and behaviours are difficult to build, but are at the heart of successful provision.

Once this cultural foundation is laid, the programme issues can be addressed. Several sports will be predominantly confined to one sex, both by popularity and competition. Any pupils wishing to be involved should have the opportunity to do so, but it should not be necessary to ensure a compulsory experience to fulfil expectations of inclusivity. Not all boys will want to play Netball, but those that do should be able to. Access to culturally significant games is the crux of the issue.

Newly co-educationalised opportunities, in games such as Soccer and Cricket, present different philosophical challenges. The most able girls can be accommodated on merit in what are still known as 'boys' teams – though in practice simply become 'open' ones. This in itself doesn't make the programme co-educational. Providing comparable opportunity in groups where all members are comfortable and fully involved is a wider challenge. Gender-blind ability groups are one possible solution.

Mixed sports still have a surprisingly low profile, especially for the most able. Even in sports where men and women have competed alongside each other for many years, such as Hockey and Tennis, schools have been slow to adopt these in competition. They may feature in

'recreational' programmes (often low-standard, frivolous 'youth-club' style activity sessions), but serve only to reinforce the subliminal stereotype that mixed sport can't be serious.

Conditioning sessions present additional complications. Whilst it is easy to make the gym open to both genders, establishing an environment where are all comfortable to attend is more difficult. Body consciousness and self confidence issues exert considerable influence. Where these are a barrier, making some sessions single sex may be necessary, at least in the short term.

Other resourcing challenges exist. Female role models are often in short supply, and staffing girls' sport is frequently difficult. Men are involved in coaching girls much more than the other way round. This is particularly the case in schools where classroom teachers contribute to games coaching. There is a place for gender-blind staffing, but beyond a certain level of frequency, reinforces a climate of male domination. Schools need to be planning now for what the future of the mixed workforce will be.

The management of school sport needs to align with a co-educational philosophy. Where the same sports are played by both sexes (eg Hockey, Soccer, Cricket), it makes little sense – and conveys entirely the wrong message – to have the boys and girls' provision separately managed. The role of head of a sport should be overtly gender-blind. On a wider level, there is no place in a modern co-ed school for a separate Head of Girls', or Boys', games.

A co-educational culture will not emerge overnight. Dismantling alpha male expectations about the primacy of boys' sport will take at least a generation of pupils. Firm and inflexible 'rules' and operating procedures are unlikely to be helpful. More individual accommodations are likely than in previous eras, underlain by a commitment to equal opportunity.

Co-education is not just a programme. It is a philosophical assumption, and a guiding principle. Its success will be based on establishing a culture based on pupil – and staff – attitudes and behaviours. The sport-specific issues will be addressed along the way, but rules alone won't achieve change. School sport and exercise is on a journey. It is a continuum that begun in Tom Brown's Schooldays, and is heading towards a future that is yet undefined. Gender blindness is one of the speed ramps along the way.

WORKFORCE

All the trends and initiatives detailed above have one thing in common: they demand a greater quantity and higher quality of staff than ever before, with a wider range of skills. There are approximately four times more specialist sports staff employed by UK independent schools than was the case ten years ago. The resource explosion of the late twentieth century was in facilities: its equivalent post-Millenium is the growth in workforce.

High performance is resource-intensive. A more inclusive programme requires additional people and places to provide more pupil opportunities. Variety beyond team games demands new skills and has less favourable staffing ratios than outdoor sports. Health and fitness requires its own new workforce. It is, therefore, easy to succumb to a culture of adding. Finding staff at short notice to plug holes, or meet new requirements, is frequently the norm. In such circumstances, quality will often be compromised.

The first question for any school is what contribution it requires to the extra-curricular sports programme by classroom teachers. Boys' schools, in both senior and prep sectors, (mostly now co-educational) historically depended upon this, but now find this assumption under unprecedented pressure. All schools are finding willing and able volunteers in short supply, especially those able to coach to a high level and willing to commit to weekend sport. In some schools the species is almost extinct: others have more than their share of a diminishing resource. Initiatives to pay teachers for this service have met with mixed success.

Although paying experienced teacher rates for moderate quality games coaching may not appeal to bursars, the impact is more complex than this. The pastoral dimension of sport, combined with knowledge of the pupils, should not be underestimated. Neither should an understanding of the values and standards of school sport. It is hard to compare this hidden impact with the alleged technical capability of cone-carrying 'professional' coaches. Further, full-time teachers are in a position to win the battles in the corridors, which contribute so much to the culture of sport in a school, though are difficult to quantify on a spreadsheet.

However, minimum standards of competence and enthusiasm are essential. Reluctant staff will be successful in conveying their indifference to pupils: where they are allocated to the pupils of lowest motivation and ability, there emerges a perfect storm of disaffection. The passive supervision of someone sitting in school clothes marking in the corner of a sports hall is one of the least edifying sights of school games. The sector has put the 'bad' in 'badminton', by allowing it to be inadequately staffed through conscription. No school should tolerate standards that are this low.

The future of classroom teachers coaching games is a critical issue for the sports programme. It is linked with the question as to whether a school is willing to consider compromising academic appointments in order to bolster co-curricular expertise. Those without a clear

strategy for engaging a critical mass of teachers within sport are facing a crisis of coaching every year, and lurch from one looming disaster to another.

Most schools have more specialist PE teachers than timetabled lessons justify. The sector tolerates some overstaffing here in a way that no other subject would be permitted. This is set against an expectation of full commitment to co-curricular sport, usually involving Saturdays. Girls' schools have never had the same dependency on non-specialist help from the classroom, and are therefore less vulnerable to inconsistent supply: however, they have correspondingly greater requirement for additional capacity. In order to meet parental ambition for range and frequency of fixtures and other opportunities, most girls' schools now require a supplementary force of part-time teachers and coaches. There has, however, emerged a culture in this sector of offering time off during the week in recognition of weekend commitments. This brings its own issues and covert staffing cost.

Graduate assistants used to be the marginal members of school sports staff, with their contributions confined to administrative tasks and assisting the coaches. It is estimated that the number of these appointments has quadrupled in the last five years, and their roles have become more central. Many schools now depend upon these untrained, inexperienced young people to take the lead in running sessions, accompanying teams and upholding standards. The increased demand often exceeds supply, which exerts a downwards influence on quality. Rapid turnover means that inexperience is the norm. Schools with this dependency will need to significantly improve their induction, training and appraisal of this workforce if standards are not going to decline. The combination of this role with 'on the job' PGCE certainly mitigates the quality issue.

The last decade has seen a growth of full-time sports coaches, who have emerged to fill both the skills gap – bringing contemporary expertise – and also the staffing shortcoming. There are many advantages to full-time sports coaches, and they are likely to become more prevalent in the medium term. The investment in housetraining and upskilling is justified by their longer tenure, and high profile appointments, at relatively modest costs (outside TPS), can raise the profile of sport in a school. Professional sport discards huge volumes of these people annually, and it is one of the few recruitment arenas where the supply and demand dynamic is in schools' favour.

The part-time coach is the last stop on the line of meeting capacity. It is an easy, and cheap, expedient that looks better in theory than practice. This is the inevitable accompaniment to a culture of adding. Every time a coaching vacancy cannot be filled, finding another external coach appears as a simple solution. However, it assumes an available workforce of sufficient standard and commitment, which is increasingly rarely the case. As the first constituency to be dispensed with at the start of the pandemic, many disappeared to find alternative employment, and have not returned. Demand exceeds supply, which again inevitably compromises quality. Schools are often grateful to find anyone vaguely suitable, and are therefore reluctant to make

additional demands of accountability. Little companies springing up to service this vacuum can rarely provide committed, housetrained man (or woman) power. Many schools have been willing to outsource this problem, and turn a blind eye to quality. It is a model based on compromise, with undue reliance on luck.

Crisis management has become a seasonal expedient for games staffing. The time has come to build a more dependable workforce model that provides the resource to allow schools to deliver the quantity and quality of sporting outcomes that they seek. The starting point is to establish exactly what this requirement is, and then to build a sustainable range of personnel to deliver it.

This is likely to be a mixed economy. PE teachers and specialist sports coaches, supplemented by some generalist teachers, plus graduate assistants. The optimum mix will vary for each school, but the expectations of each will need to be made explicit. Contractual specification is replacing goodwill and sector expectation as the foundation of this commitment. Schools will need a clear strategy on how they see classroom teachers contributing, and an understanding of the volume of specialist teachers – together with full and part-time sports coaches – that will make up the required total. Succession planning is a luxury few schools currently indulge. However, the alternative is the annual crisis of trying to invent a new formula to make demand equal supply.

CONCLUSIONS

School sport is at a crossroads. Its historic assumptions of the primacy of team games, the honour of selection and the staffing model are under unprecedented threat. Traditional programmes are incrementally eroded each year. Retention in team games, commitment to Saturday matches and meritocracy are becoming slightly less fashionable annually. The sector is struggling with its identity. All of these things still have a place and a value: it's just not the same place that they had 25 years ago.

There is an opportunity for modernisation and transformation. This will not mean a diluted version of what has gone before, but rather a new, appropriate and future-proof approach designed to deliver identified and specific outcomes. These will include recognisable areas of team sport and high performance, but will be extended to include a broader agenda of physical and mental wellbeing. What, when, where, how and by whom are all under review.

Some schools are further down this journey than others, and that is a reflection of the shifting landscape. Forward-thinking school leaders and Directors of Sport are already engaged in a process of re-evaluation aimed at maintaining the best of what has existed for 150 years, but seeing it through a twenty first century lens. They are also widening their programme and building a culture of willing participation that celebrates a much greater range of activity. The infrastructure to deliver this, in terms of time, people and places is changing as well.

The distinction between performance and participation has become artificial, and irrelevant. 'Performers' are, by definition, 'participants'. Different styles of participation are appropriate to different constituencies of pupils, and reflect the varying cultures of individual schools. 'Sport for All' is an outdated strapline from a different era.

Tinkering around the edges will not have meaningful impact. The time has come to carefully assess the range of desirable outcomes that can be delivered through school sport and exercise. The next challenge is to build the programme that will enable this and the final hurdle is the resources that will deliver it. Schools need to establish a clear picture of what this would look like if it was brilliant – and work back from there. Clarity of vision and purpose are essential, though sadly not common.

Sport has been an integral, and high profile, part of school life since Tom Brown's Schooldays. Its potential contribution to the lives of young people is more significant than ever. It is, however, in a state of flux. It requires modernisation to meet current needs, and to reflect contemporary society. This will be a more complex challenge than at any previous time in history.

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PADSIS provides a range of services to support school sport and exercise. This includes programme audit, plus recruitment and training services. Over 75 schools have taken advantage of this opportunity to review, modernise and improve their provision, staff structures and communications over the last 15 years. If you would like to evaluate, enhance or future-proof your programmes of sport and exercise, please do not hesitate to get in touch to discuss possibilities.

PADSIS offers a Sports Helpline for Heads free of all charge or obligation.

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