ICE EDUCATION

Changing Times in School Sport

NEIL ROLLINGS

www.ice-education.co.uk

First published 2024

Published by ICE Education
6 Main Street, Sedbergh LA10 5BN

CONTENTS

TRADITIONAL SCHOOL SPORT

For most of the Twentieth Century, independent schools (and their 'quasi-independent' cousins, the traditional grammars) operated a stable offering of sport. The programme, facilities and workforce were similar in most environments, underlain by a broadly consistent philosophy. It was an era that was entirely comfortable with meritocracy, where the able players dominated the opportunities, and also the recognition mechanisms. They played in all the teams, usually in the most significant positions, and dominated the games. In doing so, they set records of goals, tries and runs that will probably never be allowed to be beaten. The purpose of sport was inter-school matches for the able minority – and the aim was to win, and by the biggest possible margin.

The characteristics of this system were stable and easily recognisable. It was an era dominated by the primacy of team games, many of which had emerged and been codified during the nineteenth century, and had found instant traction in schools.

Codes of Football, Cricket, Hockey, Netball, Lacrosse and Rowing enjoyed unashamedly preferential status as 'major' games, with their explicitly 'minor' brethren, often including Fives, Athletics and Swimming, having to fit in around them. This was designed to allow the best athletes to take part in them all. There was little inclination to share opportunities. Most sports were gender-specific, and, until the last quarter of the 20th Century, most schools were single sex.

Participation was compulsory. This was largely unchallenged. It was the policy of almost all schools, and accepted by most parents. There were few alternatives to team games, and those that existed were often deliberately unattractive, and available only to the oldest pupils. Defection from team sports was not encouraged.

The late 20th century brought the development of the alphabet game, with a profusion of teams that allowed everyone to play. This was stimulated by a rising tide of inclusivity and growing unease surrounding the unequal, ability-driven limitations on involvement in inter-school sport. There were opportunities for all, as B, C and D teams emerged. Everyone who wanted to had the opportunity to play in a team – to 'represent' the school. Many others were conscripted to do so to ensure the system worked. The honour of selection was assumed, and those listed in the growing numbers of teams were 'expected' or 'required' to play. There were, however, only opportunities to play more of the same sports, based on what turned out to be the flawed assumption that all children loved competing in outdoor games. The irony of having to compel pupils to 'play' was lost on the system.

The expansion of the number of teams reinforced the concept of the 'block' fixture. Usually on Saturdays, more often than not in the afternoon, large numbers of teams were transported round the country in coaches to participate in the same ritual. Greeting, changing, tea and

extensive staff interaction established a protocol that was eagerly embraced, particularly by the boys' schools. Parents played their part enthusiastically, turning up to support and displaying passionate partisanship. They too benefited from the generous hospitality of the host school.

The historic dependency upon classroom teachers to coach games enabled large numbers of teams to play at the same time. This was rarely matched by the girls' sector, where games had always been coached only by specialist staff. The later foundation of such schools, mostly after the establishment of specialist women's PE colleges, meant that there were trained games teachers, who ran the entire programme without help from the wider teaching body. This limited the capacity to operate multiple teams simultaneously, sacrificing quantity for the quality that came from more expert staff. There were very few specialists in the boys' schools, where the Master in Charge of each sport enjoyed complete autonomy and deployed willing amateurs in charge of each team, with resulting wide range of standards. Coaching 'qualifications', provided by National Governing Bodies, were in their infancy. They were regarded with some suspicion, and not yet considered universal currency; plastic cones had not been invented.

For a long time, most schools had comparable facilities. Extensive fields accommodated team games, and the one badminton court gym (complete with ropes and wallbars) provided the only indoor facility. Courts for Fives, Racquets and Tennis appeared occasionally. Where there were swimming pools, they were usually outdoors. Kit was equally homogenous. Only the top team had 'special' jerseys, provided by the school. Others played, practised and participated in basic, standard kit which often served several sports. Heavyweight cotton jerseys, aertex shirts and pleated skirts were the staple: most would last several years. Tracksuits were infrequent, and often regarded with suspicion.

This was the character of sports provision in the majority of schools. Competition-driven, games-dominated and inherently meritocratic. Heads and Governors, many of them former pupils, mostly male with positive games experiences, recognised this system and approved. It was a stable landscape through most of the century, and would be recognised by most people who had attended UK schools through that era. Only in the last years of the century did things start to change.

THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

Either side of the Millenium, school sport experienced a seismic shift. Changes emerged, many of which were unanticipated and certainly unplanned. The sector is still trying to resolve many of the unintended consequences. The result is an unstable landscape, which presents annual problems for schools on every level. Underlying philosophies are often unclear, leading to programme and resourcing issues. Every year brings different challenges, as the sector seeks to restore the stability of previous times, albeit with a much changed programme.

Changes in sport have reflected a number of factors, including some of the following:

- Rising consciousness of inclusivity, with attendant pressure to provide all pupils with a high quality experience
- Growing sense of individual entitlement to choice of activity, and even to opt out completely
- Reduced numbers playing traditional sports
- Increased parental power, scrutiny and intrusiveness
- Dilution of the honour of selection and parental commitment to supporting school expectations
- Concerns about safety, insurance, risk assessment and accountability
- Fewer teachers willing to coach a sport they don't know well – or even to coach at all
- Increased pressure on schools, and hence teachers, to achieve academically
- Reluctance of teachers to participate in Saturday sport, creating inequity between those who do and others who don't
- Pressure for contractual acknowledgement of staff commitment to weekend sport
- Falling boarding numbers, and consequent loss of Saturday morning lessons, leading to reduction of Saturday afternoon sport
- Rising numbers of overseas pupils, who want to play different games – or no games
- Expectations of fashionable kit, top flight facilities and high standards of coaching expertise
- Increased emphasis on the marketing value of sporting success in some environments, leading to a wider range of standards
- The great majority of boys' schools becoming co-educational

EMERGING ISSUES

The most central philosophical shift has been the greater concern for inclusivity and the uncontroversial aim of providing an appropriate, high quality experience of physical activity for all pupils. The pursuit of this laudable goal has derailed many historic expectations, and caused friction where new operating procedures clash with traditional expectations. It has led to an uncontrolled culture of adding. New sports and activities, additional facility requirements, more competitions and the need for more staff with a wider skill set have increased the real cost of sports provision by an estimated 300% in the last 15 years. Levels of investment have spiralled out of control, though have rarely been accompanied by outstanding provision. Few schools – or their parents – believe sports provision to be excellent in all aspects, despite the fact that it is costing more than ever.

The ambition for wider impact demands an acknowledgement that competitive team sports do not engage all pupils. There was widespread reluctance to accept this, and a received wisdom that there had been a golden age of school sport when the number of teams and participants suggested universal engagement. The attitudes of some school governors still reflect this era, scrutinising headline scores against local rivals in judging the quality of sports provision. Whilst numbers of participants in team games were undoubtedly higher in the past, this is a reflection of compulsion, rather than one of willing involvement. Schools happily overlooked the fact that there was some unappetising provision hidden behind the iron curtain of compulsion. This was especially so for the less able and those not motivated by outdoor competition.

Pupil-centred sport has inevitably brought pressure for both variety and choice. The arms race of facility development in the later twentieth century established facilities for sports other than team games. Sports halls, squash courts, pools and – latterly – conditioning studios and fitness gyms all enabled programme expansion. Attractive alternatives to team sports became available, many, crucially, indoors. Also significant was that many of the 'new' sports had no expectation of commitment to Saturday matches. Some were physically undemanding.

Variety and choice inevitably impacted upon numbers choosing to remain involved in team games, once the gates of choice had been thrown open (sometimes reluctantly).

Incredibly, many schools had not anticipated this. At the same time that investments were made allowing indoor opportunities, schools bemoaned the numbers defecting from the playing fields to take advantage of these. It was a disconnected strategy.

Choice has brought a challenge to quality control. A wider range of activities, many with less favourable staffing ratios, require a bigger workforce and a broader skill set. Levels of physical demand and required commitment are unequal. With unquestioned historic priority given to staffing the shop window of school teams, a culture of passive supervision has emerged

elsewhere, in some schools. This is most evident at the inflection points, where the biggest numbers of pupils is simultaneously timetabled for 'Games'. Reluctant teachers, conscripted into the programme and not held accountable, have come to sit in the corner of the sports hall or gym, marking books whilst poor-quality, low-intensity activity occurs around them. For some pupils, this has also created a line of least resistance, which draws the floating voters to exploit the new choice opportunities, defecting from school teams into undemanding, indoor activity. The loss of quality control has given choice a bad name.

The trend towards less compulsion has seen many schools revising downwards the age at which free choice is offered. The average has reduced over recent years from the start of Year 11 to the start of Year 9. This shift is unlikely to reverse, and future programmes will need to acknowledge and accommodate this. It has heralded an explosion of different options, many of them individual sports and fitness activities. E-sports hover on the horizon. Pupils can participate in 'Games' (as this nomenclature becomes increasingly inappropriate) through an extensive range of activities, with widely varying physical demands. The broader this range, the greater the challenge to quality control. No schools can operate 30+ sports to a universally high standard: most would benefit from attempting fewer, but delivering them better. Inevitably, greater participation in recently adopted sport and exercise opportunities has lowered participation in traditional outdoor games, accompanied by a reduction in the number of teams. The golden age of the alphabet game is over.

Co-education has been accompanied by a blurring of the gender-specific nature of school sport. Games traditionally played by boys, in boys' schools, are now increasingly available to girls. Cricket and Association Football lead the way. The winter season, particularly, has become very crowded, with more sports happening simultaneously, and an increased number of 'national' competitions (many recently established by commercial providers) operating across two terms. A dilemma has emerged, especially for the smaller schools. Pressure to compete at a higher level argues a case for specialisation, where players focus on a single sport and teams prepare intensively for competition. However, the inclination to compete in a range of sports requires the most athletic pupils to be available for multiple activities – which then have to be mutually exclusive. Where this is not well managed, or the philosophy is unclear, the best athletes run from one activity to another, attempting to accommodate the demands of several conflicting competitions through a series of unsatisfactory compromises. It leads to exhaustion. Suddenly, the pupil exists for the benefit of the school, not the other way round.

Girls' Cricket began as a comfortable accommodation, expanding into a summer term vacuum previously unsatisfactorily occupied by Rounders. It gained instant traction; programmes expanded quickly, outstripping the resources. Schools well equipped for the boys' game found that doubling the numbers involved pressurised already saturated facilities, especially when the weather was unkind. An equality agenda produced another unanticipated dilemma: who plays on the main ground when both the boys and girls 1st XIs are at home? Girls' schools often lacked the specialist facilities and staff expertise but still succeeded in finding a form of

the game that was appealing to pupils. Their lack of historic baggage and inclination to want to make it look like Lord's frees them from many of Cricket's restrictive practices, and leaves them satisfied with a predominantly shorter, egalitarian, soft ball game.

Association Football poses additional problems. Many schools had been institutional refusers of the world's most popular game, advancing often flimsy explanations to support this policy. The advent of choice has brought greater demand, and the rising profile of the female game has added to this. Most schools are seeking an accommodation for the national game, sometimes at the expense of other sports, or by making the existing programme even more crowded. The illogic of making Association Football available only to boys who had proved beyond reasonable doubt that they had no capability in Hockey or Rugby has largely been discredited and dismantled.

Rugby – historically the favoured code of Football for the majority of independent and grammar schools – faces its own unique challenges and an uncertain future. The demise of compulsion, parental awareness, increased sensitivity to head injuries and an unfortunate media profile, all challenge its primacy as the game that all boys play. Shrinking numbers of boys inclined to play the contact game also presents challenges for smaller schools, making the critical mass necessary for a workable programme more difficult to achieve. The game is striving to find a new, modern identity. Mixed formats, including non, and semi, contact versions, together with more creative competition offers are all part of this. These help make a quasi-compulsory experience manageable, though for a shorter period. It is inevitable that fewer boys will play the contact game, though those that do are as enthusiastic about it as ever. Its future may be in a smaller niche than previously, and each school will need to find an accommodation with which they are comfortable. Reviewing the sports which compose the winter programme – for boys and girls – alongside the place of choice and cultural nudges, is a task that all schools will have to undertake sooner or later.

Although the numbers of pupils taking part in team games have reduced, those who still do are as enthusiastic as ever. Perhaps ironically, standards of performance in these activities have never been higher. A greater level of professionalism – often driven by the appointment of dedicated coaches and specialist 'directors' of each sport – has established a high performance infrastructure, featuring conditioning, analysis and other mechanisms imported direct from elite sport. An assumption that it is a success of school sport to produce professional players has led to earlier specialisation and a blurring of the historic seasons. Ambitious players (and their parents) are no longer satisfied with a single term of their preferred activity, and also expect extensive out-of-season coaching and support. The involvement of national representative pathways and professional clubs, with the constraints and demands they place on the players, is rarely helpful to schools.

The digital age has brought heightened exposure for school sport. Websites publish fixtures, results and competition draws, making comparisons readily available. Spurious league tables,

usually with questionable or impenetrable criteria, encourage this. There is an implication that the game for its own sake is no longer sufficiently appealing. Video and live streaming widen access, exhibiting provision and exposing standards to a wider audience. A small number of schools have invested heavily in sports performance, and all its accountrements, creating an elite tier, competing at a very high standard and on a national stage. These schools have raised the bar on sports provision, making it difficult for others to compete.

The growing mismatch between schools in terms of resources committed to competitive sport makes it harder to find appropriate, closely-contested, safe fixtures, at all levels. This is especially the case when enthusiasm for long journeys is waning amongst both pupils and staff, and the cost of transport is increasing significantly. The shifting identity of schools, with changing gender balance, increasing numbers of day pupils and potential contraction driven by political uncertainty all exacerbate this. Many governors no longer recognise the schools they attended.

The social occasion of school sport is also being eroded. A shift to morning games, some starting indecently early to facilitate a quick getaway, has created a more functional atmosphere for many matches. Sports such as Hockey, based around a sequence of games on the same pitch, are required to have one eye on the clock and for players to arrive changed. An increasing number of midweek cup matches are attended by time pressures. The engine isn't quite left running by the side of the pitch, but the place for changing, social interaction and hospitality has been widely compromised. Only the traditional boarding sector, itself shrinking, maintains the traditional match day with all its trimmings, though this is under pressure, not least from bursars keen to address the constantly rising cost of sports provision.

The great majority of schools now employ more specialist sports staff than at any time in their history. The workforce has proliferated to include PE teachers, sports coaches, conditioning staff, peripatetic coaches and graduate assistants. The cost is greater than ever. This is rarely accompanied by elevated standards.

PREPARING FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Strategy

Surprisingly few schools have a clear, coherent and detailed strategy for sport and exercise. Most seek to maintain their traditional offer, with recent amendments, and are left to address to the shortcomings on an ad hoc basis. This results in hasty staff appointments, cancelled matches and widely ranging standards. All of these draw energy and resources from the programme. Short term expediency is achieved at the cost of medium term strategic clarity.

Most schools would benefit from 'beginning with the end in mind'. This would require a clear picture of what their provision would look like if it was excellent. It would be dominated by clear outcomes, which would likely be plural. This could then inform programme decisions, which would, in turn, define necessary resources. Only in this way can outstanding outcomes be achieved for all pupils, a stable programme be managed, staffing requirements be met and costs controlled.

A clear strategy should be agreed by the leaders of the school and the Director of Sport, together with defined objectives and measurable targets. Accountability and review processes are an integral part of this, as they would be in all other areas of school management. Clear systems, processes and detailed parental communications are impossible without wide awareness of strategic imperatives. Clarifying the staffing structure, roles, responsibilities and accountabilities would be central to this. Most areas of school life have reduced autonomy and focused on improvement, accountability and efficiency: sport is a late adopter of this, often permitting undue inconsistency, individual whim and opaque practices.

Strategic planning is likely to address and accommodate a number of predictable factors. Few are the schools that have this robustly in place, and widely communicated. Schools must establish their own, specific ambitions reflecting their aspirations for their sporting identity, and create metrics for monitoring them. A clear, detailed, written plan is essential. Such plans may include provision for some or more of the following:

Inclusivity

To seek to provide all pupils with a high quality experience of sport and exercise, inspiring a lifetime commitment to health promoting activity, is an utterly uncontroversial ambition for any school. When schools misapply the discredited 1970s strapline, 'Sport for All', they are usually seeking to express a loose commitment to this. It is an aim disconnected from the history of school sport, where at least as many children learned to hate games as love them. The less able, those stressed by competition, not engaged by team games and preferring the indoors

have been poorly served by traditional school sport. An emphasis on performance, winning and tolerating discomfort has made games a controversial dimension of school experience, and one to which few are indifferent. 'PE' and 'Games' stimulate passionate recollections amongst adults, with love and hate in roughly equal proportion.

Research is clear that only about 50% of pupils thrive on competition, with 25% neutral and 25% actively avoiding it. Inclusive programmes must acknowledge this and seek a balance of activity types. Inter-school competition is a driver for many pupils, but a frightening prospect for others.

Provision for High Performance

The shop window of school sport has commanded attention since inter-school contests began in the nineteenth century. Competitive success has historically been interpreted as evidence of 'strong sport'. Whilst obsessions with results have diluted in many schools, they still hold currency within both the community of some parents and adolescent culture. All schools need clarity in their ambitions for this, which must be shared by the leaders of the school, its sport and its finances. Clear aspirations will inform strategies and resourcing, and influence decisions on all other aspects of sport and exercise. It will influence the business case of some schools, and define sporting identity. These things are too important to be left to chance.

Issues such as staffing, scholarships, travel, performance support, fixtures, competition entry, individual coaching and financing are all influenced by ambitions for success in matches and competitions. Aspirations may be different for specific sports, and smaller schools may seek to dominate niches which require a smaller critical mass of players.

Competitive Programme

A comprehensive strategy of competition will include both intra and inter school sport. It will encompass the number of opportunities in each sport, age and ability level and will measure not just scores, but the number of close, 'competitive' encounters. The competition architects, often the heads of those sports, need clear guidance on the programme the school would like them to create. Unfortunately, they are often afforded undue autonomy, with unpredictable results and conflicting priorities. The most able players are usually the beneficiaries of this. In co-educational environments, competition decisions must be taken on a whole-school basis, to avoid the unintended consequence of uneven provision. The number of sports which have fixtures, when in the week they take place, policies on playing children out of age group must all be part of a proactive whole-school plan, to ensure consistency, fairness and efficiency. Few are the schools that achieve this.

Regular weekly fixtures are the least disruptive, and best value, inter-school sport that can be organised. Dates, times and venues can be fixed well in advance, published in calendars and multiplied to allow several teams to play at once, increasing the efficient use of resources. Playing on Saturdays avoids clashes with other school activities and avoids the need to travel in rush hour traffic and return late. External competitions, particularly cup contests, are the opposite of this. Unpredictable draws, short notice, midweek matches, varying start times and extensive travel demand time out of school (for pupils and staff), often involve disruption for those left behind. They frequently require costly dedicated transport. Many schools habitually enter competitions in which they are annually and spectacularly unsuccessful. Most would benefit from auditing their participation in these, focusing on a smaller number of well-matched competitions, and considering the wider implications of cost and disruption against potential benefits.

Choice and Retention

Almost all schools have a compulsory experience of traditional sports in their junior years, and all offer the choice to discontinue with these at some stage. The age at which choice is offered has been revised downwards in recent years, though remains uneven between schools. It is a vital dimension of sports strategy, and should be carefully considered. The later this occurs, the greater the chance of creating a constituency of pupils who disengage from exercise, thereby significantly increasing their chance of becoming sedentary adults. Earlier choice increases the risk of failing to engage the critical mass of players necessary for successful, or sufficient, sports teams. The balance will be different in varying environments.

The demise of compulsion increases the importance of building a strong culture of participation and commitment. Retention levels in traditional games should be carefully measured and annually reviewed. Ultimately, a significant metric of the culture of a school is the number of Sixth Formers enthusiastically and willingly engaged in sport and exercise.

Many factors influence retention levels, and account for why they differ radically between schools. All reflect the quality of the provision during the quasi-compulsory experience, but the most important of these is the interaction between each group of pupils and their teacher or coach. This has significant implications for the coaching philosophy of a school and maintaining a consistently positive environment, in which all participants feel valued, have the opportunity to improve and are consistently involved in appropriate competition. Schools which address these issues, and overtly target (and measure) retention are significantly more successful in maintaining a buoyant culture of willing involvement than those which do not. Implications for the staffing model are clear.

Variety

Once choice is introduced, consideration must be given to the activities offered in addition to team games. The nature of these, and the rigour with which they are operated, is an important factor which influences retention in team sports. Whilst a variety of games and exercise opportunities can potentially engage a wider range of pupils, this is not inevitable. The way in which these activities are presented and coached, together with the sense of purpose and achievement, determines the level of impact.

It is particularly unfortunate when a small number of schools make an additional charge for some of these sports, typically those requiring external facilities or staff. The most costly part of every programme is the operation of school teams, not the provision of variety. Equality of access is an important principle of inclusivity.

It is a fallacy that a wide variety of activities increases pupil engagement. In practice, it usually means a compromise of quality control and an unequal standard of experience. In these circumstances, it is usually the least able and enthusiastic pupils whose experience is compromised. Most schools would benefit from running a smaller number of activities to a higher standard, and only add to this when the quality can be assured.

Staffing

The delivery workforce of sport is undoubtedly the greatest challenge to most schools. The general reduction in the number of generalist teachers contributing to sports coaching has combined with a culture of adding to create a perfect storm where a greater demand combines with a reduced supply. Those teachers who do still contribute, in environments where their colleagues do not, are increasingly conscious of a perceived unfairness and often seek contractual recognition of their commitment. This is especially the case when applied to weekend sport. Within girls' schools, the pressure to offer more teams and sports, in line with the programmes of co-educational competitors, has required more specialist staff.

Without doubt, people are the most significant resource determining the quality of school sport. Multi-million pound facility developments cannot be exploited without the staff who inspire a culture of enthusiastic participation. Despite this, investment in facilities is often more significant than in the people who enable their use. Most schools would see greater impact from improving the quality of staff than in developing even more lavish venues.

Many environments now operate a mixed economy of sports staffing. However, it is often reactive to vacancies rather than the product of a proactive, sustainable plan. All schools would benefit from defining the mix that would meet their requirements at a predictable and

acceptable cost. It is also important that the staff are deployed to maximal efficiency (which is rarely the case). For most schools, the mix is likely to include:

Specialist teachers and full time coaches
Most schools have more of these than at any stage in their history. The staffing formulas which dictate most subjects are often not applied to PE and Games. It is important to clearly define the expectations of specialist staff, within and beyond the timetable, and especially in terms of weekend (and holiday) commitments. Within a mixed economy, it is vital that they are role models of quality and commitment for the rest of the team. No staffing model will work efficiently without this. It is likely that the full time sports coach (probably out of professional sport, and not a teacher) is a workforce that will expand in schools. This brings a combination of multi-sport capability, considerable capacity and flexibility to be heavily committed to extra-curricular sport. This can all be achieved at moderate cost, and can also contribute to income generating work in school holidays.

Generalist teachers
Expectations of generalist teachers must be clear. The best models allow able and enthusiastic classroom teachers to share their passions and abilities with pupils, but do not depend upon conscripted staff who are unwilling to embrace minimum standards. For this model to be sustainable, teachers involved must feel that their commitment to sport is both valued and recognised. The most effective way of doing this (though not the cheapest) is to make a time allowance. Counterintuitively, direct payment is rarely successful in satisfying perceived unfairness.

Peripheral staff
Within this category are graduate assistants, peripatetic coaches, exercise instructors and commercial providers. All have varying degrees of unsatisfactoriness, emerging from lack of experience, unreliability, rapid turnover, lack of housetraining and poor cultural fit. There are, of course, many exceptions, and areas of the country where strong fields of applicants are easier to attract. Generally, the recruitment, induction, training and accountability of these staff is not strong, with corresponding loss of quality. This is doubly unfortunate when they are disproportionately allocated to the lower ability pupils. Those environments which thrust very young staff – often wholly without experience or qualification – directly into parent-facing coaching roles, in which they have heavy responsibility for children and the school's reputation, rarely have outstanding outcomes. As soon as they have experience, they are often leaving to be replaced by another generation of beginners.

Dual Function Staff
Many schools have letting models which require sports centre or pool staff to service commercial activity. Such staff often have skills sets which could be deployed by the school in pupil-facing activity, especially at the inflection points. The functional separation between educational and commercial activity often fails to exploit this possibility. It is, however, vital

that such staff are invested in pupil outcomes. The integration of pupil provision and revenue-generating activity, within and beyond term dates, offers most schools a chance to improve efficiency, quality and income by taking a more coherent approach.

Most schools would benefit from auditing their staff requirements, and building a stable, affordable and sustainable model to meet them. This would require an analysis of the actual number and skill set required to deliver the identified programme to which a school aspires. Quality, quantity and variety must all be considered. Clear expectations of all staff, and appropriate accountability, would ensure that the programme operates to maximum efficiency. This would also potentially discourage a culture of adding, improve transparency and more closely link it to outcomes and impacts.

Health, Wellbeing and the role of Physical Education

Encouraging pupils to be physically active, and providing them with the skills and inspiration to do so, is an uncontroversial ambition. It does, however, maintain a low profile in many environments and is often a poor relation to competitive sport. Although facilities for health promoting exercise have never been better in schools, they tend to be designed for (and therefore used by) aspiring athletes, rather than those embracing the benefits of activity for its own sake. Rarely are these environments designed with the reluctant exerciser in mind, and programmes to educate benefit and inspire participation are infrequent. Facilities must make all constituencies of pupils comfortable to use them. Monitoring discretionary use might reveal disproportionate use by some groups, or one gender. A thriving culture of health and fitness would make all pupils feel comfortable using these facilities and pursuing their own goals.

The promotion of physical wellbeing should be a higher priority for sport and exercise programmes in most schools. Choice in the games programme should provide the opportunity to take part in a range of functional exercise types, appropriately delivered by trained, engaged and empathetic staff. Where outside instructors, or sports centre staff, are deployed to deliver these classes, they must adopt a different approach from that used with their confident, self-motivated clients from other environments. The pastoral side of encouraging positive attitudes to physical activity, and potentially overcoming the legacy of previous negative experiences, should not be underestimated. 'Strength and Conditioning' is a title that does not have inherent appeal for many children, especially those not inclined towards sport. Many of the coaches of this title prefer to focus on athletic conditioning for the marquee athletes. Broadening the impact of this role, with friendlier nomenclature (such as 'Head of Health and Active Wellbeing', or similar) and ambition for wider impact, would be a welcome modernisation.

Building a culture of health and fitness is a school-wide priority. Understanding the benefits of active lifestyles, not least to academic performance, is a modern educational prerequisite.

Physical Education lessons have an important part to play. Learning about exercise, its impacts and how to achieve them, is a much more important, and potentially impactful, use of time than spending time on a skill-based approach to indoor games. Stimulating lifelong exercisers is a more significant outcome than a taster experience of Badminton or Basketball. The importance of stimulating lessons in learning about fitness has trailed behind outdated concepts of 'Health Related Fitness', often dominated by off-putting fitness tests.

Character Development

The early justifications for games in schools were neither physical, nor competitive. Their aim was to develop 'character'. Courage, selflessness, respect and sportsmanship were among the ideals of gentlemanliness, and games were seen as a mechanism to develop these qualities.

However, participation in sports does not make the development of such qualities inevitable. Sport is neutral: it is possible to develop positive behaviours in the right environment, and anti-social ones in the wrong one. Creating a list of desirable attitudes and behaviours to be developed through sport and exercise would be a valuable starting point. This would also have the potential of changing the tone of inter-school matches.

The industry of sports coaching has been hijacked by technical outcomes and tactical imperatives. Education in how to coach has almost entirely ignored personal outcomes, in favour of skills and drills. Inset sessions, and NGB qualifications, revolve around improving players, not developing people. However, one of the justifications for compulsory sport, and the resources devoted to it, would be a capacity to enhance desirable personal qualities. Session planning rarely incorporates this. It is a significant opportunity for all schools to develop a character curriculum, which could be delivered through sport. These outcomes are not ability-dependent.

Non-specialist teachers are often more instinctively sensitive to personal outcomes, frequently more so than graduate assistants and peripatetic coaches. They have a potentially valuable contribution to make in housetraining the latter constituency into a coaching approach with an educational focus. The sector has unwittingly come to value performance outcomes over personal ones, and would benefit from redressing this imbalance.

A Force for Good in Schools

The days when a school's marquee athletes strutted round the site – wearing special blazers, behind with work and contemptuous of rules – are over. The status afforded to the results of school matches and the achievements of the most able players often contributed to an atmosphere of toxic masculinity, which schools have battled hard to challenge. However,

athletic prowess will always capture the attention of the young, which results in sport having the potential to influence the culture of a school. Whether this is positive or negative depends entirely on the way that the staff control it.

It is the responsibility of those leading sport in schools to ensure that it has a positive impact upon the organisation's culture. The high profile players (and staff) must be conscious of their status as role models, and aware of the attitudes and behaviours that they will be accountable for modelling.

Communications with Parents

The relationship between schools and parents has changed in recent generations. Sport has not been exempt from the impact of this. A greater sense of entitlement has made parental compliance something that can no longer be assumed. Supporting the school's expectations, especially when they are temporarily inconvenient, is far from universal.

Workable relationships within this landscape demand a new, proactive approach to communications. In addition to the more conventional 'what' and 'when' of the programme, greater attention will need to be given to the 'why'. This assumes a more credible articulation of benefit and rationale than has conventionally been the case, within a tone that seeks to educate and persuade, rather than dictate. Parent handbooks, multi-media presentations and other communications will need to be more extensive and compelling than ever before.

Inattention to proactive communications stimulates a bigger volume of reactive correspondence, and fuels frustration all round. Where the parental enquiries begin with 'Why?', that is a cue that the rationale has been inadequately articulated.

The principal source of information for prospective parents is usually the website. It is important therefore that this accurately reflects the school's philosophy for sport and exercise and any ambitions for inclusivity. Then conventional focus on competitive achievements can create an unintended impression that the school values the achievements of a small number of able athletes ahead of its provision for the majority of pupils. Such impression can be unwittingly compounded by the prominent use of proprietary microsites which provide only the information and statistics of school teams. Ensuring that the website – and other communications – give equal weight to high performance, team games, variety plus health and fitness is essential for any school aspiring to an inclusive programme.

Controlling the Cost

The cost of operating sports programmes has spiralled upwards incrementally over the last 20 years. More staff – specialist and peripheral – a wider range of facilities to maintain, newly developed equipment, software packages, ever-rising transport costs and a culture of constant adding create budgetary requirements that are often hard to control. Expenditure on sport and exercise has tripled, in real terms, for most schools, and continues to rise.

Political threats will cause schools to do what they should have been doing anyway: ensuring efficient programmes whose outcomes justify the cost, and whose expenditures are predictable. This will require a closer audit of costs and benefits, and more accurate anticipation of the real price of the programme. Carving up a large number of small budgets, typically sport by sport, all with their own manager, is the least efficient way of doing this.

Given the sums involved, it is perhaps surprising that schools do not provide training and guidance for the teachers who manage them, who often have little or no financial experience. Planning, cost-control and accountability could often be improved, in an environment where the starting point is usually making adjustments to the previous year's budgets. This time in history could provide a timely stimulus to starting again and building a whole new, modern model of budgetary management.

The Role of the Director of Sport

Changing times in school sport have, inevitably, significantly shifted the priorities of the Director of Sport. The essence of this change is one from management of a predictable programme to leadership into an uncertain future. These roles are rarely now combined with front line coaching, and the necessary skill sets have adjusted accordingly.

The Director of Sport must be an industry expert, aware of the trends and challenges of the sector and able to solve the problems within each unique environment. Having a clear understanding of excellence, and being a compelling communicator of benefit, is arguable more important than coaching ability. From being a coach and administrator in previous eras, the priorities of this role are now leadership, culture-building and quality control. The relationships between the Director of Sport and the school's leaders – including the head – are more important than ever.

CONCLUSIONS

The landscape of school sport and exercise has changed fundamentally since the Millenium. It continues to fluctuate and present challenges to most schools. Tinkering around with an historic programme that is no longer fit for purpose will not establish a sound foundation for the future.

The opportunity exists to envisage the programme of the future which will consistently deliver the combination of outcomes which will define the sport and exercise identity to which individual schools aspire. Many aspects of education will change in the coming years, as the sector shifts, becomes leaner and more value conscious. Sport is an important point of difference for independent schools, and part of their DNA. However, 'traditional' school sport is based on historic assumptions, many of which no longer apply. Finding the modern programme, with plural success criteria and an inclusive foundation, that stimulates a positive, lifelong relationship with exercise, is a challenge which all schools face. It is too important to both educational outcomes and business case to be left to chance.

ICE EDUCATION

ICE Education works with schools of all types to develop sports provision

Advisory Services include:

Sports Strategy
Programme Audit and Development
Staff Structure
Job Descriptions and Accountability
Communications Development
Director of Sport recruitment and Appraisal
Rugby Programme Compliance Audit
Sports Budgetary Review

We offer an initial consultation with Neil Rollings, free of charge and obligation.

Contact Helen Oliver to arrange an exploratory call:

EMAIL **helen@ice-education.co.uk**
TELEPHONE **015395 60060**

6 Main Street, Sedbergh LA10 5BN
TELEPHONE 015395 60060 EMAIL info@ice-education.co.uk
www. ice-education.co.uk