

Malcolm Wallace – Written evidence (NPS0114)

Introduction:

My name is Malcolm Wallace and I am a UKA licenced athletic coach with over 20 years of experience as a mainstream and para-athletic performance and development coach and I am a licenced track and field official, in my previous life I was a footballer and a qualified football referee, I have been involved in sport all my life. I have specialised predominately in throws both seated and ambulant. I have been fortunate to coach athletes to Olympic and Paralympic level within the UK and overseas. Several athletes have gained national and international medals and world, region and national records. For 19 years I have run a free of charge ladies only coaching sessions for runners they are aged between 16 and 80 years which has attracted up to 60 women per session. I coach at clubs and schools from 11-year-olds upwards, all my sessions are inclusive and I am noted as having both mainstream athletes and disabled members of the community training together. I have been researching the decline in worldwide sports participation, with the emphasis on youth participation for over 9 years which has included reading scientific papers on the subject and undertaking research programs including interviewing youths that have left the sports.

Over the last few years, it has been seen that there has been a decline in all members of society leaving physical exercise, this decline has been documented over the years and has been one of the causes of increased obesity levels from an early age. This is not only seen within the UK but other locations as far apart as USA, Australia and New Zealand, however, one of the largest decline in participation is between the ages of 16 and 19 years. It has been suggested that as this is the ages that sports academics suggest that specialisation should take place, which in simple terms means that our youth will be dropping the majority of the activities they have been taking part in and concentrating on one sport, could this be one of the main reason why participation levels in a number of sports have dropped? This question was answered by R. M Eime, J. T Harvey & M. J Charity (2019) published in the international journal of sports policy and politics: Sport drop-out during adolescence: is it real, or an artefact of sampling behaviour? This is a study in which the data was obtained from community sports rather than elite and came to the conclusion the study confirmed that the drop-off during adolescence in community sport participation, is real and not simply a consequence of a reduction in sampling behaviour compared to younger participants. Several research programs, including the aforementioned article, have concluded that sport policy should specifically prioritise retention in sport, and not merely focus on increasing total participation numbers.

(R. M Eime, J. T Harvey, and M. J Charity, School of Health and Life Sciences, Federation University Australia, Ballarat, Australia; Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia)

QUESTIONS

- 1. How can local delivery, including funding structures, of sport and recreation be improved to ensure that people of all ages and***

abilities can lead an active lifestyle? For example, how successfully do local authorities and other bodies such as Active Partnerships, Leisure Trusts, local sports clubs and charities work together, and how might coordination be improved?

The answer to this question is the majority do not work together but will often compete against each other to gain funding or even the kudos of being part of a special group. We must start to re-evaluate the structure, support and route these organisations take to provide sporting/leisure opportunities to the local population, we must also ask ourselves are all these organisations really necessary or are they placing obstacles in the way of developing "sports for all" programs. Sport England has recently launched its latest strategy "Uniting the Movement is our 10-year vision to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity." It commences its strategy document "As we adapt and rebuild from the huge disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic, we need to collectively reimagine how we keep movement, sport and activity central to the lives of everyone "Because if we harness its power, we'll be able to improve people's lives in so many ways."

The document then went on to state "We began the consultation by holding more than 150 conversations with partners and stakeholders. These were broad and open to understand more about what mattered to people most about our strategy and why." With the decline in sports participation levels throughout the UK and at all levels, with the possible exception of the older age groups 45 years of age and above, should not this organisation that has received many millions of pounds in public funding find out why their previous strategies have failed?

Many of the organisations involved in community based sport and physical activities are championing their future involvement as being central in leading the nations recovery from this pandemic and this is despite scientists stating that the UK started the pandemic in a bad way highlighting one of the contributory factors as being its poor state of public health, an example being its high levels of obesity due in part to a decline in participation levels in sport and physical exercise.

2. How can children and young people be encouraged to participate in sport and recreation both at school and outside school, and lead an active lifestyle? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.

I have always been amazed how adults appear to forget their childhood especially those adults that are in the older age groups, but I am also bewildered that this type of question is put to adults; surely the question should be put to the children that are leaving the sports market in large numbers every year.

This decline in participation is highlighted in a recent survey undertaken by England Athletics. They asked former club members that had left track and field the reasons why they had left. The following is an overview of the results

45% time constraints from studying

30% training required too much time

17% training got boring

17% not as fun/ exciting as other sports

The churn rate in athletics is extremely high in the region of 45%+ between the ages of 16 and 19 years of age but also very similar in other age groups.

Athletics is not the only sport to see major drops in participation and there are several causes can be directly linked into the decline in youngsters leaving the sports sector behind. One cause that is often spoken about is the early selection of "elite" players to sports academies such as football and rugby where selection can start as young as 9 years of age. This situation creates two scenarios, those that are not selected will often feel that they are not good enough and leave or not join in sport, on the opposite side of the situation the youngsters that are selected are often re-evaluated every two years and many are dropped from the academy and 95% of those that are dropped stop sport.

One of the biggest reasons for the high churn rate is the conflict between the demands made by schools, parents and the local sports clubs. Today's youth have a wider choice of sports and other activity clubs such as Scouts, Guides, chess and computer, tennis, rugby etc. compared with children born in the post war years up to the late 80's early 90's. Let me expand on this reason by illustrating the problems place undue pressure on our modern teenager and beyond. A year 7 student will arrive at their new secondary school and will have numerous school clubs open to them like many children they will select the ones that they feel is ideal for them but as they progress through that initial year they will drop some clubs and begin new ones, this is termed sampling. Many of these clubs/activities will be extracurricular and take place at lunch time or after school. Many schools will also offer a wide range of sports including inter-school competitions which means one or two evenings a week at competitions and possibly one evening training, add in another craft or educational based club such as a history or maths group and the youngster has 3 or 4 evenings a week where they have external commitments linked into school activities. If we look at the educational demands placed on the students it is easy to see how pressure is being applied to many of our youth, for example homework, revision for exams and one can include the tutoring programs that enable the students to get into "better" schools. If we say that for a maximum of 2 hours per evening 3-4 days per week the students have school based commitments from school clubs, competitions and studying.

If we now look at the other sporting activities that a lot of our youth participate in it will be clear as to why we are seeing sports drop off rates as high as 47% every year. For example the majority of sports clubs offer and expect youngsters twice a week training sessions lasting an average of 1.5 hours per session plus a competitions on the weekend during the season, although many clubs have mid-week competitions as well.

When I began coaching I was taught that school came first and outside clubs etc. came second, this advice, it would appear, from my observations, is no longer a given, in fact I often hear comments from coaches and team managers in a number of sports that "school P.E. teachers do not know how to coach" or "they have no idea of the correct way to coach this technique". I will make sure that I know what sports the athletes that I coach participate in and whether it is school or within a club environment, allowing me to take into account their schedules when providing training programs or setting my club programs and they are not allowed to train on nights they have school sports or other clubs. I see so many bad examples of youngsters attending coaching sessions at a local club after they have competed for the school earlier in the day.

To resolve this reduction in our children leaving sport we must bring back fun into sports and that must take place within the schools from the day our children start school until they finish school. This will mean making the majority of the investment for sport allocated to education establishments and making programs age specific and not linked to the various "rules and concepts" that are currently bandied around the sports industry such "pathway" "talent identification" "10000 hours rule" and my least favourite "Long Term Athlete Development" the latter being a bi-product of the 10,000 Hour rule which has been proven to be the figment of a journalists imagination.

There are many examples of good practice in schools such as Sportshall athletics competitions. This is a fun based competitive program that allows every member of the school to take part including disabled members of the school in a team-based sport or can provide competition on a one to one basis. This program is fun and inclusive and provides the participants with the ability to learn run, jump and throws skills and is designed for implementation as a lesson based program up to festival based.

I was asked to go into a primary school along with a fellow coach and provide coaching sessions for classes that ranged from 6 to 11 years of age, the instruction was it had to be athletic-based and include run jump and throws coaching. It was very clear from the first lesson (7-year-olds) that the children were not impressed and got bored very easily, it increased bad behaviour and as a result, they lost concentration and for myself and my fellow coach it was demoralising. At the end of the lesson, my fellow coach said that she felt our session was wrong and we were not doing what we wanted, namely, making it fun. We decided to change the program for the next day's lesson and I pulled together a lesson based on children's game, for example, "frog in the pond" and several others. The result was that the children enjoyed the lessons and I built a term-based program around this idea, the key to the success was we did not mention coaching but gave them suggestions how they could improve allowing the participants to take charge of their development.

I live in one of the areas of shining beacons for sports and physical activities within schools. To highlight how they are leading the way in developing sports participations one only has to look at the Hertfordshire Schools Athletic League, there are 72 secondary school which take part in the league with 5 matches taking place each week each match has 5/6 schools participating . Each match caters for U14 (years 7 and 8) and U16 (years 9 and 10) boys and girls. Each match starts at 4:30 P.M. and the last race is at 6:25 P.M.

If we compare the above with a local athletic club league matches you can see the difference and why so many youths are stating very clearly that club athletics takes up too much time. A local league match which caters for U13/15/17 girls and boys start at 11:15 and finish approx. 5:30 or later. Travelling times is also an important element in the time equation as teams can find themselves travelling between 30minutes and 1.5 hours to get to a venue.

There needs to be a linkup between schools and clubs supporting each other but it has to be with a better understanding of what a PE Teachers role and duties are and with the schools taking the leading role.

3. How can adults of all ages and backgrounds, particularly those from under-represented groups, including women and girls, ethnic minorities, disabled people, older people, and those from less

affluent backgrounds, be encouraged to lead more active lifestyles? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.

Disability

For two years just prior to the 2012 games I worked on the Playground to Podium program visiting numerous locations looking for "talent" for the Paralympic athletic team, on the day of each event I would work alongside other sports and we would see a wide range of disabled secondary school age members of the community with the idea of getting them to join the sport each of us represented, it became clear that after a couple of events the majority of the sports had a problem, a number of local clubs, for various reasons from "we do not cater for disabled people" to "we do not have a coach that works with disabled people" with a number of other reasons in between, were not able to take on the people that showed an interest in the sport. To assist in overcoming this problem I made contact with each person that had shown interest and offered support in getting them involved at local club level in the area they lived. Over the period I worked on this project my success rate was not high. My work in this area still continues and I will often get calls from parents asking me to help them get their child into a sports club of the child's choice.

The following is some of the good and bad practice that I came across.

Case 1 Two young brothers 15 and 17 years of age with a learning disability picked up a "howler" javelin training device and both threw them in excess of 120m, I had never seen anyone throw it that far, I approached the chairperson of the local club and suggested he got them into the club the response was we know them but they are not able bodied and we are not able to help them.

Case 2 I was approached by a mother who told me that her daughter, who has CP went to her local athletic club and was told at the end of the session that she could not join the club because "she could not do the drills" I spoke to a sprint coach at another club and we organised for her to join the club and she went on to compete for England at the CP games.

I could give more examples of both good and bad practice but it is not only the clubs that are not geared to support disability sport, NGB's that have Paralympic teams also stop members of the community joining in sport citing the "pathway". One of the major problems for disabled members of the community is the distance they have to travel to obtain meaningful competition plus the lack of competitive sport that is available to them. Schools for instance hold county sports championships in a wide range of sports including athletics but it is rare to see members of the disabled community competing, the excuse provided is often "lack of time".

Governments keep on talking about equality but despite main stream schools now providing education for a wide range of disabilities but fail to provide the resources or programs to allow our disabled students to participate in P.E. I recognise that equality in sport is not always possible due to the disability but more effort should be made to increase the opportunities.

I will give you prime example of a disability that stops participation in mainstream sport.

Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome is a devastating illness that can go into remission or become permanent; I first came across this illness when I read of a

young lady that had undergone a full leg amputation not only to resolve the pain she was suffering but it would also allow her to play sport and go to the Paralympic games. Then just over two years ago I received a call from a PE teacher and a county level athletic thrower that I had coached; she explained to me she had CRPS and was in a wheelchair and was spending a lot of the time in the hospital but wanted to get back to sport and had asked her NGB the routes she could take to get back to sport and was told that she was unclassifiable and the only route was mainstream sport. She asked me for help and to explain to her why she could not compete in disability sport. I agreed to coach her and it now gives her exercise and a great deal of enjoyment but she is unable to compete due to being unclassifiable under IPC rules,; she is unable to use her left arm due to the severity of her illness and her only option is to have her left arm amputated. CRPS presents itself in a similar way to MS, remission and chronic symptoms; it is this inequality that sees one group able to participate in disability sport and the other is effectively barred from having meaningful competition. I have since come across a number of cases from athletes with CRPS that played wheelchair rugby and basketball but have been turned away from the sport due to changes in the IPC classification system.

Elderly

The elderly will often have to overcome two barriers age related aches and pains and lack of financial resources. Over the last five years we have seen a major development in "walking" sports where the participants walk instead of run to play the sports they love and now we have football, hockey, netball and many other sports now offering weekly run programs. The problem which is slowing down the growth of these sports is the cost of hiring a sports hall or an outside pitch. We know that community sports centres are in desperate need for people to make use of the facilities during the day and schools facilities are often empty during the evenings. A subsidy could be offered to reduce the cost of hiring sports halls and pitches which would go a long way to resolving the issues relating to the decline in participation levels.

Summary

Children and youth sports participation, including members of the community that have a disability, provides numerous positives to enable our children and youth the potential to develop in numerous ways from fitness to reducing stress and other health issues. However, there has been a growing emphasis among NGB's parents, coaches, and clubs on commodifying sport as an arena for winning, and living out parental and coach's dreams rather than providing access to sport for all. We need to see sport more focused on youth development regardless of ability, we seem to forget as we go through school maturation takes place on an individual basis and time scales and it is often the more mature child that is considered as a star performer rather than the one that is a few months behind in their growth. We must as a nation understand the stress that modern education and outside of school activities place on our children from an early age. The medical profession and especially those that deal with child development state very clearly that children and youths should up to adolescence have three months rest from active sports but this appears to be having been lost in the pursuit of medals and honours. One only has to look at the research that has taken place on the increase in injuries amongst our young

age groups over the last few years, we must undertake an evaluation of the benefits and the downsides of early sports involvement and ways to decrease instances of children dropping out, burning out, or suffering injuries.

Schools should be supported financially and in conjunction with clubs to alleviate many of the stresses we place on our young.

We must start to ask our young people why they are leaving sport and physical activities in such large numbers with many never to return. England Athletics undertook a survey to find out why they had such a high number of children and youths leaving track and field 75% of respondents stated time was a key issue for them leaving the sport and 30% stated injury.

Over the years research, worldwide, has been published into youth development by such people as Cote, Ward, Abernathy et al plus we have many other interested groups looking into sports participation but in the UK we seem to be only interested in LTAD and the 10,000hr rule, many people have stated that Bayli's LTAD was not based on the 10,000 hr rule, In 2003 at the Scottish S and C conference he said "Scientific research has concluded that it takes eight-to-twelve years of training for a talented player/athlete to reach elite levels. This is called the ten-year or 10,000 hour rule, which translates to slightly more than three hours of practice daily for ten years". Incidentally since the introduction of the LTAD program worldwide and it may be a coincidence but dropout rates have increased but more importantly the A and E departments have seen an increase of sports injuries, in some locations by as much as 45%.

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