



**UNIVERSITY OF
STIRLING**

**How to achieve a sporting culture of
excellence in Scotland**

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1 Introduction

1.1 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore possible relationships between elite sporting success and aspects of Scottish culture, values and motivations. The study was commissioned by The Scottish Institute of Sport Foundation and undertaken by a research team from the Department of Sports Studies, University of Stirling. The recommendations arising from the study are those of The Foundation.

1.2 The Research Study

The research was undertaken in two phases.

Phase 1 Review of Literature

The review of literature examined a range of issues:

- (i) An assessment of current and historical levels of Scottish international performance in a range of sports, to identify the nature and extent of the perceived problem of 'under-achievement'.
- (ii) A review of commentators' evaluations of Scottish international sporting performance (e.g. print media, sports coaches, administrators and players).
- (iii) A review of the broader factors affecting performance in international sport.

The work undertaken in Phase 1 (which is published separately) identified a range of generic issues relating to increasingly standard elite sport systems and to specific Scottish factors. These included:

- The concentration on football and rugby union leads to an overly negative perspective on Scottish international sporting success and raises questions about generalised assertions regarding Scots' sporting 'failures'.
- In some of the high profile failures there are clear sports-specific (maybe even cyclical) explanations for recent decline in performances.
- Many sports which have experienced historic success have been dependent on one or two successful individuals, with limited strength in depth.
- International sport has become much more competitive, with recent substantial increases in the number of competing nations and substantially increased investment in elite sports systems.
- Elite sports systems are becoming standardised and key elements of successful systems include: substantial funding; an elite institute; an integrated excellence culture; effective talent identification and progress monitoring; well structured competitions, with ongoing international exposure; targeting of resources to small number of sports; comprehensive planning for each sport; elite coaches; sports science.
- Research indicates that the simple importation of coaches for their technical skills and experience may underestimate the importance of the need to cross-cultural preparation and training.
- General issues of culture need to be considered in interaction with other components of a complex system.

Following discussions with The Foundation, this work was used to identify the range of issues to be explored in Phase 2.

Phase 2 In-depth Interviews

Following the identification of issues in Phase 1, 31 individuals involved in elite sport were selected for in-depth interview. They were selected to reflect experience (foreign coaches working in Scotland and Scottish coaches with overseas experience), type of sport (individual, partner and team sports), gender and some athletes who have achieved international success (Appendix 1).

1.3 Summary conclusions

This summary document provides an overview, prepared by the research team, of the analyses and conclusions from the in-depth interviews (Sections 2 to 7) and a commentary prepared by The Foundation on the issue for consideration arising from the study (Section 8).

Although there were inevitable differences of opinion and emphasis, there was a substantial degree of agreement about core issues. The key perspective, which provides the framework for the analysis and recommendations, is that the factors to be addressed are **systemic, inter-related and involve all stages in a sports development continuum**.

Although there are clearly identifiable areas where intervention is possible, such interventions must be part of a wider, coherent and integrated, strategy relating to a coherently managed system, or supply-chain, for developing elite athletes.

Within this broad approach, the core unifying concern was the **general lack of sporting cultures of excellence**.

This concern informed perspectives on all issues - the current nature of school and club sport (section 2 and 3); the lack of intensive, competitive environments (section 3); coaches' experiences and approaches (section 4); and funding and facilities (sections 6 and 7).

Although this document addresses each of these issues in a broadly hierarchical way, it needs to be remembered that at each stage the concern is the *contribution* that each aspect of the supply chain makes to this overall sporting culture of excellence (section 5).

Each issue is introduced by an illustrative quote from the interviewees.

2 School sport and school/club relations

Many respondents viewed recent developments in physical education and school sport as negative, failing to provide opportunities to develop sporting skills and competitive attitudes.

2.1 “The most skilled leaders will come from a multi-skilled background”

“What is lost is the broad based physical education platform that used to be developed from age 8 or 9 ... The most skilled leaders in [sport] will come from those who come from a multi-skilled background and that has to be the role of the schools. This is crucial up to the age of 13 – to get a basic sports vocabulary in ... We specialise too early and need to adapt a multi-sport approach.”

The perceived decline and changed nature of PE in primary schools meant that the multi-sport skills necessary for developing performance sport are not widely provided.

2.2 Lack of inter-school competitions/leagues

“To raise standards you have to have intensity of competition ...If you don’t have the quality of competition that tests your skill levels under immense pressure you are never going to develop that ... [In Scotland] we have to address the intensity of junior competition...”

“You don’t become an elite player at the age of 16. You have to learn to become an elite player at a younger age. You must start to train like an elite player at the age of 13. You cannot change all your habits at the age of 16 – it has to be developed over the years so that the body can get used to the demands...”

The relative absence of inter-school competitions/leagues meant that there was a lack of intensive, competitive environments in which to develop the skills, confidence and *understanding* required for elite sport. Educating young athletes about these demands was as important as developing sporting skills.

2.3 Need for more achievement orientation

“School does not encourage competition in the slightest ... Anything you do you are not allowed to single out performance, everyone has to be successful ... Everyone doesn't have to be successful, everyone has to gain a certain level of attainment, granted ... ”

The combination of ‘inclusive’ approaches to sport and the lack of leagues and inter-school competition is failing to produce the necessary achievement orientation among many young sports people.

2.4 Need to get those with potential into clubs earlier

“[The shift from school... to club...] is a good thing. You tend to get young players playing with older more experienced players ...so they are then a small fish in a big sea. [In school] they think they are great because they are so much better than their peers. In a club situation they can learn more ...The ones who are keen will join clubs rather than just play school [sport]...”

The combination of a decline in school sport and the more general lack of a competitive environment mean that sports clubs need to play a more central role in the identification and development of young sporting talent.

2.5 Poor talent identification

“Scotland is such a small country, so that talents cannot get lost! In the ideal case, schools should identify the talents and send them to clubs, district squads etc but that's the weak point of the Scottish system: no cooperation between schools and high performance sport system.”

The combination of weak school sport and weak relationships between schools and sports clubs has led to unsystematic identification of sporting talent.

3 Clubs and competitive structures

3.1 Clubs need to recognise their developmental role

“A lot of club coaches want to work with their performance players but they also want to run a recreational club. There is not club that can take a young player and take them right to

the top on their own. If a coach concentrates on one player the club suffers because they do not have the time to develop the athletes and keep the club going. It is passing the athlete on to the national system where the breakdown comes ...”

In certain sports the strength of clubs and athletes’ loyalty to clubs and coaches were factors restricting elite development because clubs cannot take them to the next level. Some clubs were regarded as having an overly ‘defensive’ attitude to their athletes and were reluctant to pass them on to elite coaches or elite squad systems.

3.2 Weak club structures and lack of intensity of competition

“The lack of intensity in competition within Scotland and within the UK is probably the biggest reason for our limited performance at international level.”

The competitive weakness of clubs and their inability to provide the experience of intense competition relates to general concern that confidence and skill development can only be achieved through *regular and intense competition*.

3.3 “It’s too big a jump”

“There is a problem in bringing through [athletes] ... The standard has been raised – the gap between Scotland and GB level is greater than it has ever been, but the structure is not there to help young [athletes] bridge that gap.”

There was a widespread concern about a lack of a systematic and coherent development continuum in which young elite athletes gradually progress, in terms of skill and understanding the nature of elite sport. This relates to poor systems for talent ID, the need to get young talented athletes into clubs earlier and the more general issue of **the failure to develop sporting cultures of excellence**.

4 Coaches

A number of key issues relating to coaches were identified, although attitudes varied, often reflecting the current state of a particular sport and the extent to which it had embraced a ‘performance culture’ and systematic coach development programmes.

4.1 Defensive coaches

“The coaches are a little bit afraid of us [foreign coaches] and if you are afraid, you are not open-minded ... A lot of coaches here, they never went abroad, they are not open-minded – but nevertheless, they think that they have in-depth knowledge.”

In some sports, although not all, it was suggested that many coaches are rather defensive when confronted with new ideas, especially if these are presented by foreign coaches.

4.2 The attitude/approach of foreign coaches is key

“When I walked in a door, people were like: Oh, you are [an overseas coach], you must know more. But I say: No, I don’t! You know pretty much as me, but you haven’t had the chance to do all this. First, they think you’re crazy, but then you convince them. I needed four/five years to reconstruct that, to ‘de-culture’ them ... I think they were technically fine, they just don’t know it”.

The issue of coaches' defensiveness relates, in part, to the approach and desired time-scale for change. A longer term, bottom-up approach seems to be less disruptive than a perceived top-down approach seeking to impose radical and immediate change.

4.3 “Trying to get full-time performers from a part-time system”

“When it comes to high performance sport, coaching has to be more than a hobby.”

Despite the growth of full-time professional coaches, most sports were dependent on volunteer, part-time, coaches. However, an allied concern was that the growth of professional coaches might undermine the valuable work done by volunteer coaches.

4.4 Need for a development continuum of coaches

“We have to train people to work with the level of the athletes they have.”

There was widespread agreement about the need for a ‘continuum of coaches’ to deal with athletes at various stages of their development, with more formal systems for ‘handing on’ athletes to their next stage of development.

4.5 Poor coach education systems and career structures

“In Scotland, the lack of a coach education system causes problems. In France, it takes quite a long time to become a coach. By contrast in Scotland, you attend a course for around three or six months and then, you are a coach. In France, it takes longer, but after passing through the coach education system, we really know what to teach and how to teach ... Nothing like this in Scotland ...the level of knowledge of the Scottish coaches is really poor.”

There was a general perception of a need for general improvement in coach education systems. Reflecting concerns about an essentially voluntary system, several interviewees felt that the lack of a coaching career structure was an important issue.

4.6 “It's not sports specific but human-being specific”

“...the players were...forced to do things without knowing why they should do these things ... the coaches used to be more dictatorial, they did not teach the players how to train, they just told them what to do - without explanations why specific exercises are important ... the players did not understand why they should do things on the pitch, during the training etc. ...if you don't know why you should do something, then you also don't realise if it is important or not.”

Most interviewees stressed that the coach/athlete relationship was the key to sporting success and that ‘one size does not fit all’. It was suggested that many Scottish coaches tended to adopt hierarchical, overly formulaic and inflexible approaches. There was a widespread need for more athlete- and people-centred approaches.

4.7 Need for international experience and knowledge of other sports

“You need multi-awareness as a coach which benefits from knowledge of other sports going on in other countries. We have a coach development approach to [sport]... but it is very specific to [sport].”

“We cannot bring the mountain to Scotland. We need to go to the mountain. We have to go out of our little thoughts and get out in the big world and see what it is all about in sport. I think you do that by travelling abroad and learning what others are doing.”

There was widespread agreement about the need for funding to enable coaches to gain experience of international elite sport and coaching techniques in other countries and other sports (and even techniques used in industry).

4.8 “They are satisfied to produce Scottish champions”

“They are satisfied to produce Scottish champions. But that is not what we want – we want to produce Olympic champions. But for achieving you have to learn... But if you think that you are already the best, you are not open-minded about learning ... we go abroad for learning.”

Some suggested that the lack of international experience led some coaches to have low aspirations for themselves and their athletes. This also related to some concern about low levels of unchallenging, usually internal, benchmarking.

5 Sporting cultures of excellence

This was a key issue, emphasised by most interviewees. The concerns relate to sports-specific issues and the perceived lack of early competition and early learning about the nature of elite sport, the lack of intense competitive opportunities, coaches’ lack of international experience and a coherent developmental pathway.

5.1 Widespread lack of sports-specific ‘performance cultures’

“The existing performance culture in Scotland is the biggest obstacle for being successful in Scottish [sport] ... The problem of the Scots is the lack of the goal-oriented way of working, the lack of any performance culture. They don’t want to work for goals... They are hard-working in terms of running after the ball, but they don’t see the goal to beat the world-best ...nations; they are not at all achievement-oriented ... They act just for the sake of hard-working, not for the sake of winning.”

The lack of sports-specific performance cultures in Scottish sports clubs and governing bodies was regarded as a key constraint on achieving elite sports success.

5.2 “Do not understand what it takes to be a ‘top player’ ”

“The problem lies in the players’ lack of awareness how to behave and act as an elite player. They were not taught what is required for being an elite player ... The system has to teach them to avoid the lack of awareness. This education is the major thing”

There seems to be a general lack of understanding about the effort and disciplines required to be an elite athlete, reflecting concerns about the need for early exposure to elite systems and coaches’ inexperience.

5.3 Lack of competition for places

“Obviously, there are too few ...players in Scotland. Therefore, competition does not exist which is very bad because only in hard competition, you can develop into a good player ... Consequently, the girls are not tough enough in the youth squads.”

In many sports the relatively small participant base and the associated absence of intensive competition produces a lack of competition for places, even at the elite level. This serves to reinforce concerns about weak cultures of excellence.

5.4 The role of the media

“I would say that the quality of the media and the lack of coverage across other sports (besides football and rugby) is a significant issue for this country. That’s a campaign that somebody should be fighting.....”

The concern with a lack of a performance culture and understanding of what it takes to be an elite athlete was frequently strongly associated with negative comments about the role of the media.

5.4.1 Confusing fame with achievement in a small country: the media

“We do have the tendency to think that we are great when we are only just arriving Some people consider achievement as to be famous, a celebrity, getting your name in the newspaper ... Celebrity for my generation would be a consequence, but not a reason for doing it.”

In a small country where the media want stories of sporting success, many young developing athletes can be made to feel that they have ‘made it’, before they have. Such media-led perceptions can lead to a reduction in the effort necessary to achieve international success.

5.4.2 Fear of risk of high profile failure in a small country

“In the States ... if you lose – no big deal ... The cost of failure is negligible. No one knew you before ... Whereas here, if you lose [in Scotland] everybody jumps on top of you ... No one wants to take the risk because the cost of failure is high.”

The close scrutiny of the media (especially in high profile sports) can lead to the reduction of aspirations and satisfaction with ‘local fame’.

5.5 Bravehearts or underdogs?

Interviewees considered the possible relationship between their concerns with the lack of sporting cultures of excellence and broader national cultural traits. However there was a lack of consensus about the precise, if any, importance of aspects of Scottish culture for the development of elite sport.

“I don’t see in your top sports people the pessimism ... I think they are a bloody optimistic bunch!”

“I don’t see the Scots as being self-critical and pessimistic. But ...they put limitations, they don’t want to set their ambition too high in case they fail. The other thing is that they are not proud about themselves. They don’t say how fantastic they are when something has worked out. Consequently, they are not getting recognised that they have achieved something.”

5.5.1 “They carry all Scotland on their back”

“They have to dissociate their identity from what they do. They need to say: I’m Scottish but that’s just one part of me, I’m a person and then I race in this sport. What I do today, that’s just what happens today. My identity is still whatever it is. And when they separate those two, I think they will compete better.”

Several interviewees discussed issues about the interface between cultural identity and the focussed individual motivation and identity required to perform at the highest level. The

general view was that emphasising national identity, and the associated pressures, were not always the best approach.

5.5.2 “The Scots cannot deal with each other”

“One of the things I struggled most was: just saying it. We try to come to a decision ...and it goes around the houses for a long time. Within certain settings, people are lacking the ability to go and say things directly face-to-face.”

Many referred to an inherent conservatism in Scottish sporting organisations and an unwillingness, or inability, to address certain fundamental issues. Some also saw this as indicating a lack of strategic leadership and direction.

6 Funding

6.1 Funding mediocrity or failing juniors?

There was a diversity of opinion about the new sources of funding. Some expressed strongly held opinions that performance thresholds for funding are too low in the current Lottery system.

“... I think that we are funding mediocrity as a mediocre [athlete], you can stay in Scotland and you put your feet up to the fire and do very little training and have your car, have your apartment”

Others suggested that the increased concentration on medal potential may undermine the long term development of certain sports.

“The Institute only wants to fund the potential medalists. But we need the players playing tournaments in teams. We need to keep them in the game.”

6.2 Wider use of scholarships

“In other countries (France and Germany) full-time athletes combine their training with some form of education - studies (e.g. sports studies) which are tailored to suit their lifestyles. Universities are very compliant to their sporting needs and let them away. In Japan and Korea they go to universities to study [sport]. Other countries have very institutionalised systems but in Scotland athletes have to individually negotiate their terms with their university.”

Some respondents, especially foreign coaches, suggested that a wider and more systematic and integrated system of university scholarships might enable many more Scottish athletes to stay in sport and commit themselves to the training regimes necessary to achieve in elite international sport.

7 Facilities

As would be expected, there was a general concern about the lack of indoor and all-weather facilities and access to existing facilities for training purposes.

7.1 “You cannot do technical work in freezing, cold conditions”

Each sport had its own concerns relating to the need for indoor facilities for technical events and all-year training (increasingly important for many sports).

7.2 “Having one significant facility creates a sense of identity”

Several interviewees argued for the establishment of a national elite facility for their sport.

7.3 Access to existing facilities

Several interviewees expressed concern about the lack of facilities for juniors and access at reasonable times to current facilities.

7.4 “I don’t think that the lack of facilities is a bottleneck as other issues”

“I think Scotland’s got all of these things [i.e. training facilities]. You have to remember: in all things to do with development and growth etc ... it always comes down to the quality of the people and the quality of the talents.”

Although concerns were expressed about facilities many felt that the key to elite success lay in addressing the issues relating to competition, coaching and sporting cultures of excellence outlined in this report.

8 Issues for Consideration

Strategy

- There is a need for a coherent and integrated *strategy* for the elite sport system. The inter-dependent roles of each partner in this continuum should be identified clearly and recognition and status accorded to each contribution.
- There is need for clear and unambiguous *leadership* to reduce current fragmentation and to manage the various elements of this 'supply chain'.
- There is a need to move beyond useful, but ad hoc initiatives, and view the proposed action points as part of an *integrated and coherently managed system*.



School PE and Sport

- There is a need to ensure the *early development of multi-sports skills*, with specialisation introduced at appropriate times dependent on the needs of individual sports.
- There is a need to provide earlier experience of *intense competition* via the establishment of school-based leagues and competitions or alternative approaches.
- There is need to promote and support best practice in developing *school/club links* (e.g. PE School Sport and Club Links initiative; table tennis' Premier Club System).
- Both schools and sports clubs need to be assisted to develop and implement more *systematic talent ID systems*.



Sports clubs and competition structures

- Clarification is required about the *relative roles of clubs and governing bodies* in the production of elite performers.
- Governing bodies need to develop and implement *whole sport strategies*.
- Consideration needs to be given to possible solutions to *weak competition structures*.
- There is need to identify and/or promote good practice in the development of a *coherent development continuum*, with links from schools to elite squads.



Coaches

- A thorough *review of coach education* is required, including the development of more athlete-centred approaches (especially for those working with talented and elite performers).
- The development and support of a system based on a *continuum of coaches*.
- There is a need for more *coherent strategic management* of this 'supply-chain'
- *Foreign travel* and knowledge of a variety of sports needs to be encouraged and funded. A system is required for the subsequent dissemination of this knowledge.
- There is a need for the funding of more *full-time coaches* and the development of more coherent career structure.
- In the context of greater professionalisation of coaching there is a need for a *strategy to protect and support volunteer coaches*.
- A systematic *review of benchmarking* is required for all sports.



Sporting cultures of excellence

- The *promotion of sporting cultures of excellence* and a knowledge of what it takes to be an elite athlete should inform of aspects of the strategy and all investments.
- Early international experience and *systematic and integrated role model/mentoring* programmes should be introduced for both athletes and coaches.
- Funding organisations should ensure that *benchmarking* is set at appropriate, challenging, levels.
- Consideration should be given to a *media strategy*, including training to manage the impact of media coverage on athletes.



Funding

- There is need for a *sport-by-sport review of current lottery funding* within the context of the new strategy.
- Universities should be encouraged to adopt a more systematic and integrated approach to *sports scholarships*.
- Business funding and support should be sought, especially *for business/sport exchange programmes* and organisational, process and people management training.

Appendix 1: Interviewees

Tommy Boyle	BAF Master Coach (Athletics)
Jimmy Calderwood	First Team Manager, Aberdeen Football Club
Bobby Clark	Head Soccer Coach, University of Notre Dame, USA
Dave Clark	Strength and Conditioning Coach, Scottish Institute of Sport
Frank Dick	President of the European Athletics Coaches Association and former GB Athletics Coach
Alistair Gray	Member of the Board of Scottish Institute of Sport Foundation and former Chairman, Scottish Institute of Sport
Hamish Grey	Chief Executive Officer, Scottish Golf Union
Frank Hadden	Scottish National Rugby Coach
Anne-Marie Harrison	Executive Director, Victoria Institute of Sport and former Executive Director, Scottish Institute of Sport
Mike Hay	High Performance Curling Coach, Scottish Institute of Sport
Chris Hoy	Olympic and World Champion Track Cyclist
Peter Keen	Former Performance Director for British Cycling
Ian McGeechan	Former Scottish National Rugby Coach
Chris Martin	Scottish High Performance Swimming Coach
Catriona Matthew	LPGA Tour Winner and Solheim Cup Golfer
Tony Mowbray	Manager, Hibernian Football Club
Ronald Morency	Former Scottish National Track and Field Coach
Judy Murray	Former Scottish National Tennis Coach
Alison Ramsay	Board Member of the Scottish Institute of Sport and former Scotland and GB Hockey Player
Graeme Randall	Judo Coach, Scottish Institute of Sport
Meg Ritchie	Track and Field Coach, East Tennessee State University and former Scottish National Track and Field Coach
Andy Roxburgh	UEFA Technical Director and former Scottish National Football Coach
Yehuda Shinar	Chief Executive, Winning Enterprises Ltd
Anna Signeul	Scottish Women's National Football Coach
Dan Travers	High Performance Coach (Badminton), Scottish Institute of Sport
Gary van der Meulen	Performance Swim Coach, Tayside and Fife Institute of Sport
David Whitaker	Former GB Men's Hockey Coach
Matt Williams	Former Scottish National Rugby Coach
Darcel Yandzi	Judo Technical Coach, Scottish Institute of Sport

Note: The names of two interviewees have been removed from the above list at their request.