



England Athletics Chair of National Council Tony Shiret

Blog February 2015

The highlights of my February so far have been a call between the representatives of the National Council and the Youth Development League, and being the last person off Wormwood Scrubs at the end of another successful season for the Active Training World Metropolitan Cross Country League – of which more later. I also attended the reception to mark the award of the MBE to Wendy Sly. She is a Board Member and, as an Olympic medallist, has done the lot and continues to give back to the sport.

The Regional Council elections are approaching and the deadline for nominations is 27th February. I have said it before – We Need You. The Council system does not work even close to 100% well. But it gives the sport a voice in many different areas where previously we just did as we were told and there was no accountability.

The reason why the Council and the YDL have started talking is to make some progress on some of the issues troubling the League since its inception. It is clear from the lack of change at the end of the 2014 season that some thinking has to be done much earlier in the year to develop ideas. The Council's main remit is the welfare of English athletes, so we have focused on travel times and meeting lengths. However, clearly there are some performance/development related matters which have to be taken into account as well.

At this stage our discussions have been by way of “scoping” i.e. deciding what to include in our talks, rather than coming up with proposals. The idea though, is to have some firm proposals for wider discussion much earlier than last year.

One area which is of particular significance is changes to the UKA Rule Book, which will come into force for the 2016 track season. UKA plan to consult on possible changes to age groups, so that they would potentially come into line with those used by the IAAF. If implemented, such changes would have pretty major implications for the YDL. I am advised that UKA will announce details of how to feed back your views on this later this month.

It is the National Council's view that implementation of any changes should be delayed (if they are approved) as an immediate change would not give the YDL (and others) enough time to adapt, especially as this area has been problematic for the last two years. At the young end of the competition spectrum we would need to know who would provide competition for a new U12s for example.

Elsewhere, a group formed to consider an overall England Strategy has met for the first time. Again the nature of this initial meeting has been to work out very general matters – what to look at, basically. It meets again in March. The Council has requested and agreed representation on this body. We are trying to develop a strategy that advances the traditional/organised part of the sport at the same time as increasing participation at all

levels. To do this we need to increase the weight of the voice of the traditional sport, in my view, which is why we the Council are now on the Strategy Group.

A new Head of Recreational Running has been appointed. Matt Birkitt has come from Rugby League to take up the post, where he was in charge of Community Projects. You may think: “what has Rugby League got to do with athletics/running?” I was part of the panel that interviewed him and I think he has the qualities needed to get things done rather than just talk about them, so I wish him all the best with his new job and hopefully many of you will get to know Matt over the coming years.

EA has also set up a new Commercial Advisory Group. With the help of Sport England we hope to develop some commercial income streams to complement Sport England funding and affiliation fees. This group meets this week. On affiliation fees, we are now up to 137000 affiliates (+4% yoy at this stage).

At the last National Council meeting we received an update from the new Head of Coaching and Athlete Development, Martin Rush. He is trying to tie in the Coach Education system more closely with the Mentoring set-up. This will lead to recently qualified coaches getting more assistance/supervision than previously. Pass rates and licensing numbers in the Athletics Coach and Coach in Running Fitness courses (the only ones that are subject to examination) remain too low.

Neil Costello, one of the independent club-elected Board Members at EA, has produced a paper (having taken the view of a number of club coaches/administrators) on the appropriateness of the current coach qualifications, for the Board. This will be used to inform our requirement for course content going forward, probably from the start of the Winter Coach Education “season” this Autumn. One area where we are seriously missing the point in my view is endurance coaching for those not involved in recreational running – i.e. probably a very high proportion of the country’s coaches - who have to decide between the recreational based Coach in Running Fitness and Athletics Coach, where endurance is only part of “running”, which is only part of the content.

And so to Wormwood Scrubs. I had the pleasure (?) of jogging around behind the field of the Met League in the final race of the 2013/14 season. I have been to the Met League quite a lot since my sons started taking part and I have always wanted to run in the 400 man Senior Men’s race, even though at 58 my realistic aspiration was to get round eventually. The Scrubs is a flat 5 mile mud bath and it soon became not so much a race for me as a slow slosh-around. However on the day Gavin Collett and his volunteers provided competition for 765 runners of all ages and abilities including some very good ones.

The Met League is one of many organisations carrying on the tradition of Cross-Country in the UK. Thanks to them all – both on behalf of the Council and as a father who appreciates this being done properly. Good luck to those running the National this weekend.

Tony Shiret