

National Council Chair's Blog – February 2016

Seeing over a thousand athletes charging up the hill at the start of a big cross-country race on Saturday at Parliament Hill reminded me why I have loved athletics all my life - never mind that 6 or 9 miles later it has all gone a bit “Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow” as the wind, the cold and London clay combine to make completing the course a true feat of athletic endurance.

Would that every time we thought about athletics these were the images that came to mind – hope, endeavour and persistence in the face of adversity.

Unfortunately, that is clearly not the case. The emerging scandals engulfing the sport which now threaten to undermine the credibility of the 2017 World Championships dominate news coverage. How is it that a sport which is close to being the most popular pastime in the country in its most un-structured form and the person who brought us the London Olympics (and regeneration of a big chunk of East London) are now finding it so difficult to call upon the overwhelmingly positive aspects of the sport to defend it against this wave of negativity?

If we look at FIFA and the IAAF the answer is clearly that those bodies have been badly led to the point where their public faces arguably have little to do with what you and I are involved with seven or eight days a week. A common characteristic of bad or self-interested leadership is that it is not really interested in what the “grass roots” has to say. It has the financial power and resources to do what it wants and commonly makes it almost impossible for competing views to be heard. Generally these organisations are not brought to account by voices from within their own sport but by external examination which causes financial or public pressure.

What has this got to do with what I write about? The England Athletics National Council is the leading volunteer representative body in the sport in the UK. We continue to work to both make your views heard within England Athletics and apply pressure within EA and UKA to get things changed.

But as I have written repeatedly the way UKA (British Athletics) and EA are set up means that UKA has greater powers to determine everyday strategies on things like coaching and officials and schools and most other things and has very little accountability for its actions while EA now has much greater accountability but more limited powers than UKA. Now is the time to improve the democracy and accountability within the whole sport to avoid the downward spiral we are seeing elsewhere.

UKA has a body called the UK Members Council (UKMC) which is a mixture of elected members and appointed people under the leadership of the UKA President. The leadership of the UKMC is determined by an Appointments Panel from nominees invited by UKA. The advantage of the UKMC is that its members have specialist knowledge of the areas they represent. The disadvantage is that well less than one half of its members have been elected including all of its leadership.

The UKMC meets four times a year and its members along with the clubs theoretically “own” UKA. It is meant to be the “conscience of the sport”. I have just been elected to the UKMC to represent Track & Field clubs.

I would like to thank all of those clubs that voted for me in the election – and all those which did not – for supporting the democratic process. I believe that with 53% of the vote I have a strong mandate to represent your views.

It is a long process to improve democracy and accountability from within a system. I have found that having five Regional Councillors including the two elected club representatives on the England Board has been immeasurably helpful. That Board is way better than it was when I first joined in 2013.

I know that there are many good athletics/running people on the UKMC and I call on them now to make the whole system work how it should do with the UKMC ensuring that grass roots interests are far better represented than they have been so far within the whole management of the sport. Most immediately this will be better achieved by increasing the club reps from one to three (as allowed in the UKA constitution) and re-visiting the recently introduced Code of Conduct which appears to limit areas that can be discussed quite significantly.

More immediately the National Council has been busy. We have been involved in three pieces of work relevant to what we all do. First the NC has made a formal response to UKA regarding its domestic Competition Strategy Group (CSG) proposals. The proposals are shown (here) and our response (here). We were broadly against the club-facing proposals which we felt reduced competition opportunities. We also felt that age group related proposals were not sufficiently well developed. We understand that the YDL is developing its own strategy.

The National Council also discussed proposals on Officials Strategy with UKA. We have polled all regional councillors and will respond to UKA shortly. The NC itself felt that the proposals were insufficient as presented to address the shortfall in grass roots officials numbers and did not make sufficient allowance for endurance officiating.

Lastly we took feedback from our Regional Councils on regional matters and their perception of how the Council system is working. A brief report is available (here). In summary the system is not consistently applied in the different regions, has decent traction with the County Associations, but far less with the clubs, but is generally felt to be worthwhile from the point of view of getting their voices heard.

So back to Parliament Hill – well done to the SEAA and its President Martin Howard and all of its officials and volunteers for doing a good job. At a guess 2-3000 athletes had the opportunity to give the washing machine one of its annual big tests because of their efforts. The Corporation of London continues to be a friend of the sport and the

Hampstead and Highgate Residents Association showed their support for the wider sporting community through their involvement.

This happens every weekend all over the country. That is why our sport is great despite what you read.

Tony Shiret, February 2016