

Learning to Lead through **Sport**

**A report on leadership development among
high-performance and university athletes**



Foundation for Leadership through **Sport**

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Learning to Lead through Sport

ENGLAND need to find leaders on the pitch' headlined an authoritative sports journalist earlier this year and Peter Keen, UK Sport's Director of Performance noted that *'strong leadership is crucial to the success of any World Class Performance Programme.'* Yet, how much do we invest in leadership development among our top athletes? Would our sporting performance be better if more were done?

Further, it is often claimed that sport teaches us much about life in general. So, how might sport leadership experience help us learn to lead in other walks of life, to the benefit of careers after sport?

Despite the mass of books on leadership and on sports coaching there is little reference to these questions, nor research to address them. As a registered charity, The Foundation for Leadership through Sport (FLS) was set up in 2010, with the mission to encourage and enable athletes in all sports to be better leaders. One of our first actions has been to survey sports National Governing Bodies, universities and leadership development service providers to ascertain how much leadership development does indeed go on among high-performance and university athletes in England. Concurrently we surveyed major employers to determine the weight given in their graduate recruitment processes to sports leadership experience, to assess whether it would be worthwhile in employability terms for universities to put more emphasis on this aspect of student development.

The results of this survey were discussed recently at a conference of survey participants and other stakeholders, to determine whether and how more attention should be paid to athlete leadership development. This paper reports on the survey and conference.

In summary, there would be considerable benefits in more systematic leadership development among high-performance and university athletes and their coaches, both in terms of sporting performance and careers after sport.

THERE is a belief among survey participants that the development of leadership ability among athletes can improve sporting performance, though the link is hard to prove, beyond some limited anecdotal evidence.

Yet in spite of this belief, and with a few notable exceptions, there is little systematic leadership development undertaken for high-performance and university athletes. We use the term 'systematic' to refer to formalised programmes that employ a rounded and sustained approach to developing leadership skills. This is in contrast to ad hoc interventions that might develop certain aspects of leadership, but in a haphazard way. In our definition, systematic programmes also fit within an organisation-wide culture that promotes and develops excellent leadership.

The survey revealed a number of challenges to such systematic development, notably the role of the sports coach, the varying nature of different sports and difficulties paying market rates to invest in leadership development.

The sports coach frequently has significant influence on the athlete's development which can be positive or negative. The weight of view reflected in the survey was that too many coaches have a negative influence on the broad personal development of the athlete, focussing on short term results and technical skills and relying on dependency and control (even fear) to get results. Any attempt at systematic leadership development might be viewed with suspicion by many coaches and blocked.

The role of leader and the capabilities required vary among sports and any systematic leadership intervention would need to be customised to be effective. However, most survey participants embraced the 'distributed' model of leadership (the leader who sets a direction but who encourages contributions from team members and empowers them to take the lead if required), which would form the core of any leadership development interventions, even if customised to the individual sport. None believed the 'heroic' model was appropriate (one person imbued with all leadership characteristics and who 'wins the day' on their own). Nevertheless, sport seems to attract such a model despite the evidence that this leadership model is ineffective in the long term. As one participant put it – *"Heroic mythology is deeply instilled in sport despite evidence to the contrary."* There was also a resounding view that 'self-awareness' was critical for an effective leader and any leadership development should include this.

We interviewed a number of leadership development service providers, many of which were set up and directed by individuals who had been high-performing athletes previously. With this pedigree, it is unfortunate for our cause that in general they had few clients among sporting organisations. Rather they see the corporate world as offering greater returns on their efforts, notwithstanding that some deliberately undertake work for sports

clients, subsidised by their corporate work. Limited ability to pay market rates is a barrier to the spread of systematic leadership development services among athletes. This argues for incorporating leadership development into core coaching programmes.

Employers were consistent in seeking the 'rounded' individual when recruiting graduates. Participants in the survey also identified common capabilities that sport develops, which matched in large part those valued by employers. So it is not surprising that employers reported sport to be a useful source of evidence for prized capabilities. Other non-academic activities may also develop these capabilities (sport is not exclusive) but sport is distinctive and provides good evidence for certain qualities. Employers also commented that the average graduate does not market or promote non-academic achievements well.

The vast majority of organisations we surveyed were enthusiastic about the potential for more systematic athlete leadership development, seeing the potential benefits to sporting performance and athlete careers after sport. Many commented that the timing is right with various developments and activities combining to create a favourable environment, for example the Olympic Games 2012, and a continued upsurge in the interest in leadership generally.

Certain keys for success emerged from our conference with which to build on this positive attitude, notably to take a top-down approach involving the coach as integral to any systematic programmes; to tailor the intervention to the specific sport; and to seek out best practice from within and outside sport. The elements of effective leadership development were explored and are set out below.

However, there is no overall coordinated drive to push for a systematic approach across sport. So the conference urged a continuing role for FLS in stimulating a network of interested organisations and in undertaking activities to support them in athlete leadership development. These activities could well include: promotion of the benefits of leadership development in sport; facilitating research into and communication of good practice; organising conferences and other forums to exchange views; and providing specific advice to sports organisations and individual athletes, for example on the approach to leadership development and the capabilities of leadership development providers.

FLS should concentrate on benefitting high-performance and university athletes. Both groups stand to gain from an improvement of their leadership capabilities, aimed at enhancing their immediate sporting performance and preparing for their longer-term careers after sport. Nevertheless, this focus will necessitate the engagement of the athletes' corporate hierarchy to achieve effective development interventions. NGBs, universities, clubs and coaches need to embrace the drive to improve in this area.

In recognition of the substantial challenges of achieving a major increase in the amount of systematic leadership development undertaken by athletes, the conference advised a progressive approach, building a coalition of interested stakeholders concurrently with piloting development programmes in a few NGBs and universities.

The overall conclusion of the conference was that the assumption on which FLS was set up, was indeed valid: there would be considerable benefits of greater investment in the systematic leadership development of high-performance and university athletes, along with their sports coaches.



Survey coverage and approach

THE focus of the survey was on university and high-performance athletes as the initial interest was to improve competitiveness at a national level and enhance the after-sports careers of our top athletes. This is not to devalue the role that community and recreational sport can play, but rather concentrating on university and high-performance athletes would have a bigger initial impact and is likely to have a positive trickle effect into the community anyway. We also note that several initiatives on leadership are in place among younger participants in community sport, for example the Community Sports Leaders Award promoted by the Youth Sports Trust.

Our attention was on *athlete* leadership development, not that of the coaches, though the two are intertwined as discussed below. This was not to ignore the leadership role of the coach, but we were conscious that what little research and writing had been done in this area tended to focus on the coach anyway, with very little addressing how athletes themselves should become better leaders.

We covered four groups of stakeholders, as listed at Appendix 1, namely:

- nine National Governing Bodies (NGBs)
- seven universities
- eleven leadership development agencies
- thirteen graduate employers

A discussion with the English Institute of Sport (EIS) added a collective view on another 20 NGBs and an interview with British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) provided a perspective on universities additional to that of those surveyed in detail. Because we were seeking an overview, we did not formally cover individual clubs, coaches and athletes but have had a number of conversations with all three groups, which have supported the findings of our survey.

Opinions, views and data were collected from the participants through a combination of questionnaire and structured interview – most participants did both. Key points from the interviews were summarised in a written note and participants asked to validate the record as an accurate reflection of the interview.

We also reviewed many published research papers, articles and books including those brought to our attention by survey participants.

The purpose of the survey was not to make this a major academic enquiry but rather to seek opinions from a wider range of knowledgeable stakeholders and to stimulate debate in the subsequent conference.

The conference on 2 June 2011 was attended by some 60 persons drawn from many of the surveyed organisations, together with other interested parties, including the Chair of UK Sport (Baroness Sue Campbell); the chief executives of the (football) League Managers Association (Richard Bevan) and of the Rugby Players Association (Damian Hopley); and representatives from other organisations in our four groups who had not participated in the survey.

The following points embrace both the survey and the conference presentations and discussion.

There is a belief that athlete leadership development can improve sporting performance, though evidence of a proven link is hard to find.

LEADERSHIP is critical for the success of the mission both on and off the field: you do not deliver against targets with poor leadership – clear as a glass of water” – Sally Munday, England Hockey. Everyone in our survey and conference believed that leadership is important in improving performance in sport and also believed that athlete leadership skills could be developed with deliberate interventions. However, these were beliefs and opinions – we found little hard evidence of a link between leadership development and performance in the sport, either in our survey or our review of the research literature. There were one or two pieces of anecdotal evidence gathered in our survey:

“I witnessed significant team performance improvement in Aussie Rules Football following team/leadership development. The way Aussie Rules is structured and organised makes it very difficult to gain a competitive edge through factors such as buying top players – so leadership development is one of the few methods available” – Gerard Murphy, Elite Team Performance Ltd.

Measuring the impact of learning on sporting performance and results is notoriously difficult. Several organisations believed in the importance of good relevant measures at various stages of the learning cycle even if this fell short of a provable link between input and ultimate result. However, a few warned that data-led measures can get in the way of effective learning.



“Measuring return on investment can be a valuable exercise but is not easy given the likely variables. I am concerned that we are becoming increasingly reliant on such data to prove that leadership development equals performance improvement. Should we not encourage the art of leadership reinforcing the more subjective components such as judgement and authenticity rather than investing a disproportionate amount of time seeking a statistic to insert in a spreadsheet?”- Gemma Morgan, Morgan Eight

The conference concluded that it would not be a priority to conduct research into the link between leadership development and sports results, as there was sufficient belief in the value of investing in development and rather there are higher priority actions to take in order to stimulate such investment.

There is only limited systematic leadership development undertaken by athletes in this country

THE systematic leadership development of athletes was limited to a few NGBs and only at national squad level; this does not seem to have percolated down to club level at present. Universities have invested little in this area, notwithstanding that many are the homes of business schools that run leadership learning programmes. Rather more NGBs and universities were able to give some examples of leadership coaching interventions, but these were mainly of an ad hoc nature.

Hierarchy of Leadership Development Activity in Sport			
	Impact	DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY	Number of NGBs/ Universities
Systematic	High	Leadership Development as part of an Organisational Change programme (OD)	3
		Leadership Development Programmes focussed on athletes –not part of OD	1
		Ad hoc Leadership Development Programmes – not integrated/coordinated	4
	Unsystematic	Programmes which included an element of Leadership Development	10
		Activities which have an indirect potential to develop leadership	10
		No activity	8
	Low		

There is a hierarchy of leadership development interventions ranging from sophisticated and systematic; to ad hoc activities with potential to develop leadership indirectly; to those doing nothing. We also summarise here the amount of activity at different levels of the hierarchy and the potential impact at each level. Combining activity reported in universities with that in NGBs we get the figures shown. There are three engaging in systematic leadership development; one engaged in programmes specific to leadership in sport; four engaged in ad hoc programmes; 10 using programmes with an element of leadership; 10 involved in programmes with an indirect potential to develop leadership; and eight not involved in any activity. The weight of leadership development activity is occurring where there is least impact.

Cricket sets an example

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) are one of the more advanced NGBs in terms of leadership development and are convinced that their recent success on the field of play owes much to their investment in leadership throughout ECB over the past few years. Gordon Lord, Head of Elite Coaching Development at ECB, presented a short case study at the conference. The key elements of ECB transformation were: a recognised burning platform (something needed to be done); commitment to change at the very top; a culture of trust and honest feedback throughout the organisation; a development structure that included an internal steering group with senior representation from all interested parties; and leadership development programmes which employed a blended approach focused on experiential learning, self awareness and preparatory rehearsing of the different contexts the captains or leaders would find themselves in.

Regardless of the level and nature of the leadership development activity in place, most organisations we surveyed would like to do more but were less sure how this could be enabled.

The role of sports coach is key

GIVEN the belief in the benefits of leadership development it is somewhat surprising that more was not being done. We received some useful comments on why this was from agencies involved in sports leadership development.

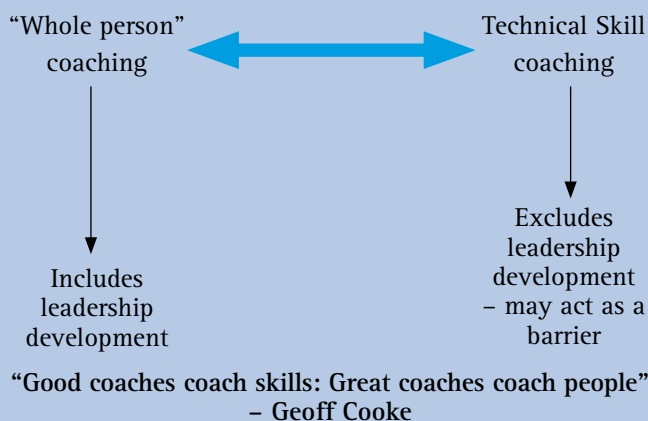
Barriers to more Leadership Development

- ★ Lack of Funds
- ★ Lack of Time
- ★ Few recognise the need
- ★ Coaches do not understand
- ★ Players do not understand
- ★ Poor experience of leadership development in sport
- ★ Poor experience of sports psychologists
- ★ Short term targets and measures predominate
- ★ Effective Leadership needs to be integrated into the organisation and driven from the top – a big task!

The discussion at the conference raised the potential problem of finding time to develop leadership in athletes who have a busy agenda. Though recognising the need to balance high expectations with realistic considerations, most thought that good leadership development need not involve much additional time, in that effective leadership development can be integrated into current activity. Indeed, sport is a productive environment for such development as performance is relentlessly visible and feedback can be uncompromising and rapid. It should be possible to make significant progress on modifying and monitoring the development of leadership behaviour with limited time input.

More significantly, the role of sports coaches was identified as a potential barrier to leadership development and this was also mentioned by many respondents to our survey. The role of the sports coach is critical in the development of the athlete, and the influence can be positive or negative with regard to the development of the 'whole person', including leadership.

Role of Coaches and Leadership Development



The prevailing view was that in general the coach has a negative influence on the broad development of the athlete, tending to look for short term results and building an unhealthy relationship with the athlete based on dependency and control (even fear) to get results. Farren Drury is a former Loughborough sports science student and Army officer who is now in leadership coaching and contributed to our survey. He says *"The role of coach in sport carries a real risk that the relationship between coach and athlete is based on an unhealthy dependency - the controlling style of some coaches can engender fear which in turn undermines and inhibits performance."* Although there are some notable exceptions, in general sports coaching courses do not cover elements of leadership development. It is then perhaps not surprising that the leadership adopted by our coaches is rather old-style command and control. Any attempt to introduce structured leadership development might be viewed with suspicion by many coaches and blocked.

However, there are some examples of coaches who do see the advantages of developing the rounded individual and who embrace the notion of systematic leadership development. Some higher level coaching programmes include elements of leadership development, for example by the Rugby Football Union.

It would seem that to succeed, a leadership development programme needs to be enthusiastically endorsed by the coach. Canada provides an example of how this can be achieved on a large scale, where in the 1980's a strategy of leadership development was implemented nationally, which embraced sports coaches in a cascaded programme and used the coaching network to deliver the leadership programmes to athletes. Learning from this experience, we should be treating the coach as an enabler not a barrier, and major change programmes need to be driven top-down.

The approach to leadership development should depend upon the nature of the sport

A critical factor in effective leadership development of the athlete is the nature of the sport itself and the distribution of leadership roles within each sport.



For example,

- decision-making under pressure will be different in a fast moving sport such as rugby to that in cricket or bowls
- the fly-half in rugby is in a better position to read the game and provide leadership in open play than a player in the scrum
- Gordon Lord, Head of Elite Coaching Development, ECB is clear that the role of captain in cricket is crucial given the nature of the game
- even in individual sports we discovered that leadership can be important to boost morale and motivation of the squad. Kathryn Evans of British Swimming mentioned the 'family' atmosphere in the squads where young swimmers receive informal and moral support from senior members of the team who have emerged as natural leaders.
- solo round-the-world sailing is likely to demand high levels of self-reliance rather than leadership of others

Different Sports – Considerations

- ★ Team vs Individual sports
- ★ The importance of a leader in a particular sport
- ★ The nature of the leadership capability required in a sport
- ★ Qualities encouraged and enhanced inherently by particular sports
- ★ Position within the team can make leadership easier to deploy
- ★ Appointment to captain can in itself affect performance

Consequently, leadership development programmes should be designed to take account of the human dynamics and inter-dependency involved in the particular sport, as well as the variability and speed of the patterns of 'play', which determine the demands of decision-making, command, communication and inspiration that a leader needs to effect both on and off the field of play.

The philosophy or definition of leadership adopted is also important in shaping the approach to leadership development – so we were keen to understand what model of leadership participants subscribed to. The vast majority embraced the 'distributed' model of leadership.

'Distributed' Leadership Elements

- ★ Nominated leader sets direction, taking contributions from team members
- ★ Nominated leader empowers and influences team – generates trust and confidence
- ★ Team members contribute and apply followership
- ★ Set of values understood – kept alive and maintained by all
- ★ Honest communication and feedback between members
- ★ Team members can take lead if circumstances require it
- ★ All read the context and adjust in the light of changing circumstances

Adopting the distributed model emphasises the need for a systematic approach to leadership development, as all members in a team need to have the same mental model of leadership; to take responsibility for their role in leadership; and adopt good follower practices, if the team is to improve.

Those surveyed were at different stages in adopting the model – some more complete and sophisticated than others – but all were leaning towards this model and none believed the 'heroic' model or 'great man' theory was appropriate (that is, one person imbued with all leadership capabilities and who on their own 'wins the day'). Farren Drury told us *"The cult of 'celebrity leaders' which sees a change of leader as the solution to an endemic problem rarely results in enduring success."*

It is appropriate to distinguish between the heroic model and the charismatic leader, who has certain physical and personality traits that attract followers. Charisma is a valuable quality to possess even in the distributed model, provided it is coupled with other necessary leadership abilities.

It is important to report that most participants said that certain personal qualities need to be present if the leader is to be effective – central to these qualities is self-awareness. Gordon Lord of ECB brought to our attention a survey of 75 members of Stanford Graduate School of Business who were asked to recommend the most important capability for leaders to develop; their answer was unanimous: self-awareness.

Limited ability to pay market rates

WE interviewed a number of leadership development service providers, many of which were set up and directed by individuals who had been high-performing athletes previously. They are thus able to relate well to current athletes and imbue their services with a real understanding of the sports environment. Yet we found they had few clients among sporting organisations because of the limited ability of such organisations to pay market rates. Rather they see the corporate world as offering greater returns on their efforts. Some deliberately undertake work for sports clients, subsidised by their corporate work, but in general this limited ability to pay market rates is a barrier to the spread of systematic leadership development services among athletes.

The lifestyle and career-after-sport services provided by the English Institute of Sport and by professional player associations such as the Rugby

Players Association could be a vehicle for low-cost leadership development services for the athlete, but do not currently provide them (though this point is under their consideration presently).

There is a belief that leadership experience as an athlete can enhance career progress after active sport – though again evidence of a proven link is hard to find

A large majority of those surveyed believed sport has certain distinctive characteristics which facilitate the development of personal qualities and leadership capabilities, including decision-making under pressure, the discipline to seek continuous improvement and performing to high standards week in, week out. Harvey Smyth, Managing Director of Gondola Group was typical when he said *"I have always believed that the sport I played at university has been a factor in my success in my business career though this was not explicit or recognised at the time."*

Employers shared with us the characteristics or competencies they seek in graduates and other applicants and there was a significant overlap or matching with the characteristics sport developed.

Appendix 2 shows the qualities and capabilities identified in the survey grouped into 'clusters' with similar meanings. It is significant that employers seek the 'rounded' graduate with evidence of extra-curriculum activity and sport is seen as effective in broadening the student. Some employers compromise on level of academic achievement if there is evidence of inspirational or high achievement in an extra-curriculum field. *"Room is left for the graduate who has less than excellent academic grades but who has shown inspiring talent in a particular pursuit."* – PwC. Clearly high-performance achievement in a sport could meet this criterion.

Mention was also made of undesirable qualities that sport can engender and which employers would find dysfunctional, notably in some a tendency to be self-centred and arrogant.

Proof may be missing of the beneficial effect of sport on later careers, and indeed the few research studies on this point are inconclusive. As Weinberg and Gould noted (2010) in their book 'Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology': *"Many people argue that sport can build leaders, but nobody has investigated how this might occur"*. Nevertheless the employers in our survey were very clear in saying that sport provided useful evidence for certain qualities. Deloitte said: *"Deloitte do not favour sport over other non-academic activities but find sporting activity is used as evidence for some selection criteria such as dedication and organisation."*

Conference participants pointed out that people are malleable in the age range of 18 to mid 20s, and this represented an ideal period in which to develop leadership skills through sport and other activities, to help satisfy a real shortage of good leadership talent in this country.

Evidence provided by sport can be very helpful when screening large numbers of candidates and one employer targeted sports clubs as part of their on-campus marketing activity in the conviction that they were an excellent source for the qualities they desired.

Yet graduates as a rule did not fully recognise the development they gained from sport and were poor at presenting this in the selection process. Universities generally considered they had done a poor job in promoting the benefits of sport and helping students present the learning from involvement in sport. There are however a range of other programmes in place at universities to assist the development of rounded, employable graduates, with which sports experience could be coordinated. The conference discussions brought attention to the value mentors can have in developing the athlete both during the sporting career and when transferring to post-sport roles. Durham University have a very successful programme involving alumni acting as mentors to captains of sport at the university.

A broader point was being made here which is one of missed opportunity. If universities in general are being required to produce the rounded graduate to improve employability, the considerable investment, momentum and interest in sport at university could be harnessed better to help produce the employable graduate.

The NGBs face a different issue. Four of those we spoke to recognise the importance of development, not only as a platform for a career post sport, but as a means of improving sporting performance. It was observed that there was a general trend for coaches to be formulaic in their game plans, allowing less room for initiatives by players on the pitch. This trend was compounded by increased professionalism which resulted in reduced experience of working in other spheres as in the amateur days.

Some NGBs and professional player associations employ lifestyle coaches who are available to members of the elite squads to support them in their personal development. Other NGBs have yet to engage in this issue of 'duty of care'.



There is a sound basis on which to develop a career beyond sport: team leadership and performing under pressure are two areas where athletes' experience could put them at a competitive advantage in seeking employment after full-time sport. And the inherent energy and charisma of personality and physical presence could be presented impressively to prospective employers. These potential advantages would be better realised through systematic leadership development.

And then the issue of transferability was also raised in the survey – the extent to which capability learnt in one context can be transferred to another. It was commented that the number of leadership role models to which an athlete may be exposed could be limited to a few coaches or captains, who may not set a benchmark of excellence. So the relevance of leadership experience in sport might be quite minimal for new employment situations, according to: the nature of the organisation and function going into; the expectations of people in that organisation as to the type of leadership that works there; and whether the job to be done demands a task-orientated approach, which is typically what team sports develop, or a relationship approach. Furthermore, sports leadership experience may well be limited to a team environment, and not extend to the wider corporate situation where leadership typically demands strong competence in visioning and longer term strategy.

The athlete transferring to a new environment may be more able to deploy leadership experience if it has been enhanced by an awareness of leadership concepts, styles and situations beyond that of the immediate team and sport being played. Systematic leadership development would build a much bigger base of knowledge and know-how and maximise the chances of successfully transferring skills into a post-sport career. And the existence of a mentor in the early days of a post-sport career, which could well be an extension of the systematic approach described below, has been shown to have a significant impact on the success of that career. It could be that the existence of only a few such systematic development programmes is the reason why it is difficult to find a strongly evidenced link between sports leadership and managerial success after sport.

The timing is right: the organisational context in many NGBs and universities is conducive to making positive leadership development interventions.

MOST if not all the organisations we talked to were enthusiastic about the potential for more leadership development. As we raised the subject in interview and explored the issues, there was a palpable rising of awareness and interest in the subject.

Some pointed to organisation-wide initiatives taking place as evidence of some movement. But, although here is clearly awareness for leadership development in an organisational change context, few have extended this to leadership development for the athletes, the focus being on leadership in administration and management.

There is also a growing trend to consider the development of the 'whole person' athlete. Universities and employers are interested in the well-rounded graduate, some NGBs are investing in life-style coaching and many of the leadership development agencies have at the core of their programmes self-awareness and positive self-belief. Gemma Morgan warns of an overly scientific approach to athlete development: *"I believe that much of our coaching decision-making is becoming increasingly reliant on the data driven sciences. We need to reinforce the art of coaching excellence supported by sports science and medicine but not be run by it."*

Various developments have combined to make this initiative timely.

Participants commented on forthcoming high-profile events in this country such as the Olympic Games in 2012 and the Rugby World Cup in 2015; the increasing pressure on universities to improve employability; the awareness of NGBs of their 'duty of care' to the athletes under their jurisdiction; the professionalization of many sports with the growth of 'player power'; the investment by some NGBs in leadership development still to filter down to the clubs; and initiatives by UK Sport developing leadership programmes for sports management. Sport also contributes to wider social and political developments, such as the health and 'Big Society' agendas, which further create a positive environment for stakeholders to listen, take note and consider action. The interest in leadership generally shows no signs of waning. As a fundamental human activity which we all experience, we seem attracted to its mysteries, progressively undertaking more research, writing and studying than ever before. We need to apply this interest to greater affect in sport.

There needs to be a coordinated drive to build on this opportunity

THERE are too few examples of top quality leadership by athletes, lowering expectations and standards for all. And there are too few examples of systematic leadership development in place. In the view of the conference, NGBs, universities and others would do well to raise the development of athlete leadership capabilities up their agenda, seeking out best practice from sport and other sectors such as the corporate world and the military, to invest in effective programmes in this area. There needs to be a structure to drive and facilitate a coordinated approach across sports, to get the most out of such investments.

Military parallels

The Services provide a useful case study on how leadership capability can be developed throughout an organisation which has strong parallels with the physical/uncertainty/pressure demands of sport. Lt. General A J N Graham made a short presentation at the conference summarising his view of the military's approach to leadership development. Leadership is not optional; it is fundamental for success that there are leaders at all levels and that a strong thread of leadership runs through the organisation. The Services had always 'done' leadership, but like ECB, the motivation for a fresh look (particularly in the Army) was an imperative to change in the face of new demands on our Forces and pressures on looking after people. This change required support from the most senior levels in the military. The Services embrace the 'distributed' model of leadership and stress the importance of: a clear set of values recognised, understood, exemplified and communicated through the organisation; sound personal qualities including self-awareness, self-reliance, honesty, humility and a willingness to accept responsibility; an ability to stand back and read the context accurately, before deciding, acting and leading to achieve; recognition that everyone in the team has a valued role and team members may need to take the lead if circumstances require (the notion of followership is important). He also stated that trust is a critical ingredient - the 'glue' which holds the elements together.

Drawing on experience inside and out of sport, we presented a model for effective, systematic leadership development for athletes.



This generic schema would need to be tailored to and couched in terms of the specific sport and organisational context, but notably it reflects an emphasis on learning from experience, accelerated by a variety of other inputs:

- an explanation of leadership concepts and case studies, to expand awareness of the range of leadership contexts, elements and approaches, as well as key factors for success ;
- collecting feedback from colleagues and obtaining input from psychometric assessments, to aid self awareness and an understanding of the impact on others
- input and guidance from a leadership coach;
- reflection on experiences and inputs, and modification of approach.
- the practical application of new behaviours, both in simulated exercises and integrated into every day work

Formalised interventions as above are valuable in speeding up the development of capabilities, but it is necessary to inculcate the 'habit of leading' and not just do the occasional burst which is soon forgotten or overtaken by events. It is also important to underscore that whilst learning to lead can be accelerated by these interventions, 'leading' is largely about emotion and feelings, and cannot be captured in an easily applied formula.

To be cost-effective, a programme of this nature would need typically to limit the number of participants to those in current leadership positions or who held the potential to adopt such positions in the future. However, it would be advantageous to ensure that there were sufficient participants to enable distributed leadership to be practised.



We have referred to 'systematic' leadership development throughout this report, to emphasise the type of intervention that is well-planned and managed for sustained positive results, as well as one that facilitates distributed leadership by ensuring that all members of the team share the same mental model. We also use the term to reflect the fact that the most successful programmes of this nature take place within the context of the whole system of coaching and the sports organisation, be it an NGB, university or club. Ignoring these contextual matters is likely to condemn the development programme to being stifled out by contrary messages and actions promulgated within the club or by the coaches.

Accordingly, an effective programme will involve the coach in designing, participating and then leading the programme, in much the way that this was achieved to great effect in Canada, referenced above. The Performance Director and organisation CEO also need to be actively promoting the programme. As with most effective change programmes, any

such leadership development should be supported by a culture within the club or other sporting organisation that drives for excellence in leadership, and so acts as a stimulant and good model for athletes to aspire to.

Integrated leadership

Dave Fisher, Senior Leadership Development Consultant at BT presented the highlights of their leadership development strategy. He echoed many of the points made by other presenters including Gordon Lord and Lt. General Graham, but in addition raised the issue of integration and application. To be really effective leadership needs to become part of everyday activity and recognised by all as critical to team and organisation success. BT have been successful in developing a blend of self-directed learning and associated practical activities.

Cascading the programme through coaches in this way would not only ensure that the developments are reinforced, but also would provide for a cost-effective approach as it would minimise the reliance upon external facilitation. It would also ensure that the time imposition on athletes would be reduced by making leadership development an integral part of training.

The start point however must be to build on our survey and conference, dramatically to raise the profile of the subject and persuade key stakeholders to take action. This will be a significant change programme and needs to be planned and executed accordingly. There are well established principles of effective organisational change which can be employed to inform and shape the change strategy. Comments at the conference advised starting with an experimental group before expanding, and ensuring the value to different interest groups and stakeholders is made clear. The stakeholders need to recognise the benefits of investment in athlete leadership development and these will differ:

- **NGBs and clubs** will benefit from better sports performance at all levels. The image and reputation of their sport will improve as the public sees examples of responsible leadership in the sport and alumni taking up successful careers post active sport. With those who build a career in sports administration, there would be better organisational leadership of their clubs and NGBs
- **universities** have an opportunity to respond to the growing employability agenda by making more of the sporting activity in their institution and enhancing it through systematic athlete leadership development.
- **leadership development agencies** have a major opportunity to develop programmes specific to particular sports based on the sound principles emerging from the survey and conference.
- **employers** will benefit from athletes and graduates being better equipped to transfer their leadership skills to different contexts and from applicants better able to promote and market their learning. Employers may also improve the efficiency of their selection processes if they are aware of the qualities and capabilities that certain sports encourage and develop.
- **lifestyle/career advisers** in professional player associations and EIS, together with employment agencies would gain from having better qualified athletes to promote into their careers after sport

And fundamentally, the immediate beneficiaries will be those at the focal point of FLS and our survey and conference: the athletes themselves (and their coaches) who will develop their leadership capabilities

- within the sporting environment, potentially giving improved personal performance as well as team results. In an interesting study of US National Hockey League (NHL) players, it was demonstrated that those who held the post of captain were better players than when they had no leader responsibilities, deriving from their greater awareness of other players and better reading of the game. It was noted that this boost for the captain could likely be attributed to the culture of leadership promoted by the NHL.
- in preparation for a career beyond active sport participation, be it within a sport setting or another sector. The greater understanding of leadership contexts beyond the sports team will improve the chance of a successful transfer of leadership into a new situation.
- building on the greater self-awareness and understanding of human relationships to enrich their lives generally

An on-going role for the Foundation for Leadership through Sport

FLS has the mission to encourage and enable athletes to be better leaders. Our focus is on high-performance and university athletes, as we believe that both groups stand to benefit considerably in terms of their sporting performance and their longer term career.

However, to achieve this mission FLS needs to work with and through the hierarchy of the NGBs and universities, clubs and coaches that dictate the organisational climate and attitudes towards athlete leadership development. As a very small organisation, FLS can only succeed through massively leveraging the efforts of others.

As the conference concluded, FLS is well placed to fulfil a role in highlighting to stakeholders why sports leadership is worthy of special attention, and building a network of interested organisations in all the categories noted above. This would need to be done in conjunction with existing industry-wide bodies such as UK Sport and BUCS, as well as lifestyle and leadership development agencies.

Additionally FLS could undertake activities to support this network in leadership development, including:

- promoting the benefits of leadership development, both within the network and more widely through the media, including providing high profile success stories to gain impact
- facilitating a variety of prioritised research, for example on the differences among sports and how this could help both in designing leadership development interventions and employers in their recruitment selection processes
- organising more thought and debate on helping athletes develop a career in the governance and administration of their sport
- helping design specific development initiatives, to include the sports coaches and other teachers and developers in any leadership initiative

- supporting universities in addressing the employability agenda with sports leadership development programmes integrated with other personal development initiatives
- building a network of executives and retired athletes who would support leadership development programmes and/or mentor athletes transitioning to a career after sport
- cataloguing leadership development work that has been undertaken and tracking the results, acting as a point of reference for organisations that wished to undertake such programmes, capturing good practice and building benchmarks

To move this agenda forward, the conference concluded that FLS should

- convene separate working groups that will serve the interests of different stakeholders, so as to engage them in determining a coordinated **strategy for athlete leadership development**: NGBs; universities; leadership development agencies; employers and lifestyle/career advice agencies; athletes; coaches; clubs; research bodies
- consider **pilot programmes**, for example by partnering an NGB that has developed a systematic programme with one that has not progressed in this area, to achieve transfer of experience
- determine how best to **structure the full network of interested stakeholders**
- resolve how to **fund the on-going operation of FLS**
- **mastermind these initiatives** and the longer-term activities of the network in conjunction with sector-wide bodies such as UK Sport and BUCS

Notwithstanding the breadth of this campaign, due to the range of stakeholders, it is emphasised that the purpose is to focus on the athlete, specifically at the higher-performance end, including those at university. FLS activities would be rigorously prioritised to this end.

The Foundation for Leadership through Sport
August 2011

The Foundation for Leadership through Sport (FLS)

A registered charity (1142882), FLS was established in 2010 to encourage and enable athletes to be better leaders. The founders of FLS - Josh Lewsey, Vic Luck, Bob Reeves and Nigel Wray - believe that there is much to be gained by increasing the amount of systematic leadership development that takes place across many sports, to the benefit both of the athletes' immediate sporting performance and to their careers after active sport. The latter is particularly relevant to university and high-performance athletes who could take greater advantage of their sporting leadership to obtain careers where such experience would be highly valued.

The FLS vision is to stimulate an increase in leadership development within the sporting environment. Whilst FLS has the capability to deliver leadership development programmes itself, its primary role is to inform and facilitate such development by other appropriate organisations: National Governing Bodies of sport, universities and clubs, working with leadership development service providers and research bodies.

Appendix 1

LIST OF ORGANISATIONS TAKING PART IN THE SURVEY

Employers	Method Data Collected
Arcadia	Interview
Ashurst	Interview
Aviva	Questionnaire and Interview
Berwin Leighton Paisner	Questionnaire and Interview
British Telecom	Questionnaire and Interview
Deloitte	Interview
Ernst & Young	Interview
Freshfields	Interview
PwC	Questionnaire and Interview
G4S	Questionnaire
Gondola	Questionnaire and Interview
Heineken	Telephone Interview
Saatchi & Saatchi	Interview
NGBs	
British Swimming	Questionnaire and Interview
England and Wales Cricket Board	Questionnaire and Interview
England Hockey	Interview
England Squash and Racketball	Interview
England Triathlon Federation	Questionnaire
Hurlingham Polo Association	Questionnaire and Interview
Rugby Football League	Interview
Rugby Football Union	Interview
The Football Association	Interview
Plus approximately a further 20 commented on collectively by EIS	Interview
Universities	
Bath	Questionnaire and Interview
Bristol	Questionnaire and Interview
Durham	Questionnaire and Interview
Exeter	Questionnaire and Interview
Leeds	Questionnaire and Interview
Loughborough	Questionnaire and Interview
Roehampton	Questionnaire and Interview
Leadership Development Agencies	
Boston University	
– Institute for Athletes Coach Education	Interview
Decisive Operations	Questionnaire and Interview
Defence Academy	Questionnaire and Interview
Elite Team Performance	Interview
Exeter – Centre for leadership	Interview
Lane 4	Interview
LIW	Interview
Morgan Eight	Questionnaire and Interview
Performance Consultants	Questionnaire and Interview
Sporting Edge	Interview
University of West England	Interview
Other	
Bright Futures	Interview
British Universities and Colleges Sport	Interview
English Institute of Sport	Interview
Youth Sports Trust	Telephone Interview

Appendix 2

CAPABILITIES SPORT DEVELOPS AND EMPLOYERS PRIZE

AN OVERALL 'ROUNDED' PERSON

Employers look for a rounded graduate with academic excellence and other interests and achievements.

Sport develops many qualities that help develop the rounded person:

LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

- Composure – making decisions under pressure
- Making balanced decisions
- Taking responsibility
- Communication skills – influencing and persuading
- Flexibility
- Team Player
- Team loyalty
- Visions – goal setting
- Seeing the big picture
- Planning for succession
- Drive for results

OTHER QUALITIES – needed for effective leadership

- Self-awareness
- Resilience/robustness/overcoming setbacks
- Managing a busy agenda
- Passion, enthusiasm
- Drive – get up and go
- Pushing the envelop – comfortable with discomfort
- Agility – quick to learn
- Self-effacing
- Conscientious
- Physically fit

UNDESIRABLE QUALITIES

- Arrogance
- Obsessed
- Fanatical
- Selfish
- Self-centred (difficulty moving from 'I' to 'I for others')