



England Athletics

East Region

## Coaching Journal Vol. 1 Conference Edition

**Welcome** to the first edition of our free regional coaching journal. We will be distributing this electronically every few months throughout the year, featuring articles by local, national and international coaches. We hope you enjoy reading these articles and look forward to receiving your feedback.

Now over Tom, for the first of what will be his regular contributions to our journal.

Richard Wheeler,  
England Athletics East Region

### **“I call all my boys champ, and some of them believe me” Tom McNab**

These are the words of the great American coach Dean Cromwell, whose book “Championship Track and Field Athletics” I recently re-read. It is probably the finest work of the pre-war period, and I would commend it to any modern coach.

It is great work, not because Cromwell was a master of physiology or bio-mechanics, but because he possessed three things, the ability to cut to the heart of an event, and the ability to communicate with athletes. I said three. The third was content of character. Cromwell’s account of how he turned a bunch of tired sprinters and a miler into a medal-winning 4 by 400m relay-team should be required reading for anyone aspiring to be a coach.

So, though Cromwell was not, by modern standards knowledgeable, he possessed immense wisdom. I well remember Geoff Dyson telling me that he and the National coaches met with him around 1948 in a posh London hotel; they departed three hours later, note-books empty.

Our National Coaches had expected the American to regale them with academic and technical detail. But Cromwell, who had worked with some of the greatest athletes on the planet, was not in that line of business. He was a practical, hands-on coach. Dyson and his men had simply asked the wrong questions.

We have the advantage of Cromwell, and great American coaches such as Dink Templeton and Bud Winter, because athletics has, since their time, been subjected to intense academic scrutiny. And here I would stress that all coaching should be driven by the best of sports science.

But it is how we sensitively apply that science to coaching, how we interpret it on the track, and how we relate to our charges, that determines our ultimate success as coaches. Alas, much of coach education has tended towards undiluted sports science, untainted by experience. This, and a blizzard of often unproven drills and exercises has frequently made coaching into little more than painting by numbers.

For what we have lacked is what we had in the past, coaches capable of sorting out for us a mass of theoretical material, and passing it on to us in an accessible form. This magazine, and the coming UKA coaching web-site, must do that; otherwise all we will have is words. Now these words may well speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but if coaches do not understand them, if they have no positive impact upon what they do, then they will be of little value.

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By providing us with your feedback, you're helping us to provide the types of future event that you want, relevant to areas that interest you.

Thank you



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## Breaking the Thirteen Minute Barrier - John Anderson

Part one of two

The act of running 5000 metres in a time of thirteen minutes or less calls for an outstanding talent and an outstanding attitude. A detailed analysis of the elements involved in a performance of this magnitude must take cognizance of the totality of the whole person. It would be futile to scrutinize the schedule of running, without at the same time, identifying all the other facets of the individual's personality, environment, aspirations and self perception.

In David Moorcroft's case his performance came as a culmination of some eighteen years involvement in running. It has been my privilege to be his coach for the last fifteen and a half years of this preparation. The circumstances surrounding a meeting, or the coming together of David and I, depended much more on luck than judgment. However, once initial contact has been established, whether or not the relationship proves to be successful will depend upon many factors, not least of which is the compatibility of ideas and of personalities, together with the willingness of both parties to ensure that all the resources and all their talents are directed towards one objective, namely the ultimate success of the athlete.

My involvement with David was purely fortuitous, and arose as a result of a chance meeting with a member of his athletic club. This man was a physiotherapist and enjoyed running and in the course of this, as a member of his local club, took an interest in some of the young runners in his club. He asked me to assist him in providing a general framework from which he might advise the young athletes, and this I did. Some months later it became impossible for him to carry on the work with the young athletes and, as a consequence, the father of one of the boys telephoned me and asked me if I would take charge of their training personally. The father who telephoned me was Bob Moorcroft and in this way began our long association. At that time I lived in Glasgow and was employed as the Scottish National Athletics Coach, whereas David lived in Coventry in England: a distance of some 300 miles. It became clear that I could not see him on a regular basis and therefore all the initial advice and work was done by telephone and letter to his father, who in turn ensured that David worked through the programmes and at the same time provided me with feedback on David's progress.

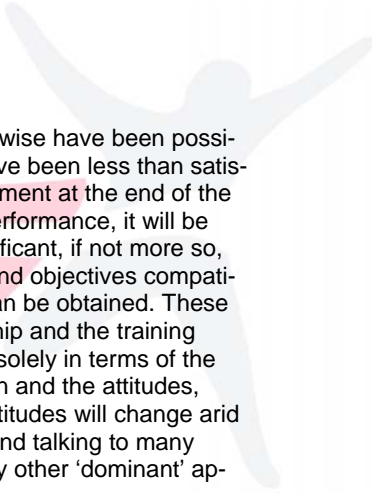
In the early part of 1969, his father wrote to me pointing out that David had recently put on 4 to 5 inches in height and that his best 1500 races of the year had been 4 min. 30 sec., 4 min. 17.2 sec. and 4 min. 11.7 sec. His height at that time was 5 ft. 8 and his weight 8 stone. Clearly this was a very young boy who was still growing at an uneven pace and thus the programme would have to be organized to take account of the developing organism and, as a consequence, the plan must be designed not simply for the immediate result, but rather the long term when the full maturing process in both physical and psychological aspects had been achieved.

As I came to know David and his family more intimately, it became clear that David was a late developer in all facets of his persona. His educational development reflected this as much as his physical development. He found difficulty in passing examinations at school, and it was only with considerable additional effort that he achieved the performances necessary to allow him entry into University. Indeed, it was only with his entry into university that his academic potential began to blossom. Nevertheless, in spite of these early setbacks, he achieved an Honours Degree at his University and this in the same year that he made the Olympic Final in the 1500 metres in 1976 and further, combined these two major achievements with his marriage to his wife, Linda. All in all, therefore, 1976 might be said to be a high-water mark in his developing and maturing process. His progress has been steady and relentless and he has combined this advancing excellence in his running with his responsibilities as a family man. The birth of his first son, Paul brought a new dimension into his life and that had an added quality to his work with potentially good young sportsmen and women in a deprived and under-privileged area of his home town, Coventry. His performances in 1982 therefore reflect the culmination of many facets of his life which together have resulted in a well-balanced intelligent and ambitious individual discovering that he has many resources and is able to excel in more than one field.

### Role of the Coach

In the period of years during which we have worked together, the nature of our relationship has changed substantially. In the early days, the role was very much that of teacher and pupil, with the information and the instruction going almost entirely in one direction, that is from me to David. As David Moorcroft has matured physically, intellectually and emotionally so the exchanges have become much more balanced to the point, where we now are two separate individuals who share a basic friendship and respect for each other and each other's talents and abilities and use this framework as a resource from which we can build the pursuit of even more successful athletic attainments. I believe that without this compatibility and understanding of each other's approach and attitude to living





and each other's basic philosophy, then the success which we have achieved might not otherwise have been possible. The strength of that relationship has provided a support during the times when results have been less than satisfactory and when setbacks have been encountered. Since I believe that the psychological element at the end of the day determines the difference between the ultimate performance and simply the very good performance, it will be appreciated that my emphasis on the exchange of ideas, principles and philosophy is as significant, if not more so, than the running schedules themselves. The need to develop a strong basic set of attitudes and objectives compatible with one's perception of life and its meaning provides a platform from which all success can be obtained. These discussions, therefore, over the years have provided a framework around which the relationship and the training sessions have been twined. The success therefore at the end of the day cannot be identified solely in terms of the running sessions and training programmes, but must be seen in the context of the total person and the attitudes, beliefs and philosophies of that individual and those with whom he associates. Since these attitudes will change and modify as a result of inter-personal relationships and broadening of experiences by meeting and talking to many other people, then it is important for the coach to recognize that the Svengali approach, or any other 'dominant' approach, cannot lead to ultimate success.

Thus, the recognition of the athlete's own contribution to his own destiny must take precedence over all other matters. In breaching new territory and arriving at new objectives, particularly in breaking records, especially world records, that can only be achieved by the 'whole man' operating on his own in face of all the odds. It is the demonstration of a man's mastery of himself.

In 1974, I came to live and work in the town of Nuneaton, thus living only 7 miles from David. This improved our relationship. We were able to share more time together and indulge in many more conversations and discussions over a wide range of topics. Most of our previous conversations had been perfunctory, as a consequence of telephone calls of fairly brief duration and of directions by letter. We were now able to move into a situation in which two adults communicated freely and extensively. This sharing process arrived at the right time in David's development from boyhood to manhood and ensured the transition was accomplished with minimal disruption.

### **Training Philosophy**

My approach to training may best be described as a distillation of the ideas of many others **and** the empirical interpretation of their findings in the practical situation and my own experiences in that area. I will be forever indebted to these outstanding research physiologists from whom I have derived much of the material which has enabled me to coach many international athletes and world record holders. They are too numerous to mention, but among them are the illustrious names of Astrand, Costill, Karpovich, Christensen, Margaria, Saltin, Karvonen, Yakovlov, and many others. It became clear to me at an early stage that a magic solution to the search for ultimate success in middle distance running did not exist. Indeed, the more I searched and the more I read, the more I realized that the balance weighed more heavily in favour of what we did not know as opposed to what we did know. As I experimented, certain elements became clear and among these was the necessity to produce a balanced programme which would cover the development of aerobic and anaerobic requirements whilst, at the same time, incorporating other elements which do not fall easily into either camp. Further it was important to provide the right marriage of these elements for any given individual depending upon the stage of development that he had attained at that time, in order that the ultimate performance might be achieved.

I therefore devised what might best be described as a Composite Programme. This approach attempted to identify the various parameters involved in the pursuit of the ultimate performance and inevitably led me to investigate more thoroughly the elements comprising the practice of running fast. Speed has always been the dominant influence in my approach and, therefore, I have been identified largely as a devotee of 'under distance' running as opposed to long, slow distance running. The truth, of course, is much more complex.

I believe that, in order to run fast, the athlete must be conditioned both physically and mentally to the experience of running fast throughout the entire period of his athletic career. This means that speed can never be neglected at any stage of the athlete's programme whether it be in the depth of winter or in the peak of summer and this must be sustained from week to week, month to month and year to year. The content, therefore, may be seen as similar from year to year and all that may vary is the emphasis placed upon each facet, whether it be winter, mid-season or spring, or, alternatively, whether he is a young emerging talent or a fully matured experienced athlete.

The skill of running fast is a learned achievement, and, in order to be developed and sustained must be regularly inculcated in the regimen of the practicing athlete. The more the athlete learns to run fast as part of his development, the more he learns to expect to run fast and, as a consequence of expecting to run fast, he does!

The experience of running fast therefore becomes natural and does not present him with an artificial barrier. The consequence of subjecting an athlete only to long slow running is that he will inevitably begin to feel that he is plodding, that he has lost pace and, as a consequence, his morale will slide and the effect will be to make him depressed. If, on the other hand, he is regularly encouraged to run fast, even though the bulk of his training at that part of the year may be of moderate intensity, then the outcome will be an athlete who feels good, enjoys running fast and is reinforced in his belief that running fast is part and parcel of his whole existence.



Running fast is as much a condition of the mind as it is of the physiological components.

Any training system must be based on sound knowledge and a combination of theory and practice. The coach must add to his established knowledge of those elements which are essential individual and which complete the artistic or empirical elements of the inspired coach.

In other words, the marriage of art and science.

It seemed to me that success would ultimately depend upon the athlete's capacity to produce speed. I developed my training programme with a view to promoting speed as the paramount criteria. The evidence seemed to suggest that any well balanced training programme for a middle distance runner would encompass aerobic work with its emphasis on the cardio-respiratory and cardio-vascular systems and, at the same time, develop a capacity to work in an oxygen debt, thus utilising muscle chemistry, particularly towards the end of the race.

It also became clear to me that if one viewed the exercise as a see-saw, then the picture was of the anaerobic and the aerobic balancing at either end with the fulcrum in the middle. Thus the weighting would change from time to time but, in the ideal circumstances, the balance would be achieved. In order to ensure that this continued to remain in balance, then the third element, namely the fulcrum, became critical. I therefore split my programme into three facets:

#### **Aerobic**

The aerobic element was split into five separate categories:

1. Long slow distance running.
2. Short fast running (3 to 6 miles).
3. Medium intensity running (8 to 12 miles).
4. Fartlek sessions (around 80% of maximum).
5. Intensive Fartlek (simulation of repetition running in an informal environment incorporating efforts of between 80 and 100%).

#### **Anaerobic**

In this category the programme was split into five elements again:

1. Short distance repetition with short recoveries.
2. Longer distance running with longer recoveries.
3. Technique running allied to acceleration running.
4. Longer flat out runs with longer recoveries.
5. Combination of several of the above.

In all cases the effort involved in each of the runs was in excess of 80% of maximum.

#### **Fulcrum or Link**

This section of my programme was intended to provide the link or bridge between the aerobic and the anaerobic. In practice, it involved extended runs at faster than race pace with reasonable recoveries.

Two particular sessions were chosen involving repetition of either 300m or 600m, though in exceptional circumstances as happened with David Moorcroft it became necessary to extend the distance of the 600m to 1,000m. This arose because David was running so fast in this session that the amount of time spent in running was being reduced dramatically. In order to provide him with an extended period of running, I introduced a session of from 4 to 6 x 1,000m with 61/2 minute recovery in place of the 600m session. This was only achieved over the last two years when he had arrived at a particularly high level of fitness and speed. The two sessions principally used in this were:

1. 8 x 300m with 3 minute recovery, and 2. 4 x 600m with 5 minute recovery.

Since it seemed evident to me that speed built up during the summer in the racing session should be sustained throughout the ensuing winter, then it became clear that all of the three elements mentioned above comprising a training programme should be incorporated throughout the winter and summer alike in the year to year development in the programme. This has meant that the content of the programme has, to a large extent, contained the same elements year in and year out but the emphasis has changed from season to season. The elements which are emphasized at any given time will depend upon the development of any given individual.

The specific sessions which have been devised have been tackled in similar fashion and vary from common practice in one important dimension. The difference is that in my programmes recoveries remain constant and do not vary either from session to session or year to year. Instead the endeavour is to improve upon the speed of each of the runs on every occasion at which the session is attempted.

Over the years there have been slight modifications but the essential principles applied have remained constant. For example, although I might use a one week training programme during some parts of the year, at other times of the year I would use a 28 day cycle which would incorporate most, if not all, of the ingredients mentioned previously.

#### **Anaerobic Element**

In part of the training programme, I attempt to develop and promote basic speed and extended speed or speed en-



duration. A range of sessions is utilized in order to achieve this objective.

### 1. Maximum Effort Running

In this activity, runs at flat out speed are utilized regularly over distances as short as 60m and as long as 600m. In all the sessions, full recovery is permitted.

### 2. Short Repetitions

The main distances utilized here are 60m and 100m. The sessions which are the key sessions here are 'back to back' 60m and 'back to back' 100m. The best example of these would be:

- 4 x 4 x 60 with 30 seconds between the runs and two minutes between the sets.
- 4 x 4 x 60 with 30 seconds between the runs and one, one and a half and two minutes between the sets.
  - 4 x 4 x 60 with 30 seconds between the runs and one minute between the sets.
- 4 x 4 x 60 with diminishing recoveries, i.e. 25, 20 and 15 seconds between the runs and a variation of recoveries between the sets, such as one, one and a half and 2 minutes between the various sets.
  - 4 x 4 x 100 with 30 seconds between the runs and 2 minutes between the sets.
  - 3 x 3 x 100 with 30 seconds between the runs and 2 minutes between the sets.

The second phase of this heading would involve longer repetitions with longer recoveries and an example of these sessions would be:

- 3 x 4-6 x 150m with 90 seconds recovery between the runs and 5 minutes between the sets.
- 150-200-150 in which distances would be run with 10m increments and recovery of 90 seconds between the runs utilized. (i.e. 150, 160, 170, 200, 190, 180, etc.)

The aim here in this section is to promote running skills and develop running technique whilst, at the same time promoting the capacity to endure high oxygen deficit and lactic acid build up. By asking the athlete to run under stress in this way, the promotion of speed is developed.

### 3. Link or Fulcrum Session

This may be seen as the key area in the balance of the entire programme. I utilize two sessions principally in this category.

- 8 x 300m with 3 minute recovery; and 4 x 600 with 5 minute recovery

In these sessions, the athlete is attempting to relate the speed developed within the shorter sessions and the endurance developed within the aerobic sessions and link the two extremes together. He is asked to run each of the repetitions as fast as possible, bearing in mind the need to complete the entire session. Quality is the determinant factor and, if the quality deteriorates then the session is stopped.

In the athlete's mind these sessions are seen as a yardstick or milestone and they are eagerly anticipated as measuring the progress made. It must be remembered, however, that other factors such as the type of training the athlete has done immediately prior to the session or the weather conditions or other emotional or domestic conditions might influence the session. This means, therefore, that these sessions do not show a straight line graph improvement but, rather indicate over a substantial period of time that progress is being achieved.

From the coach's point of view, these sessions permit the opportunity to assess the respective values of the aerobic and anaerobic elements of the programme and afford an opportunity to diagnose any particular athlete and take steps to eliminate any weaknesses which may be appearing.

In one particular case, that is the case of David Moorcroft, his ability to run these sessions became so developed that it became necessary to produce a further session involving repetitions of 1,000m. When he began to run 4 x 600m with 5 minute recoveries in times of 82 seconds, it became clear that a further challenge was required in order to extend him more adequately. I therefore introduced a session which varied from 4 to 6 x 1,000m with **61/2** minute recovery. He has tackled this session most successfully and his best performance here is 6 in an average of 2 minutes. 27 seconds.

You can read part two of John's article in our next edition, available online in February 2008



## Re-introducing the Hard/Easy Approach To Training Young Athletes

By Liam Cain East Region Endurance Co-ordinator

The potential of the endurance athletes in the East region is outstanding. There are many motivated coaches organising themselves efficiently with a hunger for increasing their skill and knowledge base. These are exciting times!

The role of the Regional Squads is to act as a focal point to bring athletes and coaches together, share good practice and raise the standard of endurance running.

One of my roles as a co-ordinator is to spot trends that I see in the region and pass on my experiences to aid improvement.

A key area that needs to be addressed is how athletes perform their continuous running sessions. By their nature these runs are generally performed unsupervised and athletes run them how they feel without any clear guidelines as to their intensity.

I have seen a misunderstanding in the intensity of continuous running in the sessions that have been introduced to the regional squad. My observations and initial impressions were confirmed when lactate testing of this type of effort was conducted by Dr Gary Walker an English Institute of Sport physiologist and Nick Tilling a physiologist based at the University of Hertfordshire at a subsequent Regional Squad.

Many coaches are not paying enough attention to this area of training which I believe is stifling well planned programmes. Instead of the hard/easy approach to training, the intensity of the easier continuous running days is too high. This has two knock on effects.

Firstly the athlete is not developing the aerobic system efficiently. Secondly, the athlete does not recover between the harder programmed quality sessions. Therefore after a couple of weeks the athlete moves into a state of over-training. This means the quality sessions actually do not progress as well as they could if the athlete eased off the gas on the continuous runs.

They would absorb and adapt from the quality sessions programmed far more effectively if they followed the Hard/Easy principle of training. Simply put – they would run faster!

I believe most coaches understand the Hard/Easy approach to training – I see it in their paper planning. I believe we are not taking into account the current fitness levels of athletes we encounter today compared to 20, 30 or 40 years ago. This is why coaches assume athletes know how to perform continuous runs. We over emphasise the teaching of high quality sessions at the expense of teaching aerobic background running. Quality sessions do improve specific event performance if they are applied to an aerobically well conditioned athlete. They actually break down athletes who have poor aerobic conditioning.

To help us appreciate this lack of basic conditioning of the 'modern athlete' we need to look back in time just prior to the 'golden age' of endurance running in Britain with the likes of Ovett, Coe, Cram, Elliott, Moorcroft, Sly, Buckner and Jones.

In 1972, Frank Horwill, introduced his thoughts and observations detailing a 5 pace theory (training at speeds below and above your main racing distance). 10 years on Britain was dominating world distance running.

Why was this introduction of a new system successful at this point in British endurance running? I suggest it was because we came off 12 years of running based around Arthur Lydiard's principles of large aerobic volume through continuous running. The successful creative coaches and athletes of the time carefully blended a rounded mixture of the best of both systems adding in Bill Bowerman's Hard/Easy approach to their weekly structure. That is why Britain was successful in the 80's

Currently, because of books, magazine articles and the internet, many coaches have a feel for nutrition, psychology skills and drills. The modern world with pressures on health and safety means we have become very track based and therefore quality session orientated. We have lost the art of teaching running!

The athlete we meet will have had less physical preparation at home and at school than athletics coaches met in 1972. The large groups of athletes running out together from a track and field based club have largely disappeared. This large group would be a mixture of junior and senior athletes. The senior athletes would take the juniors under their wing, passing on tips and encouragement. We cannot moan about this situation or long for the past. We have



to accept it and be creative in how we develop our generation of athletes. It is our challenge and our responsibility!

Having raised the problem of understanding the importance of suitably paced aerobic background running I must now try to offer a solution.

We need to understand the difference between the external and internal loads.

The external load is applied when you set a track session. If you want to run 2 minutes for 800m then this requires two 60 second 400m laps. This is the external load required to achieve a time and is mathematically driven.

Whatever way an athlete uses their specific physiological attributes they have to run 60 seconds per lap to achieve 2 minutes for the 800m. Harry Wilson, Steve Ovet's coach, would say this is what the event demands.

We now have to look at what the athlete has to offer – this is the internal load.

On an easier aerobic running day we do not base the recovery, steady or threshold running speeds on a mathematical formula. Instead we listen to the body and run at appropriate speeds dependant on current physiological thresholds.

African runners have a natural feel for their internal load. It may be due to altitude where you know straight away when you have gone over your anaerobic threshold.

The East's young athletes do not have this natural feel for their internal load – we have lost our way. The athletes perceive the intensity of their recovery, steady and threshold running differently to an African athlete (table 1)

|                          | African Athlete | East Region Athlete |
|--------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Recovery aerobic running | 1-2 mmol Bla    | 3- 5 mmol Bla       |
| Steady aerobic running   | 2-3 mmol Bla    | 4-10 mmol Bla       |
| Threshold running        | 3-4 mmol Bla    | 8-14 mmol Bla       |

Table 1: Differences in intensity of aerobic running measured by blood lactate accumulation (Bla)

In other words the East Regions athlete's are working harder than their African counterparts on steady runs! Yes, harder - with regards to intensity! Of course the East athletes cannot do the same volume as the African athletes because of this greater intensity.

Try running steady for 60 minutes with 10 mmol Bla sitting in your legs. Then come out the next day and run a hard 5k session. Compare this with the African athlete running the same 60 minutes at 1-2-3 mmol Bla. I know which athlete would perform the best over the 5k session the following day!

Now keep on repeating this cycle for a couple of weeks. Throw in some multi-pace training. Add 1500m pace, some work at 800m pace. We are now producing high lactate values every day if we go for an easy aerobic run at 5-10 mmol! The hard and easy days become a blur. Everything is actually just plain hard and times in training stagnate or actually take a turn for the worse. All quality is lost!

The African athlete meanwhile absorbs the training, adapts and builds performance. How does the East Region athlete fair? Well let us look at the Region's Power of 10 performances!

Many people believe that British athletes are lazy and need to work harder. From what I have seen and what we have tested the athletes are prepared to work very hard in quality sessions they just need to round off their training with the right amount of aerobic work at the right intensity.

If we are keen on the Long Term Athlete Development of our athletes we must spend some time teaching aerobic background running.

Practically, get out with your athletes and run with them or ride a bike next to them.

Ensure on recovery runs they are really chatting – ten to the dozen!

Steady running should still have a reasonable conversation and definitely in control. Try to avoid letting them run on their own – unless they use a heart rate monitor.

By keeping them in two's or more it creates conversation. Conversation means aerobic running and fun!



Threshold running you should hear even rhythmical breathing and the athlete should be able to speak a few words – perhaps to tell you their heart rate and how they feel.

If you are really serious about your coaching and developing your athletes invest in a physiological test to really pin down the appropriate training paces. It will be worth its weight in gold! Avoid mentioning that it costs money! Remember what I said about our challenges as modern day coaches? There are ways of finding money. Ask our clubs ask the region, we have athlete and coach bursaries. Be creative in how we raise the money to support our athletes.

By paying attention to the detail of our continuous running our athletes will be more refreshed, and physically capable of training quality instead of mediocrity on hard session days which will result in outstanding improvements in performance.

## Coaching by Numbers - Tom McNab

For a moment, I could not quite believe my eyes. For all five training groups in the indoor arena were executing the same exercise. OK, so they were not doing it in sync, but they were all performing exactly the same postural/core strength routine, which consisted of walking over a series of hurdles. And yes, some were flat-footed, some were high hipped, on their toes, some were being watched carefully by their coach, others going through the exercise without scrutiny, but all were doing exactly the same. It was the athletic equivalent of PC.

PC? Well, let me first make clear that I have nothing against core fitness, indeed include me as one of its most enthusiastic supporters, for you can't fire a cannon from a canoe. But surely one of the main aims of coaching is the intelligent deployment of training methods, securing a sensible balance between conditioning and technique. In this particular instance (and at least one group were novices) almost the entire session was devoted to these core-conditioning activities, with everyone performing what appeared exactly the same volume of repetitions. Let's first consider the novices. There is absolutely no case for novices pursuing high volumes of such conditioning activities. For at that age they should be learning the basics of running, jumping and throwing. What I was witnessing was the honest effort of a coach who had been exposed to these PC exercises on some recent course. To him I attach no blame, for to him they were Holy Writ.

For the others, the more advanced athletes, the question to me was the sheer volume of these exercises - ie how much core-stability does anyone really need, and once he secures it, how much more of this type of work does an athlete have to do?

Of course, this is a question which it is impossible to answer, but here it is worth going back a few years. Cathy Cooke, Andrea Lynch, Bev Callender, Sonya Lannaman, all of these women ran appreciably faster than our present cohort, but none of them had even heard of core-stability. But perhaps they were all freaks. Freaks? At 1m.55 and 52kg. Lynch was tiny. And what about earlier athletes, like Mary Rand, who jumped 6m.76 on pulp into a 1.6m breeze in Tokyo in 1964, or Sheila Sherwood who leapt 6.64 on Tartan four years later. Freaks? I don't think so.

What we are in danger of is Coaching by Numbers, simply taking athletes through a series of drills and exercises, rather than getting down to the slow, painstaking business of enabling them to acquire athletic skills. I well remember, aeons ago, being taken through swimming land-drills by my PE teacher. He religiously took me, week in, week out, through these drills, followed by pool breast-stroke leg-drills, holding on to the rail. I soon became a Grand Master of these swimming-drills. Indeed, had there been a Drills Olympics, then Britain need have had no fear of the outcome. The only problem was, I could not swim. Alas, this worried my teacher not a jot. He had done exactly what he had been trained to do, and my failure to benefit from his teaching was clearly my fault. My recourse was to beg my mother to pay for membership of the local swimming club, and I spent many desperate hours guddling across the pool, until my feet finally left the bottom. A couple of weeks later, I managed 77 clumsy lengths, and that marked the end of my swimming career.

I cite this experience because, in those far-off days, land-drills were swimming PC, and woe betide any PE teacher if he did not know them by rote, and anyone who dared to question them. It may be that we are now falling into the same trap, that anyone with a foreign accent and a bag of drills and novel exercises will be promptly listened to, and copied. A friend of mine, an excellent coach, recently attended a jumps course, run by a European coach. He took the athletes through a series of play-like jumping and gymnastic activities, leaving my friend stunned, enthralled. But these were practices little different from what I (and I am certain many other British coaches) had been doing for years. The only difference was the accent. And what such courses rarely manage to do (mainly because they are necessarily one-off affairs) is to contextualise such practices, for it is their judicious deployment, rather than their mere existence, that produces the results. So what we are often left with is a pottage of exercises and drills floating in the ether like ectoplasm.



For it is all rather like cooking. If we are both given the same recipe, why is it that you produce a delicious meal, while mine is inedible? It is certainly nothing to do with the ingredients, or even the instructions, which are exactly the same for both of us. And that is an issue which even the best of coach-education cannot always address, for there is no Da Vinci Code for coaching.

What I believe we have lost is the link between performance and coach education. Thus, in the early years of instruction, we have handed over to the Physical Educationists. Now, these are not horny-handed sons of toil who have laboured long in the vineyards of our schools. No; these are the Theorists. Thus we have 11 year olds "discovering" the best way to perform a basic skill, when we could easily teach them it directly in ten minutes.

Similarly, I believe we should move away from having DVD clips of international triple jumpers, when what our Level one or two coaches face is a bunch of kids who simply need "same, other, both".

For much of coaching is simply applied common sense. Alas, common sense is so rare that it is frequently mistaken for genius.



To find out more about coach development opportunities available to you, visit the Coach Education pages at :

[www.EnglandAthletics.org/east](http://www.EnglandAthletics.org/east)