

Commonwealth Games Blog

I was asked by Suffolk Sport, from my home county, if I could write a blog of my experiences at the holding camp and the Games, for their coaches enlightenment. Below is basically what I presented to them, which was written for a group who may never have been involved in athletics, nor may not understand the uniqueness of athletics within such an environment. So you'll have to forgive some of the simplistic explanations given, but I had to assume a Low level of knowledge as my baseline.

Malcolm

Today, Thursday 17th July, is the first full day for the England Team in Manchester. The team will be based here, until Tuesday next, when the team will fly up to Glasgow, ready for the opening ceremony, the following day.

My position on the team, is as the Lead Throws coach, covering the Shot, Discus, Hammer and Javelin events, to provide support for the throwers, as the team bonds and prepares for competition. I am writing this blog to help enlighten and inform you, of what being a team coach involves, how it differs from standard competition and coaching and to help prepare you, when hopefully, you too are selected to a similar post in your given sports.

Firstly, how did I arrive into this position? Much the same as the athletes, I was selected to the post, on the basis of having previously been a national coach and currently heading up the throwing events for British Athletics. Another factor was that over the past two years, I had worked in team management on several other international teams. The position is voluntary, in terms of pay, and the hours can be long, but fulfilling.

Undertaking this position within athletics, is different to other sports. Athletics is a team sport of individuals, covering the events from running, jumping, throwing and walking. The diversity of these events makes it a unique sport, which requires coaches to cover these events and to help ensure that the athletes are best prepared for their events in this, the Commonwealth Games, the second largest multi- event sport after the Olympic Games.

What may surprise other sport's coaches is that we do NOT coach these athletes when under our charge? What we do is try to ensure that the athletes follow the programmes set by their own coaches, act as eyes, and provide feedback when requested. We support the athletes to ensure that their passage to the Games, is as trouble free and productive as we can make it. To help us help the athletes, we request a copy of their final programmes from their coaches, so that we can ascertain they are working as required. We will coach if specifically asked, but this must be through their coach, with the coaches' approval. This may appear strange to any coach involved in team sports, but apart from the relays, our events do not need the possessional, positional play and foresight, of say a team ball sport.

So my first day today, has been with some of the throwers, training at SportsCity in Manchester, in the shadow of Man City's Etihad Stadium. Here I have coached, as one of the Hammer Throwers, Amir Williamson, is coached by me. For the other throwers I have filmed them, so that they can see instant feed-back of their day's training.

Over the next few days, I shall be keeping you informed of how things progress, both here in Manchester, then after the transfer to Glasgow. I hope to provide further insight into coaching support at a major event and, hopefully dismiss the oft held notion, that these posts are 'jolly's for the boys'.

Today, Saturday, saw continual storms and rainfall throughout the day. The track we are using at SportsCity was partially flooded as we trained there this morning. However, as this may be the weather that will face up to at some time in Glasgow over the next two weeks, then it may be considered apt conditions for a preparation camp?

The England athletics Team is based here in Manchester, the Australians are in Gateshead in the North East, whilst the Welsh have set up camp in Portugal! Which seems a little odd, as the conditions there bear no relationship to the expected weather of Glasgow. The England Team are beginning to gel well here, being supported by a very capable medical, admin and coaching team. The holding camp enables all members to get to know each other and vary the level of support each gives to the others as required. We are going to be away together for three weeks, in close proximity, so we all need to get on with one another, to ensure that each athlete performs to their full potential.

You may have heard the news that a stomach bug has struck the Games site in Glasgow? However, it seems that only 7 of 2,000 volunteer staff were affected, which is actually a lower percentage of stomach virus, than normally exists. So hardly the medical catastrophe the press were touting!

The logistics of running such a large team are heading to fruition, as transport is arranged to ship all the bags of clothing, equipment and people to Glasgow on Tuesday. The nightmare of moving vaulting poles and treatment tables Northward, is running smoothly, due to the unseen work of the admin staff, who ensure that such plans happen seamlessly and with no apparent effort.

Minds and efforts are now being focussed towards the upcoming challenges and goals. But first we must get there.

Each day at the holding camp sees more athletes and support staff arriving, ready for the two chartered flights to Glasgow on Tuesday 22nd. Monday saw the loading of some 400 personal bags, plus equipment, to be taken by road transport to Glasgow. By sending the bags by road, it frees up time at the airport, checking in, although all the bags will be security checked before entering the Games village. Four members of the team support staff, has travelled to Glasgow, to unload the bags and leave them in the athletes rooms at the village, a nice touch that again emphasises the amount of work that goes on behind the scenes.

Whilst passports are not required to fly to Glasgow, they are required to fulfil accreditation and security checks upon entering the village. This left a number of people, myself included, frantically getting their passports posted up to them!

For those who have been at the holding camp a while, and who have not experienced such a thing before, are now being faced by one of the dilemmas that rears its head, that of tedium and boredom. For those athletes not used to being full time, now find long periods of inactivity in between training sessions and find themselves bored and frustrated. This can lead to too many hours spent in the restaurant, open all day, and some comfort eating, which is perhaps not the best thing for a highly tuned athlete. So this is another thing for the coaches and support staff to try to keep an eye on. A games room, lounges and some trips out are offered to help stave off the tedium,

it also gives those here a taste of what life as a full time sportsperson can mean, and how the days and training must be structured, rather than just fit around work, school and home life, that most are used to.

Each athlete has been allocated two medical staff, from within the support team, to look after any injury, illness and preventative measures. This ensures that the athlete can form a working relationship, rather than just seeing someone ad-hoc, who needs to be reappraised of the situation each time. We have a team of two doctors, who are backed up by physio's and sports massage specialists, who work long days, keeping 130 athletes in top shape.

We have had a few issues with people swapping rooms, to be with their friends, which in itself is not too much a problem, but each athlete has completed a form notifying where they are for drug testing, So an innocent swap of a room, without notifying anti-doping, could lead to a missed test and possible exclusion from the Games, as well as further bans and the stigma this creates. An athlete on funding could also find their funding withdrawn. So a simple act, could have such far reaching implications.

Those at the holding camp are now looking forward to moving to a new environment, with the added stimulus of seeing most of their opponents for the first time. Wednesday will see the Opening Ceremony, which we are all, already kitted out for, then finally, three days after, the athletics starts, with new challenges for everyone on the team.

My next report will come from the village itself, with hopefully, some new insights for you.

Tuesday saw the athletics team follow their baggage up to Glasgow, flying on two chartered flights from Manchester Airport. A forty minute flight, was precluded by two hours at check in and security, with the promise of more security at the other end. We were welcomed at the airport by a Scottish dance troupe, and were led to our coaches by a lone piper playing Scotland the Brave! Upon departing from the coach at the Games village, we had to go through further security checks and onward to accreditation. Here each team member received an electronic photo pass, without which the holder can get nowhere, or access any of the services of the Games.

Whilst the England team is all housed in same district of the Village, there is no way of telling what sport someone participates in, as we are all similarly dressed. In terms of venues though, one cannot access other team events without a ticket, much the same as any member of the public. So whilst dressed the same, we are pretty much segregated from each other.

The village was built and designed for some 6,500 people, currently we have over 7,000 in place, so space is very tight. The logistics of housing, catering and transporting for such a huge number of people can scarcely be imagined. The staffing here is in excess of 2,000, plus a large Police presence, bus fleet and a city to work in with. After the Games the village will convert to housing, so a whole new estate has been created as a legacy of the Games. The dining hall never closes, with a vast range of menus available to select from. There is a Village internal bus service, which takes 15 minutes to complete a loop of the route, giving some aspect as to the size of the place.

Apart from a gym, there are no sports facilities on site, and most training/competition venues are within a twenty minute bus ride of the Village. Each section of the Village has a lounge for team members to utilise, these include refreshment, snacks, a laundry service, computers games and pool tables, along with quiet areas for more restful contemplation. All of this comes free, you pay for nothing and everything is plentiful, but neither access, nor consumption can be accessed without

accreditation, You are checked into and out of the village, with body searches and x-raying of bags, you cannot enter the dining hall, buses or gym without accreditation and being 'bar coded'. This may seem excessive, but one can imagine the attraction of such an event to a terrorist group, so the security is an acceptable, even welcome drawback to most.

The day after arrival saw the Opening Ceremony at Celtic Park, away from the main venue of Hampden Park. Here we waited, all in our Games ceremonial kit, for nearly ninety minutes, before being led into the stadium, which was a crescendo of noise and colour, both from the show and from the multitude of colourful dress from around the globe. Waiting outside to enter, you miss much of the show, but the wall of cheering that hits you as the country is introduced, is like a living thing buffeting against you. The ceremony saw even greater security in place, with it taking five accreditation checks to get back into the village and, in the words of the 1970's song 'Convoy' "Choppers filled the skies".

A change has happened to the team, after some lethargy at the holding camp, the spirit of competitiveness has perked everyone up. Now seeing and training alongside your competitors has upped everything a notch and most of the team are in a state of arousal, for the completion to begin on Sunday. Training must be controlled, to maintain, or even enhance the current levels, whilst avoiding overtraining, and worse, an injury. At this level athletes are comparable to F1 cars, they are highly tuned, but right on the edge of breaking down, so observation and careful handling are the order of the day.

The medical team is now coming into its own, with enough staff to cover all of the event's training venues and to treat, perceived or otherwise any minor tweaks and pulls. These staff work long hours and should be highly praised for their contribution to team success. Each day, each event group coach, ascertains when and where everyone is training, so that there is some medical coverage available at each location.

Drug testing is now plentiful, so again, the whereabouts of each athlete has to be monitored to comply with random testing requirements. Again, it's another thing that is accepted, despite extra work it entails.

Everything is now focussing on the upcoming competitions, where a whole new raft of complications arise. I shall discuss these in my next blog.

Life in the athlete's village continues, and the Games have started for athletics. In order to ensure that the athletes arrive at their events, we use a spreadsheet to work out their journey from the village to the call room. Below is an example of how this looks and works:-

	Bag	Bus	Arrive	Warm-up	Final Call	Infield	Start
Freddy Smith	09:35	09:55	10:40	11:12	12:12	12:30	12:50

In this example the athlete is competing at the last time on the graph, 12:50. From here the times are worked backward, all the way to first time indicated, 09:35, which is the time a member of staff checks their bag. So approximately 3 hours is allocated to get the athlete to their event, which may seem excessive, but we always err on the side of caution.

So, the bag check is to ensure the athlete has their competition kit, their accreditation, Passport (Doping Control), shoes, numbers etc. It is also checked for items that will not be allowed, like cameras, training aids etc.

The athlete(s) are escorted to the bus/transport and seen off, ready to be either accompanied, or met at the other end of the journey. Warm as the name suggests, is just that, plenty of time is allowed for the athlete to follow their own regime here.

Final Call is the most important time, miss this and the competition is over! This is the point where the competitor(s) are passed over to the meeting officials, for their checks to be carried out and the athletes are prepared to go for competition. Stadium is the time when the athletes are taken into the competition arena, to begin final preparations. And finally, Start.... The competition begins.

Beyond the times are the initials of the support team who will take the athletes through these stages. So, as can be seen, this is a lengthy, staff consuming process, but one that is vital to ensure that the athletes arrive, ready to compete.

This was put to the full test on the first day of athletic competition, when the roads all around the stadium were all blocked, and the journey from the village to the stadium, rather than being the cautiously predicted time of around 20 minutes, stretched to nearly an hour, bringing with it scores of panicking athletes and staff. The local organisers were informed of these hold ups, and as it was not the athletes fault, extra time was given for final call. It is not however ideal for the athletes mind to be delayed, so close, in some cases, to the biggest competition of their lives, hence the built in factor of extra travel time in our equations.

Previously I discussed how we got athletes to their event and the logistics involved. After the competition there is still a need to be available for the athlete, depending on how their event went for them. They may need support or encouragement, or guiding back to the village, or to the medical team. So again the coaches have a direct involvement, not often considered. The athlete may also be selected for an anti-doping test, which may involve the coach having to chaperone the athlete through that procedure. This has happened to me once this trip, which meant I didn't get back to my room until 01:20am, then having to rise at 06:00 to accompany some more athletes through the pre-competition procedures. Long days indeed.

Back in the village we are now encountering a usual problem of such championships, that of athletes who have finished competing and those yet still to. Athletes who have finished their events, sometimes a week ago, are celebrating, or commiserating, by going out and returning very late at night, or in the early hours of the morning, with scant regard for those still to do their events and wanting some peace. This leads to serious friction, with both colleagues and other, nearby teams. The walls of the buildings in the village are very thin and most buildings have three levels, so even normal activity can be most noisy. One man's celebration, can be another man's purgatory.

Weather wise, we have experienced just about everything, barring snow and ice. At the start of the Games, the weather was glorious sunshine and the splashing of sun oil, the sun oil has now been replaced by oil-skins and blustery winds are the order of the day. It is said that the Shetlands Isles can experience all four seasons in a day, well we've very nearly achieved that here!

With no TV in the rooms, and little time to relax in, the outside world has moved to the back of the mind. Indeed on occasions I have to concentrate to try to remember what day of the week that it is? Our normal calendar here is run to what day of the competition it is, which is a rather surreal concept that has to be experienced to be believed.

Back to the previously blogged subject of security, we now see many more armed Police around the main entrances/exits from the village and at the entrance to the track area at Hampden. The most rub down searches I have had in one day is three, these are carried out at the stadium and training areas by members of the armed forces, whilst at the village they are usually undertaken by security staff. These are all carried out under the gaze of armed Police, who manage to remain understated, but remain an obvious deterrent/comfort. The Village is patrolled constantly by Policed, either on foot patrol, or in electric vehicles. Basically we feel safe, but understand that could change in but a second.

The Scottish crowd, though partisan and loud in support of their sportsmen, have been very fair and cheered on all nations, without a yet heard boo for any English performer, so much credit to the crowd for that.

Life in the village is a much a reflection of the world being represented here. Countries tend to stick together, eat together and travel together. Athletes and support staff tend to look for their team's track suits and are drawn towards each other. This includes the Home Nations, so whilst this is the friendly Games, very little actual integration actually occurs. Just as in the real world, there are tensions between groups, and we have seen one case of assault, as well as a knife fight in the dining hall. These really were the exceptions to an otherwise incident free Games.

Following on from the last day of competition, was the build up to the closing ceremony. The weather though was atrocious, being very wet and squally. Twice I found myself totally soaked, neither time near the village, nor a change of clothes!

I won't be attending the closing ceremony, as I have to be up at 03:15 to get to the airport, to fly to Manchester, to collect my car. After this I would have a 240 mile trip home, so I needed some sleep to ensure that I can complete the journey safely. Unlike the opening ceremony, which was held close by at Celtic Park, the closing ceremony would be at Hampden Park, the site of the athletics events. This will entail some 5,000 persons being transferred by buses there from the village, then returning them at past midnight. I can imagine the immense queues and waiting around, in what may be a very wet and cool night.

So, I have been away for twenty days, it seems much longer and I've not had a day off in that time. From previous experience I know it will take some days to catch up on sleep, and return to 'normal' life.

I hope that I have given some insight into the inner workings of running an international team, along with the problems of logistics that constantly keep you on your toes. I hope also that it helps prepare you, if you ever are selected for such duties. I wish you all the very best of luck.

Malcolm Fenton.