

UK Sport World Class Coaches Conference report
Russ Barber – November 2004

There were many lectures, but these stood out to me in particular.

Michael Johnson

Started with a brief overview of his career, which was obviously very impressive. Michael only suffered 1 major championship loss in the best part of 10 years competing at a World level. He felt that what separates a good athlete from a truly great athlete is **consistency** over a long period of time.

He talked about which of his character traits that he felt made him consistent and also the practical things he did that added to this:-

Inner strength – he talked about the importance of making a life changing and honest commitment to training and that it is not the coach's responsibility to have to force an athlete to do anything, that the coach should mentor and advise but should be a "partner" in the relationship, not the driving force. He said that the driving force must come from within the athlete. He also said that athletes that didn't have the honesty and inner strength to face their own demons and weaknesses, would not be able to handle the immense pressure of an Olympic final.

Goal setting – he felt that an important part of his ability to remain consistent, was due to advanced goal setting. He would set a target for the forthcoming major meet (which always involved the Gold Medal!!) then break that down into monthly, weekly, and daily targets that he would totally commit to and work tirelessly towards. He thought that any athlete that did not have session by session targets, would not be focussed. He stressed the importance of not letting anything distract him from these targets and felt that his immense confidence came from overcoming hurdles and hitting targets on a daily basis.

Confidence – one of his biggest weapons was his confidence in his own god given ability, and that there was no occasion that "phased" him and no athlete that he considered a threat in his own mind, that he just totally focused on his own plan and his own race. He found this harder when he was younger, because it became fashionable for athletes to have big and aggressive pre-

race rituals, which involved unnerving stomping around and swaggering etc, but as he got older, he realised that these guys were concentrating more on showboating and trying unsettle the other competitors, rather than focussing on their own race. This gave him the edge and confidence. He named Linford Christie and Frankie Fredricks as two competitors he respected because of their mental strength.

Visualisation – he used this extensively in training and as part of his pre-race routine. He felt that helped him get “in the zone” and again, it built his confidence for the race because he felt that he’d already won it many times in his mind!! He said that as he got older, his visualisation and concentration got better and better to the point that moments before the Olympic final, he was at his most calm and peaceful ever.

Stability – he felt that athletes that moved from coach to coach were just hiding from themselves and their own weaknesses. He stayed with the same coach and felt that he wanted a stable programme with a coach that understood him. He also appreciated the fact that his coach did not attempt to “coach” the unorthodox technique out of him, and concentrated on working on things that he could improve upon.

Motivation – he enjoyed the pressure of the major meet and looked forward to racing the best in the world. He felt that too many of his competitors were actually scared of putting their necks (and reputations) on the line, and many were scared of failure because they were motivated by financial benefits or vanity, rather than wanting to be the best, for themselves. Therefore, they could not bring out the best performances when it mattered, because they had these other additional pressures, rather than what it meant to them. He had the Gold running shoes made, to increase the pressure on himself, because he enjoyed the motivation that gave him...his coach hated the idea!!!

In conclusion, Michael showed massive humility and recognised that he has been gifted with enormous natural talent, but thought that all athletes can benefit by getting in touch with their inner-selves, take responsibility and work on what really makes them tick, in order to address their own personal weaknesses and build upon their strengths.

Margo Jennings – Coach of Kelly Holmes

Margo was the most “interesting” character I think I have come across in a long time...imagine a hippy Mary Poppins!!! Right from start, she had the audience riveted and had the most fantastic manner. She is a school teacher from Eugene (Oregon) in America and part-time athletics coach.

She started with the statement – “When you come to a fork in road, take it!” She elaborated by saying that all successful people have the ability of keeping an open mind and by turning negatives into a positive, no matter how difficult and daunting. She also said that there isn’t often a right and wrong way, just that we must make the most of the choices we make.

She believes that you must pursue excellence in all areas of your life, so that if you fall short in hitting your primary goal, you have still achieved massive benefits from the journey and will not regret any of it. Therefore, she coaches the whole person, not just the athlete. To do this, she needs to know everything in great detail about her athletes, to the extent that when she was approached by Kelly, she spent 1 month living with her to really get to know her and to decide if she felt she could coach her, assessing if Kelly had the ability and inner strength to make the necessary changes in her life and training regime.

She actively removes all negative people and influences from her own, and her athlete’s lives, because she feels that negativity sucks the life out of people and stifles ambition. She encourages her athletes to surround themselves with positive reminders of successes they have had from the past (medals, photos, news reports etc).

Margo advises that at the start of each cycle, you sit down with your athlete and write down the goals for the season. Then, write down all of their strengths that will help them achieve their goals. Also, write down all of their weaknesses that could detract from achieving their target. She feels that these lists are a very visual reminder and a great focal point and motivator for her athletes. The weaknesses must be addressed and turned into positives.

With regards to training, Margo says that the very 1st thing to consider with older senior athletes, is recovery and rest, that training loads should be

dictated by how well the athlete recovers from training stress. She also says that Kelly's past injuries were due to over training, and that it is better and less destructive to an athletes career, to under train rather than to over train. She is a big believer in visualisation and teaches her athletes how to relax and to become effective at this. She develops "trigger" words, that the athletes must remember during periods of anxiety, to calm them down.

She concluded by saying that she studies all training research and prides herself in her knowledge, but also felt that there is nothing remarkable about her training methods, that it is her ability to read, advise and motivate her athletes that make her successful. Her final quote was: - "the greater the will, the more inexhaustible the energy and you will become more dangerous than danger and will move mountains!"

It is very easy to understand why Margo is such a successful coach. She had an unusually warm demeanour and inspired all who listened to her. She appeared to have an amazing grasp of life in general and in what brings out the best in people. Brilliant!

Glenn Kearney - Physiologist

Works as a physiologist with the All Black rugby team. Glenn has been instrumental in pioneering the E.S.O.P. technology. This is a device that is placed on the skin, and analyses hormone levels (testosterone, cortisol, oestrogen and lactate) within the blood, without breaking the skin. From this information, the coach can be provided with detailed feedback on how their players are at any given moment in time. From his research, he feels that the relationship between cortisol (stress hormone) and testosterone (motivation and power hormone) is very crucial in how the players respond to the various stresses of big games and championships. This information is used to change the nature of team talks, game plans, training and recovery levels etc.

He has also discovered that each athlete has a peak training time of the day, where their testosterone hits optimum levels, and that if the coach can tap into this, the training response would be significantly better. This obviously has practical implications in a squad environment but is definitely an interesting consideration.

He conducted an interesting study. He took a group of athletes, and time trialled them over a 100m sprint, monitoring their cortisol/testosterone relationship. He then separated them into two groups and conducted the same test for a further 3 days, secretly reducing group A's distance by 1m per test, and increasing group B's distance by 1m per test. Because group A were getting better each day, this was highly motivating for them and their testosterone levels rose whilst their cortisol levels fell dramatically. Of course, the opposite happened with group B whose cortisol levels increased massively.

This proved that positivity is a crucial factor with athletes, because they perform/train much better with high levels of testosterone and low levels of cortisol. Also, that high levels of cortisol brought on by stress and unhappiness, uses up vital stores of brain glycogen, which will obviously have implications on how the athlete copes emotionally with pressure and skills.

As coaches, this has large implications about the way we treat our swimmers and the importance of maintaining a challenging but positive training environment, in order to minimise the destructive effect of cortisol and to utilise the great effects of testosterone.

Dr David Hughes – Sports supplement consultant

Dr Hughes went through the pro's and con's of many essential vitamins and minerals but gave some final general advice based on his research, that he felt would help our athletes.

- For athletes in explosive events (50's and 100's), he advocates creatine, caffeine, anti-toxicants (vit A,C and E), sodium bi-carbonate and protein.
- For athletes in endurance events (200m and up), he advocates caffeine, anti-toxicant (vit A,C and E), protein and sodium bi-carbonate.

He also advocates a glycerol supplement for athletes training in extreme heat, and advises glutamine, zinc and an increased dose of vit c for travelling athletes.

Jay T Kearney – Nutrition specialist (trainright.com)

Jay started with the statement:- “An athlete does not get faster through training; they get faster through their response to training!”

He talked at length about hydration and made the general conclusion that an athlete (depending on training level) needs between 3-5 litres of fluid per day. That it is essential for athletes to replace 150% of weight lost during training with fluids. During training, he feels that it is essential for athletes to have a half water/half carb drink (30-60g per hour) to help maintain glycogen levels. He also discussed the importance of athletes having 500ml of fluids (with 50g of carbs) 2 hours before training, 250ml of fluids immediately before training, and a minimum of 250ml per hour (with 50g of carbs) during training.

He discussed the 30 minute window after training and advised that the muscles are at their most receptive to nutrients during this time. Therefore, athletes must seek high carb/protein low fat snacks immediately after training (1-1.2g per Kg). He added that athletes must avoid fatty foods in the 2 hours immediately after training.

He concluded that much of this advice is very dependant on the nature of training and the size/age of the athlete. He advised that these things need to be studied in depth by the coach/athlete and that there is no definite level that suits everybody.

In summary, he quoted:- “Carbohydrate is the key to training...if you do not have the correct level of carbohydrate in your diet, you may handle training, but not adapt or move on from it!”

My summary

The 3 day conference was excellent and I learned a lot from the speakers. The detail and level that was covered was much higher than I have come across before, and was very welcome. If anybody has any questions, drop me an e mail.

Russ Barber – City of Sheffield Swim Squad