

The Oxford Experience – a tale for the true professionalisation of the sport

Brian McGuinness, Executive Director, British Swimming Coaches Association (BSCA)

Overview

Professional coaches operating on a full time basis in the UK became normalised in the 1970's after Hamilton Bland returned from a Churchill Memorial funded research trip to Australia & the US. Both countries were the clear world leaders of pool swimming in western society at that time.

Amongst his recommendations in the report which followed, was that for swimming in Britain to compete with such nations, there had to be an increase in the number & quality of pools, especially of the 50m variety, and, relevant to this paper, there had to be an increase in the number of professional swimming coaches. The idea of course was that, having an army of suitably trained professionals, like in the US & Australia, who could dedicate their working time to such endeavours, would see the nation's fortunes in the pool, improve markedly at World level and in particular at Olympic Games.

As a result, the numbers within what became an established profession, has increased with several thousand paid performance driven coaches operating within private clubs, schools, universities, local authorities and of course, NGB's & Federations, on a range of differing contracts.

Such was the prevalence and in the light of issues arising, the BSCA added to the services provided by becoming a partner to a National Trade Union in 1998. The support offered since then, by various means, has been largely as a result of experiences that such professionals have had whilst being managed by amateurs within swimming club committees.

It would be remiss to tar every volunteer, who gives of their time & energy, to support their local Club, with the behaviours as described in this paper (the BSCA has many, many productive and friendly relationships with the sports' volunteers), but it is fair to say that the vast majority of problems have arisen where usually a wholly unqualified parent rapidly rises the ranks within a Club because their child is perceived as 'quite good', ultimately becoming the line manager of a highly experienced, qualified coach, who is themselves, strongly opinionated.

If there is no mutual respect on both sides, then this becomes a problematic relationship and the BSCA have become involved in many a legal argument as a result.

In the case of Oxford, after over 8 years of continued success, a new Chair successfully developed a combustible environment where not one, but all five of the professional coaches walked on the same day, at the same time, such was the bullying, harassment and complete lack of respect shown to them. The fact that ALL FIVE went at the same time is an illustration of the strength of feeling.

This is the tale of an extraordinary chain of events.

Head Coach – Amanda Booth

Amanda Booth holds a library full of qualifications including the top swim coaches qualification possible at the time in the UK (ASA Coach), as well as recognised qualifications in Power Lifting, Physiotherapy (which she no longer practices) and sports massage, as well as a post Graduate Diploma in Sports Coaching.

She became Head Coach at the City of Oxford SC (COSC) in December 2010 and since that time COSC have enjoyed a considerable number of achievement, unsurpassed in their history:

- Won the overall Trophy at ONB Counties for 8 consecutive years
- National Arena Swimming League Finals 2015,2016,2017,2018,2019,2020

- Taking the Club from 2 National swimmers in 2010 to 35 National swimmers in 2019
- 6 Swimmers competed internationally for English, Scottish, Welsh & British Teams

International Medallists:

David Murphy Representing GB European Junior Bronze 100 Breaststroke & Bronze 4 x 100 Mixed Medley Team

Nick Skelton Representing GB at European Youth Olympic Festival Gold in 4 x 100 FS Team, Silver 4 x 100 Medley Team

Swim England Selection:

Talent Programmes 2014-2020

2015 & 2016 England Talent Symposiums

2016-2017 Swim England Coach 2024 Programme

2017 Head Coach Swim England Commonwealth Youth Games Bahama's

2018 Swim England Coach Commonwealth Games Australia (WCIP)

2018 Women's Coaching Intern Programme (WCIP)

2018-2021 Swim England Coach Adviser

British Team Selection:

2012 Group Coach for a 2 week Camp with the British Para team in Dubai

2016 British Swimming Grand Prix Meet in Austin, Texas USA

2016 British Swimming Coach European Juniors Budapest

2017 British Swimming Coach Flagstaff Texas USA Altitude Camp

Alongside this she led a team of highly qualified coaches who themselves had competed internationally or had respected academic qualifications and experience in their sporting field.

The changing times

From 2010 to 2019 the Committee worked diligently and effectively with the coaching team, respecting one another's roles and ensuring the best was always being done for the benefit of the swimming membership. During the latter part of 2019 however, things began to change.

A strongly supportive Chair resigned citing challenges and changes in support for the coaching team based upon personal preference rather than objective performance delivery KPI's.

It was that change that ultimately, led us to this point.

Whilst lockdown meant that much was quiet in 2020, matters came to the fore in the winter months. With no competitions on the horizon due to restrictions, Swim England (SE) developed an online ranking event which they termed "Level X".

Level X is/was a relaxed, informal opportunity set up by Swim England to give its swimming members some focus and direction to their training. It was never intended to be used as a formal competition system. Correspondence from SE staff has confirmed this.

However, volunteer officers at the City of Oxford SC decided that by running this event in such an informal way, the Head Coach had embarrassed the Club and took her through a disciplinary process, finding her guilty of such and issuing a first written warning. Let us be clear – "disciplined for running an internal Level X event which SE themselves was to be a relaxed & positive experience!"

The Head Coach did not attend the Hearing due to the short notice immediately before Xmas, but more importantly, the Club had not followed the correct procedures as required by employment law. These are technical but there for good reasons to ensure fairness & impartiality throughout. Two words missing regularly in the months to come.

The hearing went ahead in Amanda Booth's absence with the expected occurring.

It was clear that this was a precursor given that some of the evidence considered was used without the knowledge or permission of the person who had written it, let alone any context. Swim England advice as to the standing of the programme, was ignored. Due process was ignored.

At the same time, the five members of professional staff were informed not to continue with coaches meetings & not to communicate with the Head Coach due to confidential matters associated with the disciplinary process. So the TEAM of coaches were not being allowed to act as a team in practical terms but this was the start of divide and rule.

The Head Coach appealed the disciplinary hearing outcome and the Appeal was heard by two committee members who had not been involved at earlier stages. Their role was to listen to the appeal & make a decision independently without interference from other officers of the Club. The Club's HR Officer was notetaker, a role she held in the original hearing, so should not have been there! Even if there was a case for her to attend (there wasn't) she should have been independent, not advising those hearing the appeal and certainly not seeking to influence any decision – she was a note taker. The Head Coach attended this hearing, pled her case and was informed '9 days later' that the original decision was 'upheld'.

Unfortunately, we now know (and have evidence to support this), that the HR Officer and the Chair intervened personally, interfering with the outcome & harassing the Appeals panel. The Appeals officers were invited to an Executive Committee Meeting with the HR officer to discuss the outcome. This included redrafting the outcome letter which had actually stated that the outcome was overturned to say that the original decision was upheld and also signed it off as being signed by the two appeal members potentially fraudulently, as at least one, had no knowledge that this had been done and did not agree with this decision.

This is now the subject of a Swim England complaint and is therefore confidential at this time. One of the Appeals Panel was suspended from COSC as a result, without any process and has suffered ill health since, all attributed to the events.

As stated, this complaint is with the SE Office of Judicial Administration, has been accepted and is one of several complaints lodged by adult members in claims of abuse of power and suspension without due process or good reason. It seems anyone who raised a concern were then suspended – this becomes a theme.

Another example of the lengths these individuals would go to, to get there way was in a bizarre covert meeting at Delaware Services Chippenham 28th January 2021.

This is the version told by Amanda Booth, the Head Coach of COSC at the time:

"I was contacted by the Club secretary at the end of January on a number I did not recognise, she informed me that this was her works phone. She asked me if I would meet her for a confidential personal meeting & that she would travel from Oxford to meet me as she knew that I was staying in Wiltshire with my parents. As I was in with my parents for the lockdown I initially stated I was unable to meet her as it would break the COVID restrictions. She contacted me again on her works phone & I agreed to meet her outside at Delaware Services Chippenham on the evening of January 28th. Naively I thought this was a confidential personal matter having known the secretary for many years. On arrival she made it clear that this was a confidential meeting & that it was not personal matter but she was acting for COSC. She then gave me 3 choices which included me resigning from the Club, requesting voluntary redundancy with a pay off to silence me so that I didn't divulge what had been going on. The third was a threat if I didn't resign or take redundancy the Club would take me through further disciplinaries and get rid of me on the grounds of gross misconduct. I was given 1 week for me to contact the committee."

Amanda did not respond to any of these three demands; make of them what you will!

Given their inability to talk, meet or discuss for fear of disciplinary action against them, the coaching team felt increasingly isolated. This led to mental ill health to the point of suicidal thoughts in one case.

The micromanagement by these unqualified volunteers was unbelievable with these experienced international coaches being talked down to and told how to do their job in a bullying & demeaning manner. Purely technical matters pertaining to squad structures, criteria, training times, methods of practice, would be received with responses required in short time if not immediately. Undermining and then ignoring of their advice, putting in their own processes against coach advice, day after day after day. Coaches spoke to me about them becoming fearful of the content of the emails or messages they would inevitably wake up to! How just seeing the mail would make them feel ill.

The emails on a variety of topics, all widely different, were incessant and requests for personal information that was irrelevant to their role as coaches in the Club, was requested by HR – this was not given.

It was ‘suddenly’ alluded that Exit interviews had been held with departing members. It was only at resultant investigation meetings that coaches were informed of the new process. They’d never been made aware of any policy document or format, let alone how this would be managed and who would lead on such feedback.

Later it became apparent that it was the Chair who conducted these interviews which, given the circumstances, is once again disturbing.

This was in February 2021, but dealt with allegations that occurred well prior to the year of Lockdown! Issues pertaining to weighing, where weighed, how weighing info was stored & used, who could see the weight, who could hear who weighed what, question marks on land training, methods of communication etc etc, all matters raised as queries by people not only inexperienced in the sport but in performance sport. Whilst these were practices that had been followed to ethical & professional standards for many years by the Club’s professional S&C staff, they were suddenly an issue and the finger of blame was being pointed at the Head Coach, Amanda Booth. It transpired that these were dressed up as Welfare Issues, yet no such concerns have ever been raised with or addressed by, the Club Welfare Officer.

In over 20 years of working in this area for the BSCA, it is still surprising how many times, a coach shouting to be heard in a swimming pool environment, a coach encouraging someone to work hard, a coach encouraging someone to train regularly and focus to improve themselves, becomes an issue of a welfare nature – or is it just a coach doing their job.

There were no concerns raised by the coaches, even when each were interviewed on these matters raised by this mysterious means.

Upon becoming aware I asked the Coaches to breach with the non-communication directive and we met secretly on zoom, where we went through their feelings, willingness to work together and the options available to them. The relief was palpable. Resigning individually was already on the table for a couple. This would not help those left behind or the swimmers, so they decided to stick together and after much discussion and planning on Friday 5th March the coaches sent via the BSCA a joint letter informing the Committee of their feeling of being harassed, that they (the Committee) had made the relationship with the coaches unworkable (not untenable) and therefore they should consider their positions.

At the same time they released a joint letter informing the membership of this by blind copy so there was no GDPR breach.

This was done in this left field way because of the way previously, the Exit interviews had been handled, the disciplinary process had been botched and also because the Head Coach had lodged a grievance against the Chair, which was ignored in breach of the Club’s own procedures and ACAS guidelines. This included formally lodging a legally binding Subject Access Request (SAR) which was

deflected and effectively ignored. The coaches had no faith that management would deal with their concerns as they should.

This viewpoint was upheld when the Committee, rather than respond to the health & safety concerns raised, claimed that there was no merit in their concerns (without investigation) but instead the coaches had breached GDPR.

It was also stated that they were not to discuss the letter content with the members in planned zoom session that had been organised with swimmers for that same Friday evening. The coaches being a bit more professional than that had no intention of doing so but were going to make sure the swimmers did not suffer and were ready to take said sessions.

Forty minutes or so before these sessions were due to commence, the Committee cancelled them. They did not inform the swimmers but did notify certain individuals, the inference was that the coaches had withdrawn their labour – they had not! Hence the BSCA tweets.

On Saturday 6th March, each coach was notified individually that they had been suspended for breach of GDPR regulations. They were also invited to a zoom meeting to take place on Sunday morning, again individually, without representation, to notify them formally of this decision. In employment law, you must follow a procedure; meeting to inform them, at said meeting they have a right to representation or accompaniment and then given letter at that point, of suspension – also discussing next steps.

None of that happened – effectively breach of contract.

The Committee have still not acknowledged the letter of the 5th or responded to its serious harassment claims, they have been ignored. The emails intensified and calls were incessant to try to split the staff, including the use of alternative, what we have called burner phones, to get a coach to speak. The BSCA has evidence of covert actions by a Committee member, who used her position as a friend and the Chair to get to what they perceived as vulnerable staff members and split the group – this evidence includes lies being told and as a result the Coaches, assisted by the BSCA, disclosing normally private information into the public domain to deal with such rumours, innuendo and inference.

(<https://www.gbswimcoaches.co.uk/resources/cosc-coaches-response-to-statements-made-about-them-to-membership>)

This included comments about 'serious' welfare issues at play, with no evidence or any record of such having been lodged, a sign of their desperation perhaps.

The staff held firm and demanded that their concerns be dealt with as a collective grievance.

Parents became aware leading to an SGM being called and ran on 1st April 2021. This was to be chaired by an independent Governing Body official, but on the night the Club Chair ran the meeting, as it was on Zoom, she chose who was to speak and muted those who said anything she deemed against her or the Committee's narrative. This included threatening a minor under 18 years old who asked if the swimmers voice was being heard. He was told she found him intimidating. It should also be noted that the coaches, as Club members, were informed that they were banned from attending this SGM thus silencing them further, despite the Chair & other Committee members haranguing them in this meeting when they had no right of reply.

This SGM was called to determine whether the Committee were fit for office and to vote upon their right to remain, as specified under Swim England laws and the Club's constitution. The Chair decided that as the COSC was Limited Company, that the SGM was deemed unconstitutional under Company Law and that there would not be a vote. This was not challenged by the NGB Regional Officers in attendance. Had this not been in Covid times, one can only presume what uproar would have ensued if all parties had been in the same room. It was a whitewash.

However such behaviour, as had previously only been seen and experienced by the coaches was now in the public domain. The bullying, harassment and dictatorial behaviour, was there for all to see. The bubble was burst. Members have been leaving in droves, enquiring as to their potential of joining other clubs to get away from such people and in expectancy of the Coaches resigning.

After a weekend of contemplation and discussion with their BSCA advisor, as they have done over the previous month, they stuck together and sent their resignations in together just before 12 noon on Monday 5th April 2021.

It is an extreme case but not an unusual one. Swim England and British Swimming have rightly encouraged coach led programmes as part of their strategies, but Clubs are largely autonomous bodies who can choose their own directions. Hence we have this sort of behaviour where the professional staff are abused and the swimming membership are affected.

Can we also stress, that there continues to be allegations of there being serious welfare concerns being banded about by Club Officers without detail or substantiation. That is simply because there are none, none whatsoever!

This despite the best efforts of Twitter trolls associated with Club officials, one in particular.

COSC can only operate as it is an affiliated member of Swim England through its South East Region. Perhaps given the above, now is the time to tighten up the regulations so that such behaviours cannot continue and clear standards are required of Club officials, when such situations arise.

Professional swim coaches are held to clear ethical standards of operation, yet voluntary management of them are not held to the same level of account, leading to this embarrassment for the sport. Hopefully, by exposing this behaviour, that can now change, with either clear standards set & upheld by the body to which such Clubs are affiliated or coaches taking greater control of their own destiny and running clubs & programmes themselves.

We, as the BSCA, will not dictate to any coach, where they should coach or who they should work for. We would ask any potential applicant to consider these experiences whilst this Club is under its current management.

What this matter does prove however is that having great coaches operating in great facilities is of no use if amateur volunteers negatively interfere in the great job they can do.

Brian McGuinness
Executive Director, BSCA Ltd.