

Delivery of sport science support in Great Britain Handball

As the second most popular sport in Europe starts to gain momentum in the United Kingdom, Claire-Marie Roberts and Ross Hall describe the preparations of the Great Britain Handball teams for their inaugural appearances at the Olympic Games this summer.

An Olympic sport since 1936 in its outdoor form, and in its current form since 1972, handball has traditionally been dominated by mainland European nations where it's a prosperous professional sport. It's a fast-paced, 7-a-side team game played on a 40 x 20 metre indoor court.

Handball is currently one of the UK's fastest growing sports, although limited sporting structures in previous years has meant that the UK suffered from a slow start in generating interest amongst athletes and spectators alike.

Despite such constraints and prior to London being awarded the 2012 Olympic Games, the National Governing Body, the British Handball Association (BHA), were already planning the development of a high performance strategy. Post the 2012 announcement, the BHA began to assemble two teams capable of competing on the international stage. Recruitment for national squads involved searching an existing talent pool for the best British athletes playing handball both in the UK and overseas. By late 2006 three women and seven men had been recruited and sent to handball academies in Denmark (Oure & Aarhus) to train. However, due to the limited number of recruited British handball athletes, UK Sport talent identification (TID) initiatives (e.g. "Sporting Giants" and "Pitch to Podium") were employed to broaden the search. By spring of 2008, the BHA had recruited 30 athletes from various backgrounds. The next challenge ultimately fell to the BHA's Performance Director, Lorraine Brown, to create a world class high performance programme. The first step was to establish a full-time national training centre and base for the British athletes at the Aarhus academy.

Whilst the initial enthusiasm and support for this fledgling sport was encouraging, it hasn't been all plain sailing.

The high performance plans and structure implemented to support both teams was compromised when the national training centre closed in 2009 following a UK Sport announcement that there was a £50m shortfall in funding. Although financial hardship beckoned, the BHA took the decision to continue to invest in both the men's and the women's squads. However, the deep cuts in the high performance programmes forced the athletes to decentralise and seek professional contracts, scattering them across Europe.

This decision was vindicated when the British Olympic Association announced that it was satisfied with Handball's ability to offer 'credible performance' in London and to create a legacy for the sport post 2012; recognition that showcasing the sport at the Olympics could be the springboard needed to ignite popularity in this country.

With the Olympics in sight, and with just over a year to go, the BHA consulted with both squads regarding the possibility of centralising on home shores for the final stages of preparation.

For the first time since establishing national teams, both squads opted to pursue different paths.

Great Britain Women's Handball Project Homecoming was the title of the new UK high-performance centre established at Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, in partnership with Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL). This partnership secured the use of GLL owned facilities and a limited amount of on-site accommodation to house the women's



Above: Great Britain Women's Handball in action Courtesy: The British Handball Association (BHA)

squad, who had opted for a centralised training programme for the final 16 months approaching London 2012. Centralising training involved the majority of the squad putting their professional handball contracts on hold, upping sticks and moving to London for their final preparations. If the disruption in the personal lives of these athletes wasn't enough to contend with, the toughest challenge yet was ahead of them. The athletes were all expected to be self-sufficient, with many holding down part-time jobs to fit in with their twice daily, six days a week, training regime. To add to the organization's financial constraints, the global economic situation has meant that sponsorship is not as readily available as perhaps it once was. Therefore, the next challenge for British Handball was how to deliver a credible centralised high performance programme with little to no external funding.

British Handball Timeline

1939	Handball played for the first time in the Olympics	1977	British Handball Association founded in Liverpool	1979	Great Britain play first international match v Italy	1972	GB compete in Olympic Qualification in Spain	2005	London announced as host city for 2012 Olympics	2006	BHA in talks with UK Sport re development of handball in UK	2006	BHA searches handball talent pool for British athletes	2007	National training centre established Aarhus Denmark
									3 women and 7 men recruited and sent to handball academy in Denmark					athletes called to 12 wk intensive training programme in Sheffield	

The prioritization of the appointment of key roles began with the Head Coach (part-time), Assistant Coach and Lead Physiotherapist. These provided a stable foundation for creating a team of support staff that met the squad's needs. Part-time appointments were made for both squads to supplement the core coaching teams, including the Team Managers, Strength and Conditioning Coaches/Sports Nutritionist, Chief Medical Officer, Sport Psychology Consultants, Osteopath and a Sports Massage. Further high performance support is provided by UK Sport in the form of a dedicated Performance Lifestyle Advisor and the BOA who lend a hand with ad hoc Physiology support. In recognition of the sacrifices made by the athletes, many of the support staff offer their services on a voluntary basis, juggling their time between GB Handball and their 'day jobs'. In fact, of the 20+ staff utilised by both squads more than half are volunteers.

One of the biggest challenges in the provision of sport science support to the centralised programme is the sheer diversity of individual athletes. There is a 15 year age gap between the oldest and youngest players; two full-time mothers; athletes from different sporting backgrounds (handball, hockey, rugby, basketball, football) and levels of representation. With an average age of 22 and around 45 international caps per athlete, going head to head with athletes with more than twice the experience has the makings of a tough contest. This somewhat unorthodox squad composition has reinforced the importance of tailoring any sport science interventions to the individual in order to deliver measurable performance outcomes.

Despite limited means and the reliance on goodwill for the provision of support to the high performance programme, centralising the team has allowed for a relative ease of sport science delivery. The ability to intervene in a timely fashion has opened up opportunities to engage in proactive interdisciplinary support. Furthermore, the ability to closely monitor the progress of each athlete in every discipline provides valuable feedback on the effectiveness of the work undertaken. On a performance level, it is clear that centralising the team has helped to increase communication and cohesiveness of the squad which in turn, has accelerated the ability of the women to compete at international level.

Great Britain Men's Handball

Following the 2009 funding cuts, some players remained in Aarhus, but had to contend with often difficult and cramped living conditions. At one point, six players shared a two bedroom flat. A combination of personal, educational and financial reasons led the men to approach their Olympic preparations in direct contrast to the women's squad. They opted to decentralise and focus on playing handball at the highest level attainable across Europe.

Decentralisation has meant limited contact with sport science support and BHA staff due to restrictions on player releases from their respective clubs. Although more than most other national sides, only 126 days of direct contact was able to be scheduled to prepare one of our newest teams for their first Olympic Games.

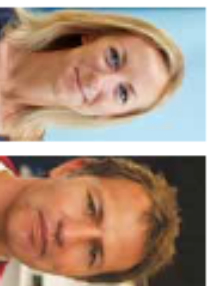
To operate effectively within these limitations, staff has devised alternative ways of delivering sport science support. For example, the use of internet voice calling software (e.g. Skype) and secure 'closed group' pages on Facebook has broken down the barriers

of long-distance 'decentralised' communication. This allows players and staff to stay in touch on a weekly basis with players posting weekly reports, providing updates on injuries, training completed and games played. Additionally, each staff member receives a weekly consolidated team report allowing them to approach each player individually, to set and review goals, provide advice or to highlight best practice.

During training camps, schedules are full, with two 2-hour training sessions per day; rest periods; technical and tactical meetings; fitness testing and measurement; psychological needs analysis with follow-up educational sessions and one-to-one: physiotherapy/massage; sports medicine pre-hab screening media training; BOA updates; etc. It could be argued that one of the major flaws with decentralised programmes is the perception that when together every spare minute must be used. Therefore, remote monitoring of athletes' well-being and training becomes essential for the team and its respective performance outputs.

Decentralisation has also generated other issues from both organisational and team perspectives. Since the Handball Arena has opened it has housed a number of matches, including a test event. Being centralised has given the women's squad flexibility to access the competition venue and to become accustomed to its surroundings, arguably a critical component of home advantage. Although the facility is available for use, decentralisation presents difficulties in coordinating training and match days within it. When the team is together, much of the time is spent abroad gaining international match experience, therefore the Olympic facility has been used just a handful of times for training. International experience is critical for this young squad who hold, on average, 80 caps less than other Olympic teams. The end, however, is within sight as the men looked forward to reforming in Serbia in May, before travelling back to the UK and undergoing the final selection phase of the preparation period. They will remain together until after the Games.

Both squads have shared similar challenges and hardships during the past 6 years and have approached Olympic preparation in contrasting ways. The men's team have had their first international win (against Bulgaria in 2010) and improved performances against world class opposition in recent months. The women's team have shown commendable improvements, recording victories over high-ranked countries, and a narrow defeat to reigning world champions Russia. Both teams are on track to raise the profile of handball and create a viable sporting legacy. However, ultimately being competitive at our first Olympic Games remains a priority, as all staff and athletes continue to strive to be the best prepared, under what have been consistently challenging circumstances. ■



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2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
<p>Nov 2008 Women's first official competition</p> <p>UK Sport announce funding cut to Handball</p>	<p>Sept 2009 Women win first international competition v Finland</p> <p>British Handball teams decentralise and scatter around Europe</p>	<p>Jan 2010 Men's first official competition</p> <p>June 2010 Men's first win v Bulgaria</p>	<p>Nov 2010 Women's first win v top 16 nation (Slovenia)</p> <p>Women's team decide to centralise training in London</p>	<p>March 2012 Men's first top class competitive game v South Africa</p>