

# The 31<sup>st</sup> European Athletics Coaches Association Conference

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Glasgow, Scotland

## Introduction

**W**hat is believed to be the largest formal gathering of athletics coaches in Europe ever assembled at the Marriot Hotel in Glasgow from 31 October to 2 November 2008 for the 31st European Athletics Coaches Association (EACA) Conference.

In his official welcome, Stewart Maxwell, Scottish Minister for Communities and Sport, underlined the global nature of the event by noting that, “over 300 delegates had descended on Glasgow from every continent of the world.” He also announced that agreements had been reached for Glasgow to host the EACA conference for the coming four years, through to 2012.

EACA President Frank Dick OBE, used his opening address to outline the conference theme, ‘Learning Faster,’ and then highlighted lessons for Europe from the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing in terms of ‘beyond winning’, ‘the reality of the journey’ and ‘the winning difference’ – a timely note given the margin of victory for Great Britain’s Lewis Hamilton in claiming the FIA Formula 1 world championship title just 24 hours later.

The conference was staged by scottish-athletics with support from UK Athletics, Sport Scotland, and the George Dallas Memorial Trust. European Athletics provided a grant to the organisers and scholarships

covering the congress fees and accommodation costs for one participant from each European Athletics Member Federation.

## Keynote Presentations

### *Clyde Hart (USA)*

Hart, coach to the legend Michael Johnson, Olympic gold medallists Jeremy Wariner and Darold Williamson, and numerous other top 400m runners in his 45-year career, explained how his coaching philosophy had been shaped by his experiences visiting Europe. He said: “the coach is always striving to be better through using what works; taking on board the ideas of others and shaping them to develop these on the track - which is our lab, while using the athlete as the ‘number one learning tool’.” He summarised with the points “use what works”, “shape and develop the athlete in time” and “if it isn’t broken then don’t fix it!”

Discussing the sources of coaching knowledge, Hart said, “you don’t get to be a good coach without being a good thief” and “it is important to learn or ‘borrow’ ideas from others.” He added “it’s really important to stay up to date; though I would stress that 75% of what I do now I did 30 years ago. We only have a bigger vocabulary these days! My own theory is that coaches should try to improve their training procedures by at least 1% each year”



*The Endurance group workshop*

Hart finished his presentation with a challenge to all the delegates: “there’s no such thing as peaking – if you can’t see the top (of the athlete’s performance potential), how do you know where the peak is?”

#### *Yannick Tregaro (SWE)*

Tregaro, coach to Swedish jumps stars Christian Olson, Kajsa Bergqvist and Emma Green, explained the importance of the carefully structured Swedish national squad approach for developing inspired and motivated athletes for international success. He said the aim of the system, which was started in 1996, is to create the best environment and culture possible among athletes and coaches. Approximately 20-25 coaches with a blend of ages and experiences have been brought together for six to 10 weekends each year to get to know each other and to learn from each other; removing individual ‘pres-

tige’ and focusing on development of ‘self’ in order to develop better athletes.

Tregaro highlighted the importance of the athlete gaining a true ‘feel’ for their event before they start to train hard for it. “With every new athlete I start to coach,” he continued, “it is the start of a long journey to find out how best to coach that athlete. Only then can they start to explore their own potential and work toward 100% of their individual ability. The athlete needs to be able to ‘Train as much as possible, with as high a quality as possible without getting injured’...but they probably will get injured!”

Tregaro also introduced his ‘frame’ for balancing all the factors in his life – professional and personal. “It is important to have a full frame but it is also important not to overload the frame – if something is added, then something else needs to be removed.

Only when everything is in balance it is possible to give 100% in athletics and everything else.”

### *Bingshu Zhong (CHN)*

Fresh from the huge success of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Bingshu Zhong, the director of the IAAF Regional Development Centre in Peking who has played a major role in the development of the coach education framework in China, reviewed the 18 years of decisions, actions and resultant structures that today underpin Chinese coaching. His highly evocative and educative presentation identified the crucial and bold steps to success in professionalising the coaching role, including key themes of ‘training before employment, training before promotion and training before attending competition’

A fundamental vehicle for an effective programme delivery was identified as the establishment of teaching centres and networks for high-level coach training. A key process goal is gaining qualification and each coach’s knowledge and ability are tested orally, in writing and through presentations. The aim is to provide a strong grounding in 1) general knowledge: e.g. basic sport sciences, the how and why, 2) specific knowledge: aimed at improving the coaches ability to bring theory into practice and 3), other knowledge: e.g. management, sport trends, anti-doping, etc, ensuring an ongoing ‘awareness’ approach by the coach.

In summary he said that coach education has been ‘institutionalised’ with clear goals and standards at all levels; quality rules are now applied supporting higher levels of overall coach planning and scheduling of training.

### *Ken Porter (CAN)*

Porter is a former Head Coach at Oxford University and now a Director of the Ottawa Lions Track and Field Club. He presented a practical example of how learning from what you are doing and making appropriate

changes has a huge impact on his club’s coaching success.

From 1988 to 2008 sweeping changes in the club athletics structure in the Ottawa region led to the creation of a single club with a five-fold increase in membership, a three-fold increase in active coaches, a 10-fold increase in financial turnover, a reduction from five to one ‘Boards’ and the creation of three full-time coaching positions. The result of the work in the period has been that the ‘Lions’ have become the foremost track and field club in Canada.

Porter said that the club is totally self-financed. Membership is set at a realistic CAN\$ 900 per annum, with a higher fee for young children who require more intensive development and education than the more mature athletes.

He said that the key interventions over the period have been based on a ‘4-C’s’ philosophy of:

- collegiality – anything is possible if no-one cares who gets credit;
- community – all those who could be, should be and might be involved in the club;
- coaching – coaches are valued and only coach (in pairs);
- competition – any sport worth doing is still worth doing, even if badly!

“Clubs need to look at themselves and firstly identify their role within the sport and secondly with their members.”

### **Workshops**

Event group workshops were given by the following experts:

- Sprints & Hurdles - John Isaacs (GBR) and Loren Seagrave (USA)
- Endurance – David Sunderland (GBR) and Peter Thompson (GBR)
- Jumps – Frank Attoh (GBR)
- Throws – Robert Weir (GBR)
- Combined Events – Toni Minchiello (GBR)



*The conference speakers and workshop leaders*

### **Additional points**

A civic reception for all the conference participants was hosted by Bailie Gibson in the Glasgow City Chambers on the evening of 1 November.

In a second presentation, EACA President Dick introduced the concept of a 'Coaches Charter' of rights and responsibilities and said that he was working with the IAAF and European Athletics to make it integral to world athletics.

Earlier, Dick announced that the EACA had a new website and that its membership had increased to 3,747. In an effort to build that number even higher, it will charge no membership fee in 2009 and will actively promote the creation of national coaches associations in all European countries and the inclusion of their members in the EACA through corporate memberships. Dick also explained the EACA Council's decision to fix the venue of the con-

ference in Glasgow until 2012 and possibly 2014, during which time it would be developed into what he called the EACA Festival of Coaching.

The EACA recognised the lifetime coaching achievements of the featured speaker Clyde Hart by making him an Honorary Member of the EACA and then gave a special award to Ewen Cameron, scottishathletics Education and Development Manager, for his contribution to the overall success of the conference.

The 2009 EACA conference will be staged in Glasgow from 30 October to 1 November. For further information see the EACA website [europeanaca.eu](http://europeanaca.eu).

Reported by Nigel Hetherington

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