

Frank Dick



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Frank Dick has a passion for coaching. He has spent much of his working life coaching athletes, performers in other sports, as well as to success at the very highest levels. He has also dedicated himself to the development of other coaches and to being an advocate on behalf of the coaching profession itself.

Among the many awards Dick has received throughout his career are the Order of the British Empire (OBE), given in 1989, and an Honorary Doctorate from Loughborough University, given in 2004.

Dick was the Director of Coaching for the British Athletic Federation from 1974 to 1994, a period when Great Britain enjoyed regular success at all levels across a range of disciplines. It was during the same period that he became President of the European Athletics Coaches Association (EACA), a position he holds to this day. In addition, he is member of the IAAF Coaches' Commission and, as the creator of the concept and a consultant to the IAAF, has been a driving force in the development of the IAAF Academy.

In his work as a motivational speaker, Dick helps major companies to develop their business through 'coaching' methods. He has also continued to advise sports stars, including tennis players Boris Becker and Andrew Murray, ice skater Katarina Witt, F1 driver Gerhard Berger, golfer Justin Rose and heptathlete Denise Lewis.

Among Dick's most consistent messages in all his roles has been the need to work with and learn from others in the pursuit of goals. "The ability to learn quickly is the only sustainable advantage," he often says, "and we can always learn faster and do more when we communicate and exchange information with others than when we work by ourselves." More than 20 years ago, when coaching decathlete Daley Thompson, he demonstrated this principle by bringing together and managing a team of event specialists who helped prepare Thompson to become the first athlete ever to be Olympic, World, European and Commonwealth champion as well as World Record holder.

This model of athlete service and the concept of "interdependency" are increasingly hot topics as the profession of coaching in athletics is going through changes to reflect changes in the sport and society. With this in mind, NSA sent regular contributor Bill Glad to revisit these ideas with Dick and to get his thoughts on the future of coaching.

NSA The traditional model of a coach and his athlete – is this outdated?

Dick: If it is not outdated already, it is certainly becoming so very quickly. The original model that we're all remembering is of a coach dispensing his wisdom to the athletes who were fortunate enough to be in his squad. Well, first of all, it's no longer exclusively his wisdom, his squad. More and more we are seeing women coaching in athletics and doing a good job, so we have to recognise that change in the profession and the model. We also have to recognise that nobody can always be ahead in all the competencies it takes to develop an athlete to his or her full potential. In the past, this kind of thought would not have entered a coach's mind. The coach was a kind of entrepreneur, a maverick figure. But the truth is that coaches aren't as independent these days. We're all interdependent and we need expertise from others. You cannot learn faster alone than you can by having access to a group of knowledgeable people. And if you aren't learning fast these days you aren't providing the best possible service to your athlete.

NSA What does the model look like?

Dick: In my view it is athlete centered, coach led and performance services supported. For example, when I'm working with a tennis player like Andrew Murray, I can't possibly be an expert in all the various technical areas of requirement that he needs to be successful. I'm not an expert in how to hold a tennis racket or on the physiological testing that is required. So we have to focus on what the athlete needs and then bring together a team of experts who can provide the best possible services as and when they are required. The coach must actually surround himself or herself with a team of people able to address the needs of the athlete. This means of course, that the coach shifts his or her role from being some kind of a benign dictator to a process leader and a team leader.

NSA From a practical point of view, what kind of services are we talking about?

Dick: Well, this area is developing and it includes a whole range of specialisms. It

starts with sports doctors and physiotherapists, you need to have a physiologist, a biomechanist and a nutritionist. Then you can get into support in the area of sports psychology. You also need access to people who can handle the athlete's economic affairs, someone who can help bring a sense of balance to the athlete's lifestyle and even someone who can help the athlete develop the skills they will need after they stop competing. It's quite a complex network of people, all of whom would be required at various times. And then you can start getting into the technical side. For example, back in the 1980's, when I was working with Daley Thompson there was no way I could adequately cover the technical side of all 10 events. So we had Art Venegas from UCLA working on the shot and discus, we had an international class thrower David Ottley working on the javelin, we had Greg Richards for the long jump and Paul Brooks for the pole vault. You could also talk about extra expertise in strength training and even flexibility.

NSA So, what does the coach do?

Dick: In order to translate the whole complex of this network of advice into a useable product for the athlete there needs to be a sophisticated process of synthesis. The coach must have sufficient understanding of all these inputs and share a common language with those persons providing them, so that he or she can translate what it all means to the athlete's advantage. This is a critical task for the coach.

NSA If all this various expertise can be brought in and synthesised by the coach, are there any other critical tasks he or she must perform or skills he or she must have?

Dick: Well, of course, coaches have to be very sound technically, that is fundamental. They have to be good leaders, which implies vision and communications and motivation skills. They have to have a sound understanding of and passion for the whole process of developing an athlete. And they must have the skills

for synthesising all the support input. It is a management job and the coach's responsibility is to manage a team and create the environment around the athlete so that the other experts can do what they need to do effectively.

NSA The model of the support team co-ordinated and synthesised by the coach, does this also apply to the younger ages?

Dick: In general terms there must be similar feeling for the need for support. If you are a coach who is working with younger athletes just coming into the sport you may not have or need access to a top psychologist or a top physiologist, but you better have access to someone who can deal with the issues that the athletes face as they are growing and you are trying to coach them. When I was working with a professional football club youth academy, it was clear that the physiotherapist and the members of staff who are normally associated with a senior team are not up to speed with the particular problems of a growing child. So for example, if you've got a 16 or 17 year old suddenly having aches in their shins due to Osgood-Schlatters Disease and you're not careful, it could be treated like it's a normal injury, whereas it actually needs some specialist thought from those persons who are competent to deal with it. So, in principle, the team concept would be the same, but the actual services delivered would be different. When we open up the point of young athlete development it brings up the idea that we also must help coaches develop a sense of overall process management of what goes on from when an athlete comes into the sport until the time they go out the other end.

NSA That's a big task.

Dick: Not really. In today's world of technology you can track somebody and their activities quite easily. It is not hard to conceive of ways to make sure that all information is passed on to the next responsible person and the next person. We must have some system of tracking athletes all the way through and

there must be a system to manage the development process. Otherwise, we don't know what previous coaches have done and tried and, importantly, we can't give the athlete the best possible service. But coaches have to see this as a part of their professional responsibility.

NSA Much of what you have been talking about is a change of mind set on the part of coaches.

Dick: Absolutely. There is a need in the sport for new thinking. I believe that this will come in part from a level of training that goes beyond the existing coach education, including the IAAF CECS Level II course. We needed a sense of academic and professional credibility to be attached to the world of coaching and a starting point is the education system, including the advanced educational opportunities.

NSA This, of course, brings us to your work with the IAAF Academy. What is your vision there? What are you trying to achieve?

Dick: Increasing the professionalism of athletics coaches will be greatly aided if we can create a sense of career and career pathways. After someone has got to the top of a basic educational process such as the CECS or a national programme there are several distinct pathways that are open to them. A large part of what I see the Academy doing is preparing coaches for these pathways and then supporting them as they move along them. This has never been available for athletics coaches but you see it in other professions. Both [IAAF Member Services Director] Elio Locatelli and I believe passionately that the sport needs this and that it will make a difference in many ways. Fortunately, a lot of people in the IAAF agree with us.

NSA What are these pathways?

Dick: First you have an elite coach, someone who has got to the top end of being a practitioner in a particular event with a particular athlete and needs to be equipped to take athletes all the way to Olympic medals. But the idea of an elite coach should not stop

there. We have been talking about a different paradigm, one which involves looking at suiting the coach to the development needs of different aged athletes. It should be possible for somebody to become world class at coaching beginners, at coaching teenage athletes, at coaching late teenage athletes, etc. There are special skills that are required for each group, just as, for example, someone who teaches an infant has very different skills compared to someone who lectures at a university. The notion of an elite coach must capture that and we must prepare people to be the very best they can. Second, you have those coaches who will be responsible for whole programmes, with multiple athletes, multiple coaches and multiple support teams. I am thinking of coaches who lead a programme at a large educational institution like a university in the US or a big club in Europe or ultimately a national team. This is a different kind of role with specific skill requirements. This role calls for leading a number of people, dealing with various areas from the development of young kids right up to elite athletes, creating a sense of dynasty and other specific tasks. A third pathway is for the coaches who would deliver the whole notion of professional development for other coaches. The job of these is to be an architect, engineer, leader and manager of coach coaching and coaching career development. Such a person would be responsible for the actual development of coaches and coaching in a federation or to lead a team doing such for a federation. This could be the most important single appointment a federation makes. This is a role that involves, among other things, specialised teaching, lecturing and mentoring skills. Through the Academy we are trying to develop each of these very different career paths.

NSA As someone involved in various aspects of coaching and coach development, could you outline the agenda for the profession for, say, the next five years?

Dick: There are two big tasks that come to mind. The first is to put in place the sense of

career we have been talking about and a sense of self-respect for coaches. Linked to this is a sense of accountability and responsibility. Coaches must not continue to expect other people to do things for them, to think that there will be a hand out here or that people will suddenly appreciate them. They must take control of their own profession. And I think this would be supported very strongly by the various Area Coaches Associations around the world because they are aware of these issues. The second task is to make sure that coaches recognise that they can't know everything and that they actually need partnerships to access those skills they need to be better at what they do. We must be far more willing to understand and acknowledge what we don't know and pursue avenues to help us to address those gaps. And this goes beyond the technical. When we ran the World Class Coaches Club in Helsinki during the World Championships, the participants and I all had a chance to learn from different areas of the sport. I know I learnt a lot when [IAAF Vice President] Helmut Digel spoke to us about marketing and sponsorship. There are many areas where we coaches need to open our eyes and see the whole picture of the realities the sport faces so that we can understand how we can best conduct ourselves, work in partnership with federations and Area associations, retain the sport's values and develop athletes in pursuit of their goals in a way that will make our sport strong in competition with other sports.

NSA Are you optimistic about this happening?

Dick: Of course I am. I'm an optimistic guy. But it will not happen if we don't work at it. Technical changes are easy to make. We can learn to jump off our left foot instead of our right foot relatively easily. The most difficult changes in life are the behavioural ones. To change attitude, to change behaviour and ultimately to change culture, that's a long road, but I am optimistic that given the will we will make those changes and thereby make a substantial contribution to the future of athletics.