

GB CANOE SPRINT SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

A CO-COMMISSIONED, INDEPENDENT
'SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS'
OF CANOE SPRINT IN GREAT BRITAIN

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REPORT FOR PUBLICATION MAY 2020

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1. Executive Summary

In November 2019, British Canoeing and UK Sport jointly commissioned a panel of independent experts to deliver a 'Situational Analysis' of Canoe Sprint in Great Britain. The panel was asked to investigate the factors contributing to the underperformance of the British Canoeing Sprint World Class Programme against World-level medal aspirations, and to consider the potential for Canoe Sprint to be competitive across multiple events, and to win more than 1 or 2 Olympic medals per cycle in the future.

Along with a desk review and an electronic survey, the review consisted of semi-structured interviews with 79 stakeholders, including a range of athletes, coaches, leaders, staff, former staff, overseas representatives and leaders from within the domestic clubs, providing a rich data set upon which to base the analysis.

The review identified that the context within which Sprint Racing (hereinafter, The Sport) is operating offers a number of opportunities; the sport has many passionate people working hard to bring about high performance, there is a reasonable participation base, there are no barriers to entry, and the sport has Olympic status which is attractive to athletes and enables access to UK Sport support and funding.

There were 4 high order themes that the panel identified – Strategy and Leadership, Training and Coaching, the Centralised Model and the Domestic Clubs.

The panel found that whilst the sport is ambitious, there is no clear vision and strategy for the sport and sprint has been subject to a series of short-term approaches in a bid to achieve quick success. This has led to a sense of instability within the sport that is detrimental to performance. The relatively inexperienced leadership team has sought to address many of the issues that the sport is facing without, as yet, any clear evidence of success. It is recommended that the sport should set out a long-term strategy, identifying the key processes that will be necessary to achieve its aspirations, whilst also investing in the leadership of the sport.

The panel also found that there is no agreed, long-term approach to athlete or high performance coach development, and little evidence-based decision making. Whilst there have been some pockets of excellent coaching, and several coaches of high potential, there is a lack of belief in the quality of coaching across the system. It is recommended that the sport invests more heavily in understanding the 'What it takes to win' model in order to agree a broad training philosophy, and ensures that it builds a community of practice and development for coaches working with elite athletes. The sport should also invest in developing a clear crew boat strategy.

The environment at Nottingham that houses the centralised programme does not appear conducive to developing elite athletes, with some senior athletes choosing not to attend the central programme. The facility is sub-optimal, and there is a reported lack of clarity and consistency in selection. The panel recommends that the sport should seek to ensure that the environment is improved, and ensure that athletes can access the best coaches and the best experiences through the central programme. The sport should adopt a discretionary semi-centralised approach that enables athletes to choose remote support, providing it meets minimum quality standards, whilst working to examine the most appropriate pathway to develop elite athletes. Furthermore, the sport should seek to develop and

recruit more female coaches and leaders, and ensure the environment is optimised to support female athlete development.

Finally, there was found to be a great deal of resentment and division between the domestic clubs and the central world class programme. Clubs resent athletes being taken away and the funding that the world class programme attracts, whilst not valuing the coaching offered on programme. Clubs tend to be recreational and have a marathon focus. The panel recommends that there should be a commitment to repairing the relationship with the clubs, and the clubs should be supported and rewarded for developing elite sprint paddlers, with Talent Clubs being held accountable for delivering against minimum standards. The sport should build a community of practice for coaches working with talented athletes and ensure a more extensive competition structure for non-selection sprint racing.

The panel would like to thank British Canoeing and UK Sport for its support during this process whilst, in particular, thanking all of those from the wider community that engaged with the analysis for their openness, commitment and passion.

2. Introduction

British Canoeing has won eight medals in sprint canoe since the Olympic games in Sydney 2000. There are 12 Olympic medal events and the British team has never won more than two medals at any Olympic games, whilst the programme has yet to deliver an Olympic medal in any Women's Sprint event. There has also been limited medal success at senior World Championship level.

In November 2019, British Canoeing and UK Sport agreed that there was both the need and the opportunity to understand more deeply the context and practices which were shaping the progression of athletes in the Canoe Sprint World Class Programme, and to understand why there is not more depth in the senior athlete pool and why there is not more medal success at Senior World and Olympic level.

A commissioning group consisting of Michael Bourne (UK Sport Interim Director of Performance Services), Biz Price (UK Sport Head of Performance Advisors), David Joy (British Canoeing CEO), Paul Ratcliffe (British Canoeing Performance Director) and Ivan Lawler (British Canoeing President), appointed a panel of 4 'independent experts' to deliver a 'Situational Analysis' of Canoe Sprint in Great Britain, against a goal of sustained and greater medal success across a wider number of events at the Olympic Games. The panel was asked to identify the actions that will need to be taken to optimise the chances of strengthening the talent pool of athletes and achieving greater medal success within World Championship and the Olympic Games, in order to inform British Canoeing's sprint programme strategy development and also the investment submission to UK Sport for the Paris 2024 cycle.

The panel was asked to investigate the factors contributing to the underperformance of the British Canoeing Sprint World Class Programme, both within the Tokyo cycle and historically, against World-level medal aspirations and to consider the potential for Canoe Sprint to be competitive across multiple events, and to win more than 1 or 2 Olympic medals per cycle in the future.

More specifically, the panel were encouraged to investigate;

- Vision, strategy and culture
- World Class Programme coaching
- Domestic club landscape
- The relative success of male programmes versus female programmes
- World Class Programme leadership
- The "What It Takes To Win" model
- Crew boat and individual boat philosophies
- Daily training environments

The first 4 areas were determined by the commissioning group as the areas requiring the greatest investigation.

3. Review Findings and Recommendations

3.1 Desk review summary

Thirty documents were included in the portal and reviewed by the Panel, including strategic plans and reviews, the 'What it takes to win' model, financial reports, Board minutes, Culture Health Checks, performance analysis reports, and selection policies

The following themes emerged;

- Previous strategic plans explicitly stated the vision for GB to be the number one ranked sprint nation by 2028 and to consistently be in the top three nations in terms of medals at world and European championships across all classes and disciplines.
- The 2016 strategic plan, written by the previous Performance Director, envisaged a Performance Programme Manager for Sprint (not a Head Coach) and improvements were to be made to the Nottingham facility.
- The Tokyo Investment Strategy was supported by a full 'What it takes to win' model, based on the four phase race plan, covering the period 2017-2021.
- Consecutive strategy reviews highlighted that there was little progress against the priority performance elements in 2017-18 and 2018-19.
- Financial statements show a relatively stable picture, albeit that the current model is heavily reliant on UK Sport and Sport England funding.
- Board minutes recognised the under-performance of sprint and the financial risk to the organisation.
- There was a significant deterioration in the cultural health of the organisation in 2019.

3.2 Strengths

Despite the limitations expressed above, a number of strengths were evident within the sport;

- It was clear from their engagement in the analysis that there are a great number of people in the sport that care passionately about sprint canoe, and many of whom are working hard in either professional or voluntary roles to bring about effective performance.
- It appears that the participation base within the domestic clubs is strong and that gives a broad talent pool upon which to draw
- Whilst there is a general lack of diversity in the sport, there would appear to be no obvious barriers to entry; the sport is relatively inexpensive with clubs providing access to the expensive equipment, and there being a reasonable geographical spread across the country (with the exception of the northern English cities)
- The sport is recognised as having Olympic status and this brings opportunities to access funding and to be able to offer opportunities for world class competition to athletes
- British Canoeing appears to be a relatively stable national governing body for sport, with reasonable governance structures
- The specific nature of the sport, and its challenges, gives it the opportunity to learn from the other similar sports and those sports with similar challenges within the UK high performance system that have delivered success from similar starting positions (such as cycling and rowing)

- Despite the challenges that will be detailed later, the National Water Sports Centre facility in Nottingham does provide a bespoke training and competition facility for the sport, as well as a home for its' HQ operations
- The sport is also able to access multiple sites across the country with the UK well stocked in terms of rivers, lakes, gravel pits and canals
- The sport has recognised that the current situation needs addressing and should be applauded for its' willingness to engage in the analysis with such openness

3.3 Key themes and Recommendations

This report will now set out the key themes that emerged under 4 core areas;

- Strategy and Leadership
- Training and Coaching
- The Centralised Model
- The Domestic Clubs

3.3.1 Strategy and Leadership

In an effective high performance system, we would expect to see a clearly articulated vision, strategy and philosophy for sustained success. Investment and resources would be aligned to the strategy, with direction being provided from the centre and local deliverers being engaged in strategy formulation. There would be clarity on what constitutes success and measurements would be in place to monitor effectiveness. Success is likely to be judged on senior athlete success, athlete progression and the delivery of key processes.

The current goal of British Canoeing is unrealistically ambitious in the short and medium term for sprint canoe; the 'number one canoeing nation' vision that has been applied to the whole sport (consisting of the Olympic disciplines of sprint canoe, para-canoe and slalom, as well as other non-Olympic disciplines) since 2016 is felt to be unhelpful for sprint. Whilst the other disciplines have been more successful relative to their competitor nations, Great Britain is not considered one of the leading sprint canoe nations currently, and has never ranked among the top 3 nations in terms of medal success. Having this publicly stated vision for the sport has precipitated the perception of failure and not seeing success has led to a lack of belief and trust, as well as frustration amongst athletes and coaches. Consequently, coaches and leaders have sought 'silver bullet' solutions, looking for new and innovative approaches and making constant changes and adaptations in seeking out immediate results.

There is no clear vision and strategy for the sport; The strategy that was written leading into the Rio Olympics in 2016 has not been entirely delivered, and many of those interviewed reported not knowing the current strategy for the sport. This has generated a lack of belief, conviction and clarity, with a sense of fragility and vulnerability being present across British Canoeing.

The demand for success encourages short-term approaches; the current system demands medal success in order to justify funding and investment and the sport is being 'pinched' from above by UK Sport, and below by the domestic clubs. As a result, leaders adopt short-term approaches to decision-making. It should be recognised that, with Olympic status, the sport is well funded through UK Sport. However, there is a sense that strategy is being funding-driven with funding being an 'end in itself' rather than being a 'means to an end'. The current funding model reinforces the drive for short-term impact and can act as a constraint to a longer-term approach. This has also led to suspicions by some of the role that UK Sport plays in the decision-making of the sport, particularly within the domestic clubs, many of whom do not fully understand the funding model.

The short-term approaches have resulted in a sense of constant change, with coaches and staff feeling that leaders are engaging in micro-engineering and tinkering, and these numerous small-scale changes lead to a further lack of trust and confidence. Sports that have had sustainable success, such as rowing, have done so with continuity and consistency that provides stability in their sport (this is a correlation, though whether the stability is the cause or the effect is debatable).

Whilst it is recognised that the leadership team have sought to make changes, the sport has not yet seen anything concrete in terms of interventions making a significant improvement. Furthermore, the certainty, clarity and conviction over the future direction of the sport that is perceived to be needed

at this time has not yet been provided and some of the changes in personnel recently have added to the sense of instability.

The multiple committee structure that is currently in operation across the sport is not understood by all and is perceived by some to be unwieldy. Similarly, there is a lack of clarity outside of Nottingham on the roles and responsibilities of coaches and leaders, with titles within the organisation generally appearing confusing.

Recommendations

1. The sport should take the time to identify a long-term (3 Olympic cycle) strategy that clearly sets out the key processes required for success in the short, medium and long-term. It should set out a programme of change in the next 4, 8 and 12 years, defining the high priority areas that must be delivered (for example, the culture, the training, the coaching, the facility, the clubs). It should create time-scaled benchmarks and incremental progression markers that give clarity on whether they are on-track. This will allow conviction, and generate greater confidence and stability across the sport. Where possible, the sport should seek to involve the key influential people in this process in order to generate buy-in, and use this as an opportunity to excite a new generation.
2. As part of this process, the sport should set realistic performance goals –again over 3 cycles– that enables them to get some early ‘small wins’ that create momentum into the system, setting out the signs that things are moving in the right direction.
3. The sport should invest in the leadership of the sprint programme, for example by providing external mentoring and support, and providing clear accountability and responsibility.
4. The sport should seek to capture the learning from sports that are similar in nature in terms of the demands of the sport, but as importantly, should seek to learn from sports that have been through, and succeeded through, similar performance challenges such as swimming, rowing, cycling and gymnastics.
5. Finally, the sport should seek to ensure that the committee structure enables effective high performance practice and does not hinder it, and should also seek to simplify the terminology and jargon around leadership and coaching roles, in order that these are more easily understood by the wider community.

3.3.2 Training and Coaching

In effective high performance environments, there is an understanding of ‘what it takes to win’ at senior level and how this is likely to change in future. This understanding is underpinned by research and analysis, with appropriate input from coaching expertise. There would also be a clearly-mapped and progressive framework setting out the programmes, timeframes and progression milestones for athletes at each stage of development. A full menu of coaching, science & medicine and operational support services would be available to support the athletes according to their stage of development, with the agreed values, philosophies and culture being exemplified in daily practice by expert coaches and practitioners. Identified athletes would have development plans that are needs-focussed, individualised and holistic, supporting both their canoeing aspirations and their educational and non-sporting development. The development plans would have a long-term focus towards senior international success. The training environment would be conducive to learning and underpinned by contemporary learning and development science. There would be an appropriate balance of high challenge and high support, with athletes encouraged to take responsibility for their own development. Finally, a culture of learning would be encouraged amongst staff, with a full programme of training, Continual Professional Development and knowledge enhancement for all staff, linked to the athlete development framework.

Whilst it is recognised that the sub-divisions / categories within the sport (eg gender, distance, crew size, boat-type) make alignment difficult, there is currently no agreed, long-term, planned approach to athlete development; rather there appears to have been a silo mentality, with coaches searching for the ‘silver bullet’, rather than working together to define a shared approach. There is no agreement on training principles and technical models, what needs to be delivered (and how) at every stage of the athlete pathway. The sport has not set out clearly the right combination of technique and physical or mental attributes, nor clarified the right combination of quality coaching and volume, environment or time on task. Instead individuals have worked in silos towards their own philosophies with varying degrees of success. There is also disagreement over the impact of marathon training on sprinters and the right age to specialise in sprint. The latest ‘What it takes to win’ model and documentation is long and complicated and there are questions over its’ functionality and how easily it will be understood across the sport.

There is a lack of evidence-based decision making in the sport with a reliance on ‘hand-me-down’ training theory. There appears to be a lack of real curiosity in the sport to truly understand the factors that influence boat speed (for example, the physiological profile of the athlete, impact of biomechanics etc) and there has been very little historical data collected to inform selection and the ‘What it takes to win’ model.

Some athletes and clubs reported the quality of coaching on the World Class Programme as being sub-optimal. However, there are some pockets of outstanding coaching with some coaches receiving favourable reports, others who were identified as having high potential, and others with good technical knowledge. However, some athletes spoke of coaches not possessing the necessary people skills and not being able to handle difficult athletes, whilst some reported unhealthy ‘high challenge / low support’ coaching; some of the coaches appointed onto the World Class Programme were inexperienced, due to their early transition to coaching from being athletes without a great record of

success or coaching apprenticeship. The standard of coaching in clubs was not perceived to be stronger, with club coaches—whilst developing effective relationships with athletes—being less aware of the sports science and more technical aspects of the sport. Changes in coaches and the coach development team has added to the sense of inconsistency and prevented the establishment of effective relationships.

There has been no history of success in crew boats and there is currently no clear strategy for success. It is recognised that, unlike rowing for example, sprint canoe has traditionally been an individual sport and K1 athletes have been prioritised. However, crew boats do present an opportunity for increased medal haul, for increased exposure for athletes and for an increase in the depth of talent. Similarly, there doesn't appear to be a clear strategy for success in Canoe, and whilst Men's Canoe is not directly supported, this is potentially an opportunity that could be leveraged.

Recommendations

1. The sport should invest more heavily in understanding the 'What it takes to win' model, ensuring that it is more curious on what it needs to know and what it does not yet know, but needs to know. For example, what is the right athlete make-up, what does that look like at each stage of development, how is it trained, and what is the athlete journey? To enable this, the sport should make greater use of data science, analytics and research, adopting a more evidence-based approach and starting to measure and collect data over time to support future understanding and decision-making. Furthermore, it should ensure that a case study approach is utilised to capture the learning from the occasional successes that there have been. Again, sprint canoe should look to learn from the experiences of sports such as rowing and cycling.
2. Once the right training philosophy is agreed, the sport should give it time to have an impact, have real conviction and share the model with the wider sport.
3. The sport should ensure that where possible the best and most appropriate coaches are working with the most talented athletes according to their stage of development. This may involve pro-actively ensuring that the best coaches currently in the system are retained. If necessary, any future recruitment should ensure that the coaches are a strong cultural fit, and the sport should ensure that all coaches working on the central programme adopt a 'team' mentality.
4. Likewise, the sport should seek to build a community of practice for coaches working with elite athletes. They should invest in the growth of coaches of high potential, those that show the necessary curiosity and drive to be elite. They should treat their high potential coaches as elite performers, and ensure that they have individualised development programmes that are driven by learning and not qualification. High potential coaches should be given ongoing CPD opportunities to access learning through, for example, visits to overseas sprint environments, or to non-sprint high performance environments, and should be provided with mentoring from more experienced, senior coaches, which in turn may help bind otherwise detached senior coaches into the system. It is important that the sport defines its' elite coach development strategy as this is a potential area for competitive advantage.

5. The sport should adopt a more radical approach to crew boat development. Whilst there is little agreement on the best way and time to select and how to train crew boats currently, the sport should seek greater understanding through adopting a rational, scientific approach to strategy development. The sport should ensure that it incentivises and rewards athletes for participating in crew boats, continues to offer a centralised programme for training crew boats, and provides sufficient competitive opportunities to inform selection and develop crew boat race skills.

3.3.3 The Centralised Model

In an effective high performance system we would expect to see the best athletes being brought together to train and compete with their peers, to receive the highest quality support and learning opportunities, and to develop clarity on the standards required for world class performance. Involvement on central programmes should be hard-earned, aspirational and exclusive. Athletes should be selected based on their potential to achieve future success on the world stage, using a range of qualitative and quantitative technical, physical and psycho-social data, and making use of relevant performance data. There would be a system in place for tracking athlete progression which feeds into the recruitment and development processes. There would be a clearly defined Pathway with programmes being delivered in key geographical locations, ensuring that all talented athletes have the opportunity to access support and to reach their potential, with continual opportunities for entry to (and exit from) the Pathway at all stages.

There is a perception that recent sprint successes have been developed outside of the centralised programme at Nottingham, and indeed outside of the club programme. Successes appear to have arisen where there are small, athlete-driven training groups featuring developing athletes as training partners, an outstanding coach chosen by a highly focussed athlete, with clear technical models and training philosophies that are delivered consistently over time.

The facility and environment at the National Water Sports Centre, Nottingham does not appear conducive to developing outstanding athletes. The facility is perceived to be sterile, uninspiring and unwelcoming and the location is not ideal for the majority of athletes. The sport moved there full-time post-Rio and the compulsory and immediate nature of the move to a facility that was not perceived to be ready, means that many athletes have not felt this to have been a positive step. Furthermore, not all of the physical facilities are considered to be 'elite'; the nutrition provision is reported as poor, there is no rest or recovery area for athletes and coaches, there is no ergo room, the water is negatively affected by the wind and weather, it isn't always possible to access the water and the management of the facility by Serco is considered to be far from ideal, with facility improvement being very difficult. The facility at Dorney is considered superior and more suitable by many athletes, whilst the camps held overseas (often in South Africa, with better water and weather) are viewed positively.

Many athletes did not recommend the centralised programme at Nottingham. Some more senior athletes are choosing not to come to Nottingham and this itself influences other athletes to look elsewhere for support and becomes self-perpetuating.

The compulsory, full-time nature of the centralised programme may not be ideal for all athletes, particularly those young, developing athletes where moving full-time to Nottingham at age 18 or 19 can cause challenges, with impact on family, lifestyle and education. Some coaches and athletes also expressed concern that some athletes are being de-selected off the centralised programme too early at age 24, before they have been given adequate time to develop sufficiently to compete at senior level, a journey which they believe takes 8-10 years beyond juniors. Many of those athletes that are de-selected do not return to their clubs and are lost to the sport, with the learning developed through the World Class Programme not being re-ploughed into the club base.

There is a sense that the selection processes are not robust and therefore it is not clear whether the best athletes are being selected for central programmes, with the selection criteria perceived to be unclear and inconsistently applied. Performance in regattas is the primary medium for assessing athletes and this can lead to a short-term, “result-today” focus with no account being taken of conditions on the day, observations of the athlete on programme, training data, or the ability of the athlete to perform under pressure.

Generally, the environment is more conducive to developing male athletes than female athletes, with its’ reportedly ‘Alpha male’ high challenge / low support approach. There is apparently a 60:40 male:female athlete ratio across the sport, with an increased drop-out of female athletes around ages 16-18. However, despite Olympic medal success being confined to male athletes, there was a sense that female athletes have made a similar level of progress. Whilst there is considered to be gender equality in terms of support and resource allocation, there is no obvious differentiation in the male and female programmes, and no specific effort to understand or provide an environment which supports the female athlete accordingly. Perceived non-athlete centred coaches, and the constant changes in coaching relationships are likely to disengage female athletes, and some young female athletes have reported challenges concerning body image within the sport. There are also very few female role model coaches and leaders across the sport, which may be indicative of a lack of diversity generally. Finally, there are perceptions of some coaches’ behaviours impacting negatively upon female athlete health and wellbeing, as confirmed by the 2017 British Canoeing Independent Investigation findings recently made public.

Recommendations

1. At the heart of these recommendations is a belief that the sport should seek to match the best athletes with the best coaches (according to their stage of development) in the best environment. The centralised programme has to deliver the very best possible experience so that senior athletes, given a choice, would still choose to come onto the programme, and that means ensuring that there is a strong enough point of difference from what is available elsewhere. The sport should prioritise athletes with genuine Paris medal potential, matched with outstanding coaches, together with a group of younger athletes and the developing coaches group. Effectively, this becomes a 2-pronged approach – putting great support around the top athletes in the short-term, but building a stronger base in the longer-term. The success of this approach depends on ensuring the best coaches are paired with the best athletes.
2. The sport should adopt a discretionary, semi-centralised approach; whilst the default should still be for athletes to attend the central base for the World Class programme support, athletes should also have the option of making the case for a British Canoeing endorsed remote programme. In this case, the athlete would have to agree their individual support plan, with British Canoeing quality assuring against minimum standards for coaching, medical provision, facility, reporting, programmes, compliance and occasional engagement at the centre. Should athletes not be prepared to attend the central programme, or be unable to meet the minimum standards for remote support, then they risk non-involvement / selection. Whilst the aim remains for all athletes to choose to attend Nottingham, this discretionary approach puts athletes first, but enables quality assurance.

3. The sport should continue to optimise the use of overseas venues which offer focussed training opportunities and bring together 'teams' of athletes and coaches, and should also explore the occasional use of other appropriate venues around the UK.
4. The sport should improve the facility and environment at Nottingham; this may involve increased access to water, an improved relationship with Serco and being able to hold them to account for the standard of service provision, improving the nutrition provision and rest and recovery facility, and improving the environment so that it is felt to be more inspirational and welcoming.
5. The sport should work towards a modified Pathway model for the development of elite athletes; whichever Pathway model the sport adopts should include camps at a central base and overseas, and optional full-time attendance on a central programme.
6. The sport should pro-actively develop and recruit more female coaches and leaders, whilst also tapping into the science available around female athletes in other sports to ensure that female athlete development is optimised. Furthermore, the sport should ensure that sufficient safeguarding protocols are in place to protect all athletes, coaches and the sport more widely.
7. The sport should establish and communicate clear and consistent selection criteria and protocols, setting out the standards required at entry and for progression, and ensure that these are applied consistently year on year.

3.3.4 The Domestic Clubs

Accessible, local opportunities for athletes to compete and train are likely to feature in effective high performance systems. There is likely to be clarity over the distinct responsibilities of the key stakeholders, with alignment between local and national delivery, based upon direction, philosophies and quality assurance from the centre, with flexibility in delivery to allow for local context. There is likely to be regular inter-action, communication and engagement between local and national staff, relating to the development of specific athletes, and with regards to more generic knowledge sharing. There is also likely to be a range of competitive opportunities that reflect the athlete's stage of development, recognising that competitive experiences are part of the athlete's learning journey.

There is currently resentment and division between the domestic clubs and the centralised programmes. Whilst some clubs are positive about their relationship with British Canoeing, there are a number of loud voices that have an impact on the belief of athletes in the system. Whilst it may be possible in the short-term to generate success without the buy-in of the clubs, this will not be possible in the long-term. From the clubs' perspective there doesn't appear to be any benefit to them in developing Olympic sprint paddlers; if they do, the athletes get "taken away" and do not return, while the club receives no reward or recognition for the role that it played in developing the athlete. There is also resentment by the clubs over the level of expenditure and funding on the World Class Programme, which it is perceived is at the expense of the marathon programme. The headquarters at Nottingham is perceived by some clubs to be 'top heavy', with there being little trickle down of funding to the clubs. Some clubs do not believe in the central expertise on the World Class Programme to deliver success, and believe that they could and should do it better. In return the central coaches do not trust the quality of coaching in the clubs.

There has been a general lack of visibility of the central team of coaches in the clubs, and a lack of communication. Whilst recent attempts to improve this are recognised, and there is a sense of heading in the right direction, there has not yet been a noticeable impact.

Clubs are generally recreational with a non-sprint specific performance focus, and they are perceived by the centre not to understand fully the demands of high performance. The clubs', whose coaches are often part-time volunteers, focus tends to be on marathon paddlers and participation, which have differing technical and physical characteristics to sprint; there is a polarised debate over whether marathon and sprint are contradictory or complementary, and athletes are often forced to choose between the two by the age of 18. British Canoeing have invested a significant amount in 10-12 Talent Clubs in recent years with questionable effectiveness and minimal quality assurance. It is felt that there are some forward-facing clubs that want to work together with British Canoeing, but others that are keen to wrest back responsibility for the development of elite athletes.

There are deemed to be an insufficient number of sprint regattas and competitions; while athletes want to race and compete, there are currently only 5 national sprint regattas that are all held in Nottingham (compared to far more, for example, in Germany) and multiple marathon events which are perceived to be more engaging than the, apparently uninspiring sprint events.

Recommendations

1. There should be a commitment to collaboration and partnership, with both parties committing to repairing the relationship. British Canoeing should promote a whole-sport narrative and define 'Stronger Together' in terms of the behaviours expected. There should be a better two-way flow of information and communication, both formal and informal, and a greater visibility of national coaches in the clubs. Both the clubs and British Canoeing should seek to understand the context from the perspective of the other party, and the impact of their actions on the other party. The role of the clubs in developing elite athletes should be defined in order to provide reassurance to the clubs of their role and to generate pride and recognition.
2. Clubs should be incentivised, supported and rewarded for developing elite sprint paddlers, with both financial and non-financial rewards and incentives being offered. A smaller number of sprint talent / performance clubs should be accredited, with accreditation being linked to clear criteria and monitoring. For example, accreditation should be given to clubs that deliver athlete progression, offer coaching and support, deliver the agreed 'What it takes to win / progress' models, offer sprint specific competitions and regattas, deliver a local talent identification programme, establish links with local universities and schools, have requisite facilities, and can offer match-funding. Currently the accreditation is for 3 years; the sport should consider a longer accreditation period to allow for better business planning.
3. In due course, British Canoeing should consider expansion into non-traditional centres of population; for example, into geographical areas where there is currently little participation such as the larger northern cities, but also into more diverse, currently under-represented, communities.
4. The sport should build a community of practice for coaches working with talented athletes. High potential coaches working in talent / performance clubs should be provided with development opportunities, such as involvement at the centre and camps overseas, knowledge sharing opportunities, and mentoring or shadowing opportunities with more experienced coaches.
5. A better and more extensive competition structure should be developed that provides more opportunities for non-selection sprint racing. Events should be held around the country, with consideration being given to joint marathon / sprint events and crew boat only events. The sport should seek to be innovative and creative in the delivery of regattas in order to encourage paddlers to enjoy the sport and to enjoy the contest.

4. Appendix : The Review Process

The panel consisted of the following 4 members (see Table 1);

- **David Parsons** (as Chair) – David was Performance Director for the England & Wales Cricket Board from 2007 to 2019, a period which saw the England team reach number 1 world ranking in all formats, culminating in winning the 2019 ICC World Cup. He is now a high performance consultant.
- **Robin Williams MBE** – Robin has coached GB Rowing crews to the podium at World level a dozen times including Britain’s first women’s Olympic rowing Gold medal at the London 2012 Games. This success was repeated in Rio. He now works as an independent rowing consultant to various countries.
- **Steve Headington** – Steve has been an Operating Partner with a leading private equity firm TDR Capital since 2004, and has accumulated over 35 years business experience. He has worked with UK Sport, EIS and co-commissioning groups as an independent expert since 2014 and was a member of the Mission 2016/18 panel, as well as supporting various investment panels, performance reviews, and improvement initiatives across the world class system.
- **Anna Stembridge** – Anna is the current Head Coach of Team Bath Force Superleague Club, former Head Coach of England Netball and an ex-international athlete. She is also a Senior Lecturer at Cardiff Metropolitan University and is currently undertaking a PhD.

The review consisted of 3 parts;

- A desk review of relevant documentation provided by British Canoeing
- Semi-structured interviews with 79 stakeholders, each lasting between 1-3 hours (see Table 2)
- An electronic survey for stakeholders unable to participate in semi-structured interviews, completed by 8 responders

Table 1;

Interviews and days on the project for the panel

Panel member	Interviews	Days
David Parsons	30	27
Robin Williams	12	10
Steve Headington	13	11
Anna Stembridge	4	4
Total	59	52

Table 2;

Categories of interviewee

Category	Number
Athletes	15
Coaches	12
Leaders	15
Other staff	10
Ex-staff	9
Overseas contacts	3
Club leaders	16*
Total	79

*10 clubs were represented.

The majority of the interviews were conducted at the National Water Sports Centre, Nottingham with other interviews being held at a range of locations across the UK or via video call. Excellent logistical support was provided by Laura Duffin and Hannah Brown at British Canoeing.

The overall reflection of the process is that the semi-structured interviews and guided interview process enabled the panel to gather a rich data set upon which to base its' analysis. Furthermore, the panel's cross-section of "expertise" across a range of environments, though not directly in sprint canoe, enabled the panel to filter its' observations through an independent, high performance lens.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the analysis had limitations; firstly, the underpinning assumption of the analysis is that the sprint canoe system has not been successful previously, and that changes would be necessary to improve future performance. Consequently, the analysis focusses primarily on identifying the gaps in the system and obstacles to effective performance. This may mean that some strengths are not recognised in the analysis. Secondly, many of those interviewed will have had biases based upon their own role in the under-performance of the sport and, therefore, their stated perceptions may not represent the reality. It should also be noted that the number of clubs participating in the analysis represented only around 20% of all canoe clubs (though possibly a much higher percentage of sprint-specific clubs); it is not clear, therefore, whether the club views gathered in the analysis are representative of the whole club community. There is a lack of performance tracking data which would have enabled a greater understanding of the relative effectiveness of the system over time, mapped against investment and competitors. Finally, it is recognised that some of the issues raised in the analysis may be historical in nature; changes have been made in recent times that may render some of the issues raised as irrelevant or no longer applicable.