

A COACH'S CAREER

First a disclaimer. Its been a long time since I was either in the national squad or worked as team manager so what I have to say about the job (which for some reason I think means the top one) might be out of date so I start off by writing an imaginary job advert which is a useful exercise I think. Then after talking about the top job I reverse direction and start at the bottom – the ordinary club coach - and how to progress up from there.

WANTED a Manager (for the national judo team). The successful applicant will know the sport of judo inside out and will have already trained competitors to continental (EJU/Olympic) medal level. The position involves selecting the team, bringing them to match condition, overseeing their daily training in the UK and travelling to many parts of the world for competitions and training . Other personal skills such as Management, Public Relations, Information Technology and Languages will be useful. The coach will be directly responsible to the BJA Board of Directors. Salary will be in the region of £60k pa. for an initial period of four years.

But what are the realities? Judo is a sport like any other sport and managers who lose their jobs because of lack of results are a fact of life. A person who is looking for a career in coaching needs to think beyond the technicalities of the position. A quick check of the BJA website shows the following positions exist but the titles do not tell us very much other than there is a lot of jargon in the job and obfuscation perhaps. I see that there are directors, managers, administrators, coaches and heads but what, I wonder, is the difference between all of them. Who is superior to who? Surely a title should tell us something.

Director of World Class Programmes
World Class Operation Manager
World Class Start Administrator
High Performance Director
World Class Development Head Coach
World Class Start Manager
World Class Podium Programme Manager
World Class Development Programme Manager
Head of Technical (Services?)
Technical Advisor
Coaching and Technical Administrator

In the past we had the simple title of British Team Manager. This was slightly confusing in the sense that most judo events are not team events (such as the European Team Championships) but the job consists of taking Britain's top judo people abroad to compete in major internationals and they make up a British team. Simply chaperoning a team abroad requires some ability but the real work is bringing back the medals. This was achieved successfully by a number of individuals in the past.

My first reaction is none of the above titles suggest that there is a national team manager's job there and that there must be a lot of (government?) money chasing medals because the membership of the BJA could not possibly fund all these positions. For coaches this must be a good thing. But money can be cut in financially tough times and one must assume that after the London Olympics money for sport will be drastically cut. So what are the realities of the National Team Manager position?

Firstly does a clearly defined job exist? The long list of titles above conveys a sense of confusion to me. Presumably the head honcho is the Director of World Class Programmes but is there any overlap in functions? The telling question might be – Who gets sacked if the medals are not forthcoming?

When I was competing there was a National/Olympic team manager who was unpaid. He usually pulled in a few people to help (former competitors etc) also unpaid although expenses were covered. The team manager (or his assistant) travelled with the team to all events and almost every month squad training took place over a long weekend in different parts of the country (occasionally there were longer training periods – week or fortnight). The team manager picked the team or organized the selections often with a Selection committee. After each competition the team manager had to present a report to the Management Committee.

Some time later similar squads were created for juniors and women along much the same lines. Judging by the results that British judo achieved in those times the system worked well (producing Jacks, Remfrey, Parisi, Starbrook etc). We usually came back with good medals – we expected to. The system worked pretty well.

Bearing in mind my introductory remarks about job security the first thing any prospective coach should have is a clearly defined job description and a chain of command. Who answers to who? Next question to ask is – is this a good career move? It is in no aspiring coach's interest to join an organization that might fail to achieve. So look behind the jargon and the fancy titles. Are there clear thinking and farsighted people in charge of the shop? When you go for your interview check them out.

Lets look at how a person might get appointed. There is not such a clear cut route to this imaginary top position so I will start at the top and what the job is and then work down. Over the years I have known a number of national team managers such as Dave Starbrook, Tony McConnell, Arthur Mapp, Ray Ross, Colin McIver, George Kerr, Alan Petherbridge, John Newman, Neil Adams and myself etc etc all with different strengths. Apart from Ross, McIver and Mapp very few of them survived very long so the first warning I would make about such a career is don't give up your day job! Learn what you can from the job, improve your qualifications and hopefully this will prove useful in another career. This is probably sound advice for any career.

As in most jobs hands on experience and qualifications will be required to land the position. The job will be defined by a contract and for your own protection it must be defined well. Never forget that the Olympic cycle is a four year one!! Secondly there will be input from government agencies who provide most of the money and probably from the Directors of the Association and the CEO (and they might not be that knowledgeable about judo). All will want value for money and may let you know what they want. There is a potential minefield here so make sure to get advice on the contract before signing it. Thirdly you may have paid assistants but again make sure that the chain of responsibility is clear here. Who is to blame if a player fails to make the weight for example. As in football poor results will lose somebody his or her job.

The job will be to travel to all the major events with the team where you will see your competitors and the opposition in the highest competitive environments. This will give the coach-manager the opportunity to observe new techniques and trends which have to be spotted and maybe copied. You will also have opportunities to see and talk to other coaches and players and gather useful information about them. The team-manager will have to ensure that the competitor is fully informed, told when to appear and that his or her weight/judogi etc is correct.

Boldness/audacity may also be required The team manager must be fully aware of all the regulations that relate to objections/appeals to refereeing decisions, know the competition rules inside out and be ready to challenge any decision. To be able to do this he must be prepared to be very high profile and speak up when the TV eyes of the world are on him. Although it is always said that the referees decision is final it is possible that a referee can make a bad mistake and the mat-side coach may have to make a protest outside the normal procedures.

The team coach-manager must be capable of being a mat-side coach and relaying important information to his player (signals etc). If he is not mat-side systems should be in place so that his input is relayed to the mat-side coach and player.

Prior to main events there will be press conferences and various media events where the coach must be capable of making his presence felt as appropriate. It will be important for the team that he is capable of speaking confidently and making sense without exaggerating. The coach must also be a communicator and organizer. He must be able to write letters and reports and make sure of the appropriate flow of information both ways – he informs the competitors and they inform him. Nowadays the coach also has to know the jargon that goes with the job especially those aspects that overlap with government agencies.

In the months and years before the Olympics the coach will oversee the training (fitness/technical/tactical) and development of his team in person and through assistants. The coach will have to advise players on their career choices such as which weight category to fight in and which event to compete in. The national coach-manager will also have to deal with the players' individual coaches and he will play a part in selecting competitors as defined by his job description. The coach may also have to deal with prima donna players and prima donna personal coaches (God help him).

So the job of national/Olympic team manager is a tricky one that requires a number of skills one of which will be getting the job in the first place. The job in some respects is as big as you want to make it. Good assistants will make a significant difference.

The job may be advertised or a discreet phone call may let you know that the position is coming up. In the past, friends in high places and being in possession of a good gold medal would have been the main qualification. Apart from that having done a comparable job elsewhere such as coaching another national team and thirdly running a successful club and having produced a crop of internationals would also go a long way. Mostly it was the gold medallist who got the job. Every so often a good competitor will win a gold, think about retiring, criticise the incumbent coach and next thing you know he has got the job. However even top medallists can be given the chop if they do not produce the results. The job can be very insecure so the coach must develop back covering techniques – the most important of which is **keep totally out of judo politics** and get everything in writing. (When I first became BJA chairman virtually everybody in HQ covered their backs by writing memos to each other and keeping copies of them). Don't expect gratitude and don't forget that the Association may not want to appoint people it thinks it can't control.

Forming a medal winning squad is like planting a slow-growing tree. It takes years for the fruit to come through and the one who plants the sapling is not necessarily the one who eats the fruit.

From the Association's point of view both the former gold medallist and the career judoist (the one with the paper qualifications) have possible problems. The gold medallist has already had a big share of the limelight and may expect more of the same instead of taking second place to his squad members. The former gold medallist may have trained much harder in his time than his squad and may look down upon them if they cannot push themselves as hard as he did and the career judoist – the man with the paper qualifications - may always have a thing about never having won a good medal.

So if you are thinking of aiming to become a top coach how do you set about it? How do you gain the relevant qualifications?

Part Two

At this point we reverse our narrative and go back to the coaching beginning which is the transition from competent or successful player to club coach – the first stage of the career.

The first thing an aspiring coach requires is a thorough knowledge of judo technique. By this I mean a personal knowledge not a grading syllabus knowledge of it. Like most judoka, club coaches will have a small repertoire of throws that they score with and which they can teach with confidence. This needs to be widened to create a representative selection. Judo is a big subject and studying it will take some time so read everything you can find on judo no matter who wrote it. There is always something of interest in every judo book. Coaches should also be very familiar with technical statistics and other similar sports such as wrestling.

Hand in hand with technical knowledge goes coaching knowledge (getting the information across in the most efficient way), being pro-active and/or retro-active but certainly not non-reactive and putting the whole technical package together (combinations, counters, groundwork, conditioning etc).

The coach also needs to keep a technical notebook. For example I once saw a Russian win the Europeans with Uki-otoshi which up to that point was a Kata curiosity for me. That went straight in my notebook. Nowadays we have videos to record such things but from a coaching point of view a winning throw often needs to be seen in the context of a whole match not just a ten second clip of it.

So just at club level there is big technical challenge for the coach. There is a lot of technique he has to learn both standing and on the ground. Next the aspiring coach has to pass the various coaching exams of the national association for legal and other reasons. But there is so much to know in judo that I would suggest that it is a lifelong task. The club coach award is just the first step.

After achieving a club coach qualification the truly aspiring Olympic coach may need to think about following the academic route to bolster his qualifications. A degree in Judo-PE (which path the Bath people are already on), anatomy, physiology, biology, psychology etc etc will come in useful not only for the academic discipline it gives but in order to keep one step ahead of the rival coaches. Further degrees will start to put a big gap between you and your rivals for that top job. Management, IT, PR and language qualification would also be very useful. One other use for such further qualifications is the possibility of jobs in other sporting organizations such as BOA, IOC, government etc where you will probably have a much greater security of tenure.

The club coach may not aspire to become the top coach in the country and may be quite content to produce half of the national team in his own club but if he follows that route he will start to lose control and direction of his students at key moments. The national Team Manager may gather the Olympic squad around him/her for long periods of time and the club coach may feel that he/she is leading them astray. The club coach may also dislike not being the mat-side coach at the top event. I have seen squad players revolt against a coach who then loses his job but it does not happen that often. One benefit of running a successful club is the business training it gives.

The world of national sports associations can be a slightly unreal world with a lot of politics. Many a team manager has come back from a major event with a couple of unexpected medals which saved his or her skin. Conversely many a team-manager has come back from a major event where good medals were expected – with nothing.

To summarize becoming a national team manager needs:-

1. An exhaustive knowledge of his sport
2. Experience of producing top competitors
3. Coaching skills
4. Management skills
5. Language skills
6. IT skills
7. PR skills

8. An Olympic/European gold medal
9. Friends in high places
10. Luck

He will need to achieve all the paper qualifications necessary for the job and then go on to add to them such as various degrees or a MA/DPhil which would increase the possibilities of jobs in other organizations such as BOA.

In many ways the results of the job are out of his hands. The squad he inherits may not be good enough, the results in major competitions may be poor (for no apparent reasons), his face might not fit and so on. It is a gamble. It might be that the best route is to run a successful competitive club and combine that with a national job, if they will let you. At least if you lose the national job you will have something worthwhile to fall back on.

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