

LEADING KENT COACH HITS OUT OVER IMPENDING OLYMPICS FUNDING CUT

Ken Muhr, Co-South East Coaching Chairman and head coach at the SE Performance Centre and Weald TT Club, both based at Angley School, Cranbrook, has hit out at the likely big Olympic funding cut for table tennis from UK Sport, unless commercial sponsorship can be found.

Muhr, who in 40 years has coached several international including current England cadets Lewis Gray and Yolanda King from the Weald Club, was briefly involved in coaching England's current leading player, Cleveland's Paul Drinkhall, 18, the European Youth Champion who was the losing men's singles finalist in the recent World Junior Championships in Madrid, when he was 7 & 8.

"I was not Paul's main coach, but I did coach him a bit when I lived in the North East 10 years ago. He was obviously a great talent, but has since done fantastically well in challenging the best Chinese, and is currently ranked no.3 junior in the world, England's best prospect for many years. Paul has a real chance of doing well in the 2012 Olympics and I feel desperately concerned that these possibilities will be denied him and his colleagues if there are cuts in the national performance centre at the English Institute of Sport (EIS) Sheffield and in the international competitive programme."

He felt disgruntled about how table tennis was treated. "There is a danger of getting bitter - there seems a great inequity in funding Olympic sports only according to who is most likely to win most medals, because this takes no account of the degree of difficulty in gaining a medal sport against sport, let alone leaving a legacy and raising mass participation. If gaining a medal is all that matters, should we not be advising talented athletes to carefully choose only 'easier' sports which have many Olympic medals available or in which great skills are not required or not many people or countries compete (sometimes because they are elitist and expensive)? Or sports in which it is possible to reach a very high standard with intensive training in maybe 3 or 4 years time, and sometimes even less than that if you are already very fit?"

He rattled off a number of statistics. "By the criteria I have mentioned, table tennis would be the last sport to choose. Relatively small in England, table tennis is among the 3 biggest participation sports in the world, and the biggest individual sport, with around 300 million players. It is one of only 6 sports which have over 200 countries affiliated to the international governing body, and many of these, particularly in Asia and Europe, take it very seriously indeed. It is infinitely harder in England to go from national to world standard than to reach national standard. There are only 4 table tennis Olympic medals possible (men and women singles and team), compared with up to 40 medals in some other sports. However brilliantly talented and fit an athlete is, it would be totally impossible to reach Olympic medal standard within 4 years of taking table tennis up: because of the very high skill factor, related to spin and speed, it takes around 15-16 years of hard training in table tennis to reach a peak."

However, Ken was frustrated that we did not seem concerned to compete and do well in world sports like table tennis. “Should not Britain still want to be supporting and be good in mass participation and truly global competitive sports? And should not the relative quality of the Olympic training programme and athletes, and the degree of difficulty in obtaining medals, be taken into account in funding, as well as the legacy and benefits in raised participation?”

Ken considered that the current national training set up in Britain is very good, with some of the best coaches in the world, and some of the best young prospects for many years. There had been a new buzz and interest in table tennis, and he hoped that several of his local pupils would benefit from the raised profile and legacy arising from the Olympics. “Should not table tennis, a relatively cheap, classless sport, be getting a better deal?”