

A Guide to Appointing a Director of Sport

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INTRODUCTION

The average length of tenure of a Director of Sport in an independent senior school is approximately 10 years. This means that most Heads will only make one or two of these appointments in their career.

This role is relatively recently established. It is about thirty years since the first jobs of this title emerged, and over that time it has become usual for most schools to adopt the position. Changing the nomenclature is easy, and fashionable. Defining the purpose and accountability of the new job is less straightforward, and is not always something that schools do well.

In a previous era, the top job in PE and Games had a different title – usually Head of PE, or similar - but also a very different purpose. Its focus was clearly on administration and logistics, principally of the programme of school matches. Sport in schools was much more stable, straightforward and homogenous. Everyone had the same programme, and facilities, based on compulsory participation in outdoor team games. Meritocracy was accepted without question: the most athletic pupils got an indisputably better deal, and dominated all the school teams. Less athletic pupils accepted their fate with resignation, and duly learned to hate games at the far extremes of some windswept field. Teams were coached by a small number of enthusiastic PE teachers, supplemented by a significant number of willing and able classroom teachers. Engagement, variety and concern for physical wellbeing were in the distant future.

A number of changes in the landscape came to complicate, and re-define, the role of the person in charge of school sport. Investments in facilities made programme variety possible, and resulted in pressure on the previously unchallenged compulsion for all pupils to play traditional team games. The introduction of choice was uncomfortable, with schools wary of eroding the critical mass of pupils required to fulfil an expanded fixture programme. It also created an escape route for the refugees from team games. Greater pupil and parent power, business pressure, ambitions beyond winning matches, a changing workforce and new communication channels were all part of a shifting foundation of school sport. Additional concerns for the safety of Rugby, and the declining attractiveness of Cricket, challenged previously inviolate assumptions.



The Director of Sport role therefore has changed considerably, and continues to do so. When the Job Description from the previous time the position was vacant is considered, it is often obsolete. This is why this position is different from other appointments at this level, and more challenging to make.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A DIRECTOR OF SPORT?

The modern Director of Sport has four principal functions:

1 Leadership

In a shifting and volatile landscape, it is vital that the Director of Sport has a clear and compelling vision for the desirable future state of sport and exercise in the organisation. This will involve an understanding of the principal tensions of sport in a modern school, ie:

- Choice and Compulsion
- Performance and Participation
- Focus and Meaningful Variety
- Team Games and Health Promoting Exercise

In addition to a convincing and coherent philosophy, the successful candidate will also be able to engage pupils, parents and colleagues to enthuse about the vision, and commit to it. The capacity to lead through 360 degrees is essential. It is vital to understand the ways in which previous assumptions are falling into disrepair, and be a passionate and convincing advocate for a compelling, modern alternative. It is also necessary to embrace a wider, and more inclusive, ambition. There is a challenge to convincingly articulate the “why” of the programme, including the perceived benefits of controversial components such as Rugby and exam term sports. Schools are good at communicating the features of their programmes, but are less successful in describing the benefits.

The language is also confusing: the impact of the role needs to go beyond “sport”, and its implication of competitive games. To this needs to be added responsibility for “wellbeing”, “health and fitness”, or similar, to capture the sense of universal impact, and a wider programme. The previous era engaged only the pupils who were keen games players. The modern Director of Sport requires a more far-reaching vision. This accounts for a recent trend to expand the job title to incorporate more than competition. Many recent roles have been re-imagined as ‘Director of Sport, Health and Fitness’ or ‘Director of Sport and Wellbeing’.

2 Culture Building

The demise of compulsion has laid greater emphasis on building a culture of willing and enthusiastic participation. The strength of such culture varies massively, and is unconnected with school type, size or location. It is certainly possible to build a clear sense of what is normal and approved behaviour in the organisation, and establish an environment where the majority of the population wants to embrace the cultural norm.

All schools have a minority of committed and athletically able pupils, who would be drawn towards sport regardless of the quality of the provision. At the other end of the continuum, there will always be hard-to-reach children. The exercise culture of a school is not defined by either of these constituencies, but by the floating voters in the middle. Where the culture is strong, these pupils become involved: where it is weak, they move away from sport and exercise. "What's cool in your school?" is the crucial question. If it is cool to be in teams, to get on the bus, to sweat and have wet hair, then that becomes normal, and that is what the majority of pupils do.

The Director of Sport is the architect of the culture. Physical activity, in all its forms, needs to be central to the school. The alternative is that the activity of games teams exists at its margins. Sports results remain prominent in assembly, and on the website. Competitive triumphs are important. However, the biggest challenge to the sporting culture of a school is no longer high performance, but the retention of a critical mass of pupils within traditional games. There are fewer children than ever before playing team sports, especially in the Sixth Form. Many schools are right to be nervous about the introduction of choice. Where the culture is weak, this can signal a mass exodus from teams, and a subsequent struggle to fulfil fixtures. The strength of this culture can be measured by the enthusiasm for the longest away trips.

Conversely, a strong tradition of team games is under less threat from alternative activities. Where children play in teams with their friends because they want to, and because the experience is good, the additional choices are irrelevant. It is possible to provide meaningful variety alongside competitive teams. In a strong culture, these complement each other: where it is weak, teams are undermined by choice.

Parents can no longer be depended upon to support commitment to school teams. The school-parent-pupil triangle is crucial. Where the pupil and parent are on the same side, they outvote the school's preference. If the school can engage pupils to want to play, their combined will can overcome parental indifference.

3 Quality Control

The introduction of variety into the games programme puts greater pressure on quality control. This is a crucial management role for the Director of Sport. It requires that all activities are of high quality, and equally demanding. Pupils then make positive choices. Where there are fault lines in the system, many teenagers are drawn towards the easy option. Sixth Form Games often sees school sport at its worst. With resources stretched, and dominated by games teams, some of the remaining provision can be of poor standard. Some options can resemble a youth club.

The changing workforce of school sport presents an additional challenge to the Director of Sport. A mixed economy of specialist and non-specialist teachers is increasingly combined with

professional coaches and exercise instructors. Many schools have become dependent upon a peripheral workforce of graduate assistants and peripatetic coaches. Ensuring a consistent standard of both technical input and pastoral support requires a combination of housetraining, quality assurance and appraisal. Establishing robust processes for each is a new dimension of the role. Recruitment, induction, retention and accountability are a constant challenge. They are rarely well conducted, despite their vital impact upon the quality of pupil experience. Many schools struggle to find the manpower to offer a consistently high quality programme. Initiatives to pay teaching staff to run teams have a poor record of achieving the desired result. Managing a delivery workforce that is probably bigger, and more diverse, than ever is a primary challenge for the modern Director of Sport.

4 Culture of Health and Fitness

The Sports Council of the 1970s established a misleading concept of “Sport for All”. The expression has lasted longer than any other 70s fashion, and is still quoted by some schools as a programme philosophy. It is, however, fatally flawed. “Sport”, meaning (according to the dictionary) ‘competition in athletic activities’, was never for all. It never will be. But exercise and physical wellbeing can be. Healthy, active lifestyles are uncontroversial. There are compelling arguments against Rugby and other games, but there is no good case against exercise.

Of equal importance to sports teams in the modern school is the building of a culture of health and fitness. This is an essential part of an active community. It is not ability-dependent, nor the exclusive preserve of the most athletic. This area of the programme requires its own dynamic leadership (in the form of a “Head of Health and Fitness” or similar), but it is important that the Director of Sport attaches significance to it. It will include conditioning for athletic performance for aspiring performers, but go far beyond that to impact upon every pupil. In the future, this may well be the central purpose and foundation of the programme, rather than the low-status consolation prize for those who have proven beyond reasonable doubt that they have no inclination towards games.

ESTABLISHING THE SUCCESS CRITERIA OF THE POSITION

A change in Director of Sport gives a school’s leadership team an ideal opportunity to re-visit the place of sport and exercise in the organisation, and consider their ambitions for its future. The appointment is ideally accompanied, or preceded, by some type of audit or review. This would seek to establish current strengths and weaknesses, and to consider these against ambitions for the future. The rapidly changing landscape of school sport means that it is unusual for a school to want a new Director of Sport who simply maintains the status quo.

A Head, or leadership team, should take the opportunity to consider their ambitions for the impact of physical activity across the school. The debate will consider questions such as:

- Is the current programme fit for purpose?
- Is the quality of the experience for all pupils high enough?
- Are competitive results good enough?
- Do the most athletic pupils get the best support?
- Are standards of commitment, sportsmanship and discipline high enough?
- Are sufficient pupils retained in traditional games through to the Sixth Form?
- Are the heads of sports unduly autonomous?
- Do the “squeezed middle” get a high quality experience?
- Does physical activity impact positively on all pupils?
- Are there meaningful alternatives to team games?
- Are all sports operated to similar standards and principles?
- Is there a sustainable workforce of adequate quality?
- Are there robust mechanisms for induction and appraisal?
- Is there a school-wide coaching philosophy?
- Is there a true co-educational approach to physical activity?
- How strong is the culture of health and fitness?
- What is the coaching workforce of the future?
- Do PR mechanisms accurately reflect the school’s priorities and ambitions?
- Is the website confined to scores and results?
- Are the benefits of the programme promoted and explained?
- Is sport a factor which supports recruitment and retention of all pupils?

CAPTURING IT IN THE JOB DESCRIPTION

Job Descriptions for Director of Sport positions often take the form of an exhaustive list of tasks, usually expressed as bullet points. Research clearly shows that the best candidates find this off-putting, as the impression is of a demanding position composed of an apparently limitless sequence of uninspiring tasks. This approach attempts to define the inputs into the position. A consistently more successful method is to describe the desired outcomes from the role. The selection mechanism then seeks to find the candidates who can most convincingly describe how they would achieve these outcomes.

A bullet-point approach tends to focus on administrative and management responsibilities, and dilute the real priorities of the position: leadership, culture-building and quality control. An output-based description can more readily capture the latter, and offer the best candidates a creative challenge to deliver worthwhile influence.

Most advertised roles in school sport have no difficulty attracting a high quantity of applicants: the challenge for the appointment process is to find top quality candidates. The latter are in short supply, and good females even more so. It is therefore important to recognise that the Job Description has to stimulate the interest and motivation of the small number of top candidates. Research reveals what motivates the best applicants:

- Philosophical alignment with Head, and input into decision making
- A school ambitious for its sport and exercise programme
- The opportunity to build something successful and distinctive
- Capacity to make a real impact
- A degree of autonomy
- Adequate resourcing
- Sufficient timetable remission to make a leadership impact

It is vital, therefore, that the job is made appealing to the best candidates, and that presentation, text and images in the Description booklet reflect this.

Candidates respond positively to a well-articulated ambition for the position, and are able to see past current limitations if they can be enthused about a better future. The biggest influencers of this are the Job Description, and the interaction with the Head at interview. Recruitment consultants can also help bridge the gap between the present and the desirable future, through enthusing candidates about a school's ambition.

Many potential applicants will have an impression of the school's reputation, which may be incorrect, or out of date. It may be accurate at present, but not a reflection of a school's aspiration. Conveying this sense in an inspiring way is the task of the first stage of the recruitment process.

ENCOURAGING APPLICATIONS

Jobs can be divided, loosely, into those which have national, regional or local appeal. This will never be entirely accurate, but gives an indication of where the bulk of the candidates will come from. Prominent roles in schools with national reputation will inspire candidates to re-locate

their families wherever necessary in pursuit of career advancement. For positions of regional significance, candidates will consider longer commutes, or re-location within the same area and family/social network. Other vacancies will predominantly attract candidates who already live in commutable distance from the school.

For the latter two categories, the likelihood is that most potential candidates are already known to the school, or its current sports staff. Therefore an audit of the area will usually identify many of the people whom a school would like to apply. The vacancy can be drawn to their attention – either by staff who know them well, or by a recruitment consultant – and these discussions can seek to enthuse them about possibility, and anticipate concerns.

Where a school has a national catchment area for staff, this is a bigger process, and requires greater industry knowledge. Research suggests that the best candidates are 150% more likely to apply if they receive a proactive approach. This is not the case for weaker, or optimistically aspirational candidates, who will always apply unsolicited.

Approximately 20% of recent appointments have been of candidates from non-traditional backgrounds. Some come from professional sport, from the university sector or National Governing Bodies. Sometimes the skill set of these candidates is strong enough to outweigh the short term disadvantage of sector inexperience. Many shortlists include such a 'wild card' candidate. These applicants are often more difficult to reach by conventional advertising in the educational press.

Another consideration is whether or not an appointment is likely to be a first time Director of Sport, or someone who has already done the job in a previous school. This will influence the type of candidate to whom approaches might be made.

It is helpful to be able define where the desired candidates are now. Are they likely to be Directors of Sport in a smaller school? If so, their challenge will be one of scaling and quality control? Or, are they head of a sport in a bigger school? If so, they may have a better idea of what excellent provision looks like, but a challenge to extend what they have achieved beyond a single sport and also to engage with the pupils who don't play team games.

Additional Information

Most Application Forms are generic to all teaching jobs. It is therefore difficult to gather all the information that might inform a shortlisting decision for a less conventional role, such as Director of Sport (or head of a specific sport). Consideration should be given to supplementing the usual form with some subject-specific questions that require candidates to write about topics of the school's choosing. This provides additional information to support the shortlisting process.

DESIGNING THE SELECTION PROCESS

The wide ranging skill set of the best Directors of Sport presents a challenge to the selection process. This – and the significance of the position - mean that it will probably look different from other middle management roles.

The likelihood is that most schools will be aspiring to appoint a candidate who has some or all of the following capacities:

- Clear vision of the future of school sport and physical activity
- Industry expert aware of trends and priorities
- Awareness of plural success criteria
- Ability to support high performing athletes and create competitive success
- Capacity to inspire a critical mass of pupils to remain engaged with traditional games
- Commitment to inclusivity
- Capable of building a culture of health, fitness and physical wellbeing
- A convincing ambassador for the school and for physical activity
- An engaging leader of staff
- An inspirational teacher and/or coach
- Capable of maintaining good parental relationships
- Comfortable in resolving complaint and dissatisfaction
- A convincing, credible and articulate communicator
- Able to build good relationships with all pupils
- Custodian of the school's reputation
- Competent manager of large budget
- Architect of an engaging games programme

It is an obvious challenge to create a series of selection activities which accurately predict these qualities. It has therefore become the industry norm to operate this over two rounds, with a range of activities. Occasionally, the first (or a preliminary) round will be conducted over Teams/Zoom. A thorough process is perversely popular with the best candidates, who are thereby reassured of the school's commitment to sport and to quality. A flimsy, unconvincing or badly organised interviewing process undermines candidate confidence.

A typical selection process, across two rounds, would contain:

- Interview with Head to measure vision and personal engagement
- Interview with other SLT members to test previous experience and achievements
- Compliance interview/documentation check
- Opportunity to meet department, usually in an informal setting
- Tour of school, and sports facilities (often by a pupil)
- Interview by panel of senior pupils/school council/games captains
- Written task: composing a reply to a parent complaint letter
- In-tray exercise
- Practical teaching/coaching
- Presentation to panel of plan for first three years in post, plus questioning

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

There are three principal factors which influence the likelihood of strong candidates to both apply for, or accept, jobs. Whilst schools understandably wish to remain cagey regarding these, often preferring to retain flexibility, there is strong evidence that the best candidates will not apply without some broad guidance on these beforehand. This is not always best provided publicly on the published details, but can inform pre-application conversations.

The main issues are:

I Salary etc.

There is considerable variety in salaries and expectations in Director of Sport roles. It is the question most often asked by heads seeking advice on these appointments. As a general guideline, the average expectations are likely to be within the following ranges:

Local, smaller day school:	£ 50–55k
Predominantly day school:	£ 55–65k
Predominantly boarding school:	£ 65–70+k

In London and Home Counties, these rates might be 10-15% higher. Girls' schools salaries are often up to 10% lower.

In schools of national standing, often requiring re-location, the provision of accommodation and removal package, is also significant.

2 Subsidised School Fees

The likely age profile of candidates for these roles makes this issue often relevant. The principal questions will be level of staff discounts, and the availability of preparatory, and co-educational, provision.

3 Timetable Remission

This is a perennially controversial issue, and one in which existing practices vary most significantly. In some schools the role is almost a full time teacher; in others there is little or no timetable commitment. It is also linked with expectations for team coaching, principally whether the role is also the head of one or more sports.

A general expectation is that this position will attract greater timetable remission than other heads of department. Typically, to discharge the leadership functions well, a remission of about 50% is usual.

THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING A RECRUITMENT AGENT

The history of all appointments to positions in schools is a passive one. Adverts were placed in the education press, typically the 'Times Educational Supplement', and applications arrived via the Royal Mail. The transition to a proactive process was led by changes in Headteacher appointments, which established that a targeted identification of prospective candidates - and a direct approach - usually established a higher quality field. This was combined with a recognition that recruiters who conducted a specialist selection process every week would be better and more experienced than a governing body which would do it only once or twice. They would also be more familiar with potential candidates.

Director of Sport jobs are unlike most school roles. The success criteria are plural, and difficult to measure against each other. Personal qualities are important. The landscape of school sport is more rapidly changing than classroom subjects. The background of candidates – as teachers of PE or heads of sports – does not provide a seamless preparation for a role which is about leadership and culture building. Schools get little practice of making these appointments, as they do not turn over very quickly. A specialist recruiter can guide a school through this process.

High quality candidates are in short supply. Many schools will know, or have the capacity to identify, them. They will not always need a recruiter to do this for them, and may be comfortable with the ethics of an informal approach by their own staff. A recruiter can do this more objectively and on a bigger scale, and will already be aware of the aspirations of the most experienced or promising candidates.

Nationally known schools will attract a high quantity (and often good quality) field simply from advertising. Such volume creates another problem of longlisting, where additional knowledge of candidates is often useful to get a fuller picture of their achievements to date.

Application numbers are typically lower in girls' schools. Candidates are often less geographically flexible, and a proportion leave the job market, sometimes permanently, for maternity breaks.

Where schools have aspirations to improve, change or develop their sports provision, they are faced with a challenge of enthusing candidates with plans and potential, rather than a judgement based on the current situation. This often requires a lot of informal conversations to anticipate candidate objections, or to enthuse them with future possibilities. Proactive communication with potential candidates can overcome this challenge.

The majority of schools will attract sufficient applicants to an advertised position to be able to make a credible appointment. The engagement of a specialist recruiter simply improves the chances of a better result.

We offer an informal, no-obligation, discussion of any aspect of sports staffing structure, or recruitment. Please contact Neil Rollings (neil@independentcoacheducation.co.uk) to arrange a call.



Independent Coach Education provides
Training, Recruitment and Advisory services
to stimulate high quality PE and School Sport.

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