

“Athletics is in serious trouble”

By Charles Gains:

The Association of GB Athletics Clubs (ABAC) “Fact Files” surveys conducted by an independent and top UK athletics statistician, Rob Whittingham, represents the most significant contribution to the analysis of the state of the athletics in the last ten years or so.

Having a substantial background in higher education, with its pedantic obsession in justifying statements and referencing sources, I have always been amazed that a body such as UK Athletics and its subsidiary, England Athletics, can spend such huge sums of public money with impunity and without any real accountability, particularly towards its ‘customers’ the athletic fraternity.

According to ABAC Fact File 1, nearly £200million has come into the sport over a decade, with staff costs in excess of £40million and a CEO earning more than the Prime Minister you might have expected detailed annual reports on the numbers participating and standards achieved. If an external statistician can manage all this largely in a voluntary capacity why can’t a so-called professional organisation? I can only conclude that UKA is either incompetently administered or is not really anxious to reveal the true state of the sport. I suspect it is both.

Two years ago I undertook a modest survey of the state of cross country running (published by ABAC) which clearly upset one or two people but was not questioned for its veracity. I concluded that in all age groups the number of serious cross country runners, i.e., those that turned out regularly and competed at league, county level and above, was less than 7000. At senior level I calculated that about 70% of male competitors are veterans (O40) and that for women (O35) it was nearly 80%. I checked this a number of ways and kept coming up with the same figures. The crucial 17-34 age group appear to make up less than 20% of the sport and I suspected this ratio was shrinking year on year.

I stressed that the above was both personal and impressionistic and that a proper in-depth survey of the sport should be undertaken by professionally qualified researchers. I concluded that track and field athletics betrayed many of the same features and that this should, at least, activate our lethargic governing bodies. Rob Whittingham has now done the job for them. It is astonishingly close to my more modest assessment; indeed in some respects it is even more shocking. The figures conjured up by Sport England are now exposed as hugely misleading. Declining participation is exposed and a similar detailed examination of falling standards might be the touchstone that finally confirms the truth. **Beneath the glossy surface athletics is in serious trouble.**

One can sense that the money is running out, the spin has been spun; the senior administrators are quietly burnishing their CV’s in preparation for a quick exit after the 2012 Olympics. When we subsequently come to examine the artefacts left over from their tenure one will perhaps find an occasional nugget, a project that might have had a temporary impact, a promising initiative maybe but overall was this all worth £200million plus? For that sort of money in-depth standards should have risen year on year along with a vibrant increase in competitive participation. Now that would have been a significant legacy!

ABAC and Rob Whittingham are to be congratulated. They have done an incalculable service to athletics. The survey Fact Files should be studied by all who believe that the sport has a future beyond the yoke that has hung around the neck of volunteers for the past 13 years. The enthusiasm and creativity of individuals and clubs will be needed when the superstructure finally collapses.

ABAC Comment. For five years ABAC has worked steadfastly to highlight the problems with the governance of athletics. Frequently they have been vilified as trouble makers. However, many of their dire predictions have been acted out. So how has this happened? Charles Gains has got the point. UKA Ltd has been determined not to reveal the true state of the sport.

UKA Ltd., are indeed a secretive organisation. Applications to them for information under the FOI Act have been rejected. They may consume vast quantities of exchequer and lottery funds but they claim immunity from scrutiny.

UK Sport too has refused to release information supplied by UKA Ltd to justify the continuation of their funding. ABAC continues to press for information from UKA Ltd. As a consequence, an Appeal Hearing to force UK Sport to reveal confidential UKA Ltd., documents is due to be held in London on 22nd and 23rd March 2011 in a final attempt to obtain transparent information from UKA Ltd.

Charles Gains has been actively involved in athletics all his adult life. Initially as a runner but then as an administrator. He has held numerous positions at club level. He was appointed a member of the Board of UKA Ltd., in 1998 to represent clubs but resigned 18 months later when he felt the governing body was not acting in the best interests of club athletics, something that later became evident and led to the Foster Review and Report. Wishing to support future plans he became Chair of England Athletics (North West). However promises of autonomy in spending were not kept and centrally determined appointments were forced on the local Council. Along with three other Council members he resigned and has since pursued a strategy of exposing what he deems are a lack of both vision and competence at the highest levels of the sport.

Other ABAC articles by Charles Gains

1. *Power of Ten Analysis: Some observations.* 24 September 2008
2. *Cross Country Running in 2009.* 3 April 2009
3. *The rain never reaches the roots.* 29 June 2010

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