

REGIONAL COMPETITION WITH OR WITHOUT BUCKNER

The question of whether the North West Region should provide competition is one which can be considered irrespective of whether the Buckner Report is adopted in part, as a whole or not at all. This paper does not contain a full critique of Buckner's proposals, many of which do not directly affect competition, but deals with those matters which suggest a Regional role for competition provision.

Athletics consists of a number of separate disciplines all of which must be considered. However, for ease of purpose, the initial part of this paper will concentrate on track and field provision. At senior level competition is provided by League matches and County Championships with Northern Area Championships the next stage of progression and National Championships the peak.

There are significant differences of purpose between League and championship competition. The former provides two opportunities. One is for individual athletes to use as part of their racing preparation for championship performances. The second is to stimulate team competition. Both are legitimate activities but what is lacking is hard data on athlete participation in each.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the County Championships tend to come too early in the season for athletes who are aiming to peak in July. Those two dates were established several decades ago when the main avenues for senior competition were County, Inter-Counties, Northern and AAA's. Qualifying standards were required at all levels above County. For many counties the Inter-Counties at the end of May is no longer a priority.

There is concrete evidence that many seniors do not wish to take part in County Championships although no active research has been done to explain why. That raises the question as to whether it is the championships themselves or the timing which is the primary cause. A similar point arises in relation to the Northern Inter-Counties Championships, held later in the season, which have not been able to attract many senior athletes. No substantial research has been carried out to answer this question. Perhaps it should.

That raises the question of whether a future Regional Championship would fare any better than the current county championships. Is there any reason to suppose that the handful of people who participate at county level would compete at Regional level and is there any reason to suppose that those who do not compete at County level would see Regional competition as an event in which they would like to participate?

It can be argued that because the Regional Championship could attract athletes from the constituent counties the numbers would automatically be greater. Again we have no hard evidence one way or the other. Again, I can only cite anecdotal evidence to suggest that Regional competition would be seen by athletes and coaches as an unnecessary layer of competition carrying little value. However, we are faced with the simple fact that no proper research has been carried out on the subject so impressions are likely to be subjective. There is an urgent need for such research to be done.

Under the Buckner Report the Regional Championships would be on what Buckner calls level 3, the same level which he accords Area Championships but a level below both the English Schools which, frankly, he chickens out of defining as Level 3 (as they are in Scotland) and the Schools' Games which are scheduled to finish in 2011. In my view he attributes a level to the Schools' Games which it does not deserve. In my view too Regional Championships must be on a level between county and Area to have any credibility. Buckner's attachment to the five level approach undermines his argument.

This is where consideration of Regional competition comes in. If the current season is maintained where will it fit into what is an already over-crowded calendar? Buckner suggests that Regional Championships should take place at the end of June between the Northern and UKA/AAA Championships, although this would be a week after the National Under 20 Championships and clash with both the National Young Athletes League and the Regional rounds of the ESAA Multi-Events competition.

Young Athletes' competition provides further complications. Although Buckner is reported to have stated at the YAL Road show held in Manchester that change would be forced through, his stance has since been modified. Apparently, he has now told the Leagues that he cannot force changes upon them, therefore, if they wish to continue in the same format as now he cannot prevent them.

The problem for the current schedule of track and field is that there are too many competitions taking place during the summer. Buckner seeks to relieve this by advocating that different levels of competition should take place on different weekends. However, he overlooks the fact that the problem that by classifying all club league matches as level two competitions he fails to address the problems that arise from having senior League matches on the same weekend as Young Athletes' League matches. The most important of those problems in an absence of qualified officials largely because many older generation officials refuse to officiate at two matches in the same weekend and the supply of new officials has all but dried up with the abolition of qualification by experience route.

Buckner does suggest that some competitions can be continued by holding evening or specialist meetings. However, with the exception of those tracks which are run by clubs themselves, the cost of running such meetings without subsidy has become prohibitive. Lifestyle changes militate against midweek and specialist meetings (those held on Merseyside have not been very successful in terms of numbers) and the holding of such meetings contradicts the concept of reducing the number of competitions in which young athletes take part. Indeed, Buckner seems totally confused about the nature of club competition.

In Road Race and Cross Country running the current competition pathway is from County to Northern. The time period between each is two weeks on the road and three weeks on cross country. Until the early 1980's the latter was four weeks with a District Championship (East Lancs and West Lancs) held at the midway point between the county and northern events. In addition, at that time the Inter-Counties (which is now held in March) was also held in January which meant athletes could compete in three, sometimes four, championships in as many weeks. Not unexpectedly some athletes chose to miss one or other of them. In recent years many athletes chose not to compete at all, preferring the attractions of the Helsby Half Marathon and other road races.

There is no Regional road relay championship although the decision of four counties (Cheshire, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside) to hold their road relay championships at a common venue, administered each year by the host county, to save costs has been accorded the mythical title of a North West title for the overall winners of the combined event. It has been suggested that this should now be administered by the North West Region and regarded as a Regional Championship. If that is to be the case (and this applies equally to all championships) the personnel would need to be in place to administer the championships, unless that service is provided by an outside agency.

There has been a suggestion that each Region should provide teams to contest a National Road Race Championship although how this would fit in with the desire to focus athletes' attention on quality of competition rather than prizes is obscure. It appears to me to be advocating anything to justify one's existence rather than advocating something appropriate and of lasting value.

Therefore, the main points which should be considered are:-

Is there a demand for a Regional Championship in any discipline?

If there is where would it fit in the calendar as it is currently constituted?

If the Bucknerite calendar is adopted how would this affect other competitions?

Who would carry out the administration (Advertising, entry forms, booking the venue, obtaining the officials, liaising with the LA's on health and safety)?

How would it be funded?

The main courses of action which need to be adopted are:-

Extensive research into the correlation of entries at county and Northern level to identify patterns of entry both in terms of team and individual participation.

Questionnaires to clubs, counties plus senior/ junior athletes regarding the relevance of Regional Championships.

Enquiries as to the funding options for establishing a Regional Championship initially at junior/senior level.

Please Note: There is no deliberate policy of excluding Young Athletes at this stage but the emphasis appears to have been directed towards seniors where the fall off in numbers appears to have taken place. In addition, it should be easier to carry out research based on the older age groups rather than the younger ones.

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