



Images courtesy of Media Services, Loughborough University

A sporting chance

Loughborough and the Olympics

Sir David Wallace is a man of many talents. He has been Treasurer and Vice President of the Royal Society since 2002, and will become the next Master of Churchill College, and Director of the Isaac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences, in Cambridge, in October 2006. From 1994 to December 2005, Sir David was Vice Chancellor of Loughborough University. Here, he explains the important supporting role that Loughborough will play in the 2012 Olympics, and highlights some of the other ways that the university is already responding to the Olympic challenge.

Loughborough is the UK's premier university for sports development, research and teaching. In conjunction with UK Sport and Sport England, the university has been developing a package of sports facilities as part of the English Institute of Sport (including athletics, badminton, gymnastics, hockey, netball, and swimming, as well as the National Cricket Centre) to supplement its already extensive resources. In addition, generic support facilities (acclimatisation, accommodation, conditioning suites, sport massage, physiotherapy and sport medicine rooms, sport science labs, and so on) have also been upgraded and expanded. The exceptional existing personnel and expertise within the university are being augmented, to enable Loughborough to offer a coordinated programme of the very highest quality. All of this is being done in partnership with the national Governing Bodies of sport and related organisations, many of whom are based on or near campus.

This world-class environment is available to students and the local community, but priority use is for elite athletes and squads. The pay-off has already been remarkable, in the 30 medals, including eight Golds, which students, graduates and athletes based at Loughborough won at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. The focus now is on Britain's potential Olympians and Olympic squads as they prepare for the Beijing and London Games. It is likely that in the 18 months building up to 2012, the potential medal winners will be based increasingly in London, taking advantage of the Olympic facilities themselves. As the British athletes relocate, capacity will be freed up at Loughborough, making the facilities available to athletes from other nations, as part of their preparation and acclimatisation.

It is both wonderful, and a massive responsibility, that Loughborough will be so involved in the build-up to the 2012 Olympics. This profile has been built over decades, and a large factor recently has been the public backing of its most prominent former students. The university's excellent Alumni Association, supported by a group of staff that Americans would call an 'Advancement Office', has played a large role in this process, tracking down alumni and rebuilding relationships between them and the university. From an informal list of around 12,000 in 1994, numbers have grown to a structured database of over 100,000 now, of whom the university is in touch with around 50,000. It has been rewarded with excellent results: Lord Coe, Paula Radcliffe and a host of other leading figures in the sporting world have been supportive in publicising the merits of Loughborough - when they have not been busy leading the 2012 bid or winning marathons!



An inspirational legacy... and facilities to match

So Loughborough will be playing a big part in the build-up to the Olympics. Of course the aim will be to keep momentum going beyond the event itself, and maintaining British sporting development. But as the bid for the Games emphasised, we should be much more imaginative and ambitious in the legacies that the games leave.

In my view, the biggest legacy of the Games will be the inspiration that they will give to the nation and young people in particular. Sport is theatre without the script. You do not know the outcome and you do not know who will perform on the day. That's one of the great things about sport. Having this happening in our own country will magnify the sense of drama and the desire to be part of it, in some way, in the future. The impact on young people is particularly important. There will be various things to engage them in the run up to 2012, some of which should impact on the performances at the Games themselves, and they should all stimulate the culture of 'volunteering and participation' which will help to make the games a success.

The obvious sporting legacy of 2012, of course, will be the large-scale, permanent venues in east London. Will they be able to break even in the long run, given the initial set-up costs and the fact that they will not always be full to capacity in the future? The challenge is a very different one from establishing the sporting environment at Loughborough, where the focus is on the facilities for athletes; the fact that Olympic sites are massive spectator venues multiplies their capital cost very substantially. There is a corresponding increase in costs to maintain and run them. We will have to wait and see.

There is another wider legacy that I believe the Games should aspire to leave. In the sporting domain, the Olympics represent the pinnacle of excellence. We should be asking what are the common factors in achieving excellence across all human endeavours including, for example, business and the performing arts. Sir Clive Woodward (another Loughborough graduate) has commented how much players in contact sports can learn from ballet. How might we use the Games to establish an aspiration for excellence in all aspects of human endeavour? Frank Dick (another...) is exploring how an 'Institute for Excellence' might be set up in a practical way to realise this kind of vision.

In the meantime, Loughborough is committed to giving younger people outstanding opportunities to turn sporting aspirations into actions, by developing their abilities.

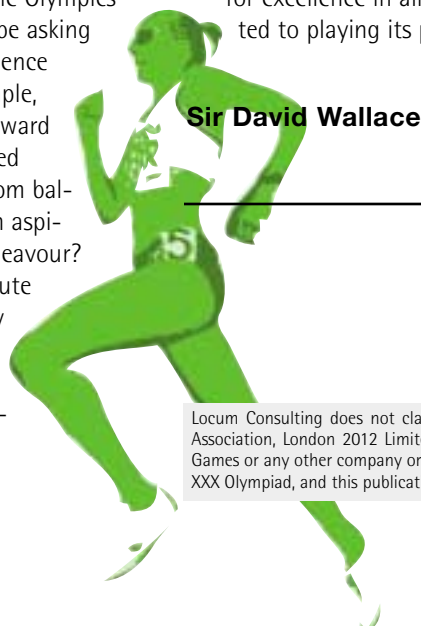
The university has been fortunate in obtaining significant help from individuals. The hub of activity is at the Sir John Beckwith Centre for Sport, which was opened at the university by Paula Radcliffe in August 2002. It houses the Sports Development Centre, the Youth Sport Trust, and a number of other sporting organisations, as well as members of the academic department. John's initiative was also vital in the establishment of the university's Institute for Youth Sport.

Another excellent recent addition is the Peter Harrison Centre for Disability Sport. The aim of the centre is to generate new knowledge in disability sport and inclusive physical activity through applied research, which can be translated into practical outcomes that provide tangible, lasting benefits for disabled people. Fiona Neale, who won a Silver medal in the 100 metres backstroke at the Sydney Paralympics, and who is a personal heroine of mine, is just one of the many disabled athletes to have benefited from the university's support.

The university has also taken steps to provide the local and regional community with the chance to participate in a wide range of sports. For example, it has funded an upgrade of the ground for the local football club, Loughborough Dynamo, whose players are students and local young people. It also subsidises the 50 metre pool to the tune of £100,000 per annum, so that members of the local community (like me, now I have the time!) have access.

On a more strategic level, the East Midlands Development Agency and Sport England have supported an £8 million 'Loughborough Sports Park', adjacent to the University, to grow the sports 'cluster' that has been developing around Loughborough for some time. This will bring together national governing bodies of sport (22 of which are based in the East Midlands), and other sports-related and commercial organisations, to share knowledge and expertise and increase efficiency through shared services, all which will benefit the University, the town and the region economically. Loughborough's involvement in the preparations for the 2012 Olympic Games will only serve to increase the pace of this development.

On every level, London's hosting of the Olympics will give a huge boost to sport in the UK. New opportunities will be presented to elite athletes and beginners alike, and the profile of sport will be raised to new heights. The seeds could, and should, be sown for the next generation of British Olympic and Paralympic success, for greater participation in sport throughout the nation, and in the creation of a wider aspiration for excellence in all that we do. Loughborough is committed to playing its part.



Sir David Wallace

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