

February 22, 2010

Dear BBF Committee and Prospective Committee Members,

It has been brought to my attention that the position of Head Coach for the Great Britain Baseball Programme is being reviewed along the lines of looking for cost savings for the BBF membership. As the implications of any strategic change will affect who holds the position in the future, I would like to highlight some points that I feel are relevant to the decision-making process and should help ensure the right person is appointed.

Firstly, although I am very supportive of the current staff and share pride in what they have achieved, I consider my personal feelings on the matter to be irrelevant. The BBF board represents all members, junior to adult, and I appreciate that one team/group cannot be held above the rest, and that decisions need to be made on what is in the best interest of the game and the membership as a whole. Therefore, with the development of baseball in Great Britain in mind, I would like to highlight the following points.

The majority of baseball people in the UK recognise that the greatest weakness/stumbling block to game development is the lack of competent coaches at all levels. Prior to Stephan Rapaglia's appointment some 6 years ago this problem had become critical at the GB junior and academy levels. These teams were being staffed for the most part by well-meaning parents with very little baseball knowledge and player development was, at best, stagnating.

The relevance of this to your decision-making process is that the role of the Great Britain Senior Head Coach has a number of ripple effects, some of which I feel may not be immediately obvious. I believe my personal experience of British baseball, like that of various others, clearly highlights this point.

Prior to Stephan Rapaglia's involvement in GB baseball I had been in the country and eligible to represent Great Britain at two European Championships. I chose not to be part of GB baseball at any level due to the coaching staff that was in place. I had no negative personal feelings towards the staff, but they lacked the credibility to attract players who had been exposed to a higher level of play in other environments. Evidence can be seen in GB's rise during Stephan's time, from (under current tournament size) a Pool B team, considered a rest day for the major nations, to a major nation in its own right, now not only established, but capable of challenging for the gold medal each cycle. I feel a large part of this is due to the credibility the current staff brought and, through that credibility, the players they attract to the programme. What is often overlooked is recognition of the programme's ability to draw in domestic-based players like Simon Pole, Roddi Liebenberg and myself who, although having come up through other National academies and programmes, now reside in the UK.

Now, the real question here is: why is this issue important to the British 12- to 18-year-olds? The answer is that young players represent the future of the game, and we must provide them with a target to aim for and the coaching to give them every opportunity to reach that target. This is where the ripple effect comes in, and where the importance of

why the level of person who holds the position of Head Coach comes into play. Stephan was very good at selling his vision of a programme and, through doing so, persuading people like Roddi Liebenberg, Simon Pole, Will Lintern, Alex Malihoudis and me to get involved at the youth level, something I would not have considered in the past.

Under Stephan and Alan, GB baseball has moved from having an isolated senior team, to an organisational structure that stretches from the senior team, through the juniors and into the academy. This structured approach provides active mentoring from the GB senior coaching staff to the GB youth coaches

Through Stephan's involvement and persuasion I served as GB Under-15s Head Coach for two cycles and instructed at the youth academy. Without his association I would not have considered taking these volunteer, unpaid positions. I was also very fortunate to have Will Lintern, a future GB senior player at the time, serve under me as an assistant coach on one of the tours. Will is now the Under-15s Head Coach, and has been involved in the senior programme as a player for some years. It is clear that the mentoring process that Stephan gives to his players and junior coaching staff has had a vast effect on Will, and now means the next generation of player is getting exposed to a higher level of instruction. Although perhaps only 2-3 players from each year's intake at this level will make it to the GB seniors, learning to play the game the right way will have a continuing impact as these players progress out of the junior ranks and into the other levels of baseball.

This clearly illustrates the fact that the selection of the National Team Head Coach has far-reaching effects, and the lack of leadership and credibility prior to Stephan's appointment to this position could be seen to have led to a much slower progression of local-born talent into the national squad. It's the old analogy of "you reap what you sow", and just as crops take time to grow, so do baseball players. The green shoots in the form of young players like Richard Klijn, Michael Trask, Callum Woods and Will Lintern, and even the reinvigoration of experienced players like Alex Malihoudis, whose game has lifted noticeably since Stephan's arrival, show the revival of local talent has started. However, like any crop it only needs one bad season to have all the good work destroyed.

I understand that a strong committee seeks to make the best decisions for the future of the GB programme, and I am not naive enough to think that you are all unaware of the need to improve coaching levels in the UK. With this in mind, I offer the following suggestions:

- Create two unpaid positions of "Developmental Coaches". Each year, the BBF should select two coaches involved in domestic baseball to be mentored by the GB Senior National Team coaching staff. These two coaches should travel with the team and attend all training camps. They will learn from coaches with professional and US College coaching experience and then contribute that knowledge to the domestic leagues.
- One member of the coaching staff of each National League Team should, each year, attend a one-day coaching clinic at a pre-season domestic GB camp. The

coaches should spend the first half of the day watching GB practice, and the second half going over training structure and procedures with the GB coaching staff.

- To help guide club coaches to structure more meaningful practice and training sessions, the templates for GB training drills, batting practice routines, etc, should be sent to all senior domestic clubs at the beginning of each season.

Each of these points will, I feel, add value, and they highlight that the level of coaching needed cannot be drawn from the domestic pool, as that was responsible for creating the original problem. I feel, therefore, that it is imperative to appoint someone with the background, experience and credibility that Stephan and Alan brought to the Programme.

It is an unfortunate fact that we do not have the domestic coaching resources to fill such a position right now. However, there are young coaches such as James Pearson and Will Lintern who have the passion and commitment to be considered for such a role within a few years.

Nevertheless, this could only happen if they have around them the right mentoring opportunity and structure to aid in their developmental pathway. This is not going to be achieved by learning from well-meaning coaches who only experience the domestic leagues and have only a basic grasp of the fundamentals, but from people like Stephan, Lance, Charlie etc, who have experienced the game at the sharp end and can, therefore, open the young coaches' minds to a new level of thinking and give them a network to further resources.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read and consider this, as I understand there are a lot of views to take into account. However, I feel I have to convey a clear argument to show: (i) why the next GB Head Coach needs to be either one of the current coaching staff (thereby retaining the existing momentum) or a candidate with a similar pedigree: and (ii) that the Head Coach, through his leadership role and responsibility for guidance of the programme, needs the freedom to select staff members throughout all levels of the GB organisation to ensure his vision and strategy are correctly and fully implemented.

Sincerely,

Adam Roberts