

Speech by Secretary of State, Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP

City of London Academy, Southwark – 28 June 2010

Introduction

Thank you all for coming, and thanks too to the City of London Academy for hosting us.

I'm particularly pleased to have the opportunity to talk about this government's priorities for school sports today: right at the start of the YST and Lloyds TSB's National School Sports Week.

This year nearly 14,000 schools and 5 million children will be taking part. And by encouraging them to have a go at an Olympic or Paralympic activity they have never tried before, it is an excellent example of harnessing the power of big sporting events to get more young people playing sport.

Of course, it's not easy to talk about sporting inspiration only hours after England's World Cup disappointment.

As someone born in 1966, just months after the only time we have ever won the World Cup, I too desperately wanted this time to be different.

But sport is about picking yourself up after setbacks as well as winning trophies. On days like this we should measure our sporting potential by the height of our aspirations, not allow it to be limited by the despair of failure.

Perhaps this too is the moment to remember that great sporting careers don't start with the World Cup, Wimbledon or the Olympics. They begin in back yards, side streets and school playing fields right around the country.

They may end up with expert guidance from a Fergie or an Arsene or a Carlo – but they start with a helping hand from teachers, volunteer coaches, and mums and dads.

And on today of all days – whatever the fog of national disappointment – I want to be clear that, for this government, competitive sport really matters.

Not just because it's great entertainment.

Not just because we have the Olympics in two years.

But in its own right. As something that should be a vital part of growing up for every child in the country.

Banishing the myths

It's great to have Denise here – and what an inspiration she is to so many young people.

But we need to banish the idea that those who care about competitive sport care only about finding the next Denise Lewis, David Beckham or Andy Murray.

And as I mentioned Andy, the very best of luck to him in seeing off Sam Querrey later today.

Of course we want to nurture world-class talent. But above all we want to nurture the values that are common in sport, but perhaps not as common outside sport as they should be.

Discovering talents you never knew you had. Striving to be the best you can be. Teamwork in adversity. Dignity and generosity in victory or defeat.

But the figures for involvement in competitive sport at school are still very disappointing. Fewer than 3 out of 10 pupils regularly compete against classmates, while fewer than 2 out of 10 compete against those in other schools.

Too many young people want to take part in competitions – and simply don't get the chance.

Even more disappointing is what happens when young people leave school. Sports participation drops off sharply – with the number of 16-19 year-olds doing sport falling by a third compared to 11-15 year olds.

For young women the drop-out rate is even higher. And for disabled people the picture is worse still – only 1 in 10 currently does 3 half-hour sessions of sport per week.

The cost is enormous. Not just in terms of health, where 1 in 4 adults in this country are now classed as obese – the highest level in Europe.

Not just in terms of social breakdown, where there is clear evidence that participation in sport reduces the propensity for at-risk teenagers to commit crime.

But also in terms of educational attainment, where teachers know that physical activity boosts concentration and feeds through directly into improved academic performance.

The schools showing the fastest improvement in GCSE results over the past three years were schools with a sports speciality.

So the question is not whether to focus on sport *or* on academic achievement. The question is whether we can afford to go on ignoring the fact that sport can help power academic performance.

And let's bury forever the idea that losing a sports competition is an assault on children's self-esteem.

Low self-esteem does not come from losing; it comes from not being emotionally equipped to deal with disappointments and setbacks.

The point of competitive sport is to help provide that emotional ballast.

To allow young people to experience competition in a structured, rules-based environment, and learn how to treat Kipling's "two imposters" – triumph and disaster – "just the same."

Shakespeare wrote: “Ambition should be made of sterner stuff”. And there is a lesson here: we will never help people to reach their ambitions if we shield them from the self-discipline and risk-taking necessary to move to the next level.

Competition addresses a basic human desire to stretch ourselves to the limit of our potential.

Before Roger Bannister ran a four-minute mile in 1954, no one believed it was possible. The following year 37 people managed it – and the year after that there were 300 more.

Bannister didn't just change what we thought he could do. He changed what we thought anyone could do.

So encouraging young people to broaden the horizons of their ambition is vital – and competitive sport should play a major role in making that happen.

Why now?

Why is this so important now?

Because the greatest sporting competition on the planet will arrive on our doorstep in 2012.

Offering us a once in a lifetime opportunity to put this right.

Two weeks ago I was in Plymouth to watch Tom Daley training for the Olympics.

Still only 16, and with his school studies to contend with, he is in training *ten times a week, every week*. All those hours, days, weeks and months of training, for a dive that will last *less than two seconds* in 2012.

His back two-and-a-half somersaults with two-and-a-half twists takes longer for me to say than for him to do.

He knows that success in two years' time depends on the hours he puts in now.

And he recognises that what he is working towards is not just a moment of glory in 2012, but an achievement that will last a lifetime, that no one will ever be able to take away.

What extraordinary self-discipline. What remarkable determination. Like Denise, what a role model for thousands of young people.

But if we are serious about making the most of what Seb Coe described as “the greatest opportunity sport in this country has ever had”; if we are truly determined to use the Games to secure a lasting legacy of increased participation in school sport, then it isn't just our Olympic and Paralympic hopefuls that need to be putting in the hours now.

It is ministers, officials, and of course schools themselves who need to be laying the groundwork.

An Olympics-style competition for schools

That's why we are today announcing our plan to set up a nationwide, Olympic and Paralympic-style competition – open to every school and every child in the country.

Annual competition days will start taking place in schools from the next academic year. And by the summer of 2012, I hope that tens of thousands of schools will have chosen to take part.

That will mean more competition within every school. But the plan will also mean that local schools are pitted against each other in new, district leagues – starting from January next year. This will encourage schools to try new sports and create new opportunities for children who may not have played much sport before.

Any school team or individual athlete who succeeds at this level will then have the chance to progress through to annual, county or city-level festivals that will showcase the best of local competitive sport.

Finally, at the top of the pyramid, the most talented young athletes in the country will have a chance to represent their school at a National Olympic-and-Paralympic-style event – with the first one hopefully taking place on the eve of the Games in our brand new Olympic Stadium in 2012.

And, as a crucial part of the scheme, young people at every level will be able to add to the excitement and motivation by tracking the progress of their school online, and comparing themselves with other schools and individuals around the country.

2012 and beyond

We will be setting out the full details of the scheme – including its name – in the autumn.

But let me be very clear. Success will not be when the first national event takes place in 2012. Success will be when it happens in 2013, 2014, 2015 and every year from then on.

That's why this cannot simply be a government initiative. If we're going to make this a permanent fixture in every school calendar, schools themselves must have a real stake in the scheme, and a whole range of partners must be involved right from the start.

Already I'm working closely with the BOA, Sport England the Youth Sport Trust and LOCOG.

I have discussed this with the Mayor of London who I am delighted to see is here and has given it his full support.

And I will be talking to the BPA about how we can best bring the benefits of the scheme to young disabled people.

Michael, Boris and I will also be asking some of our top Olympians and Paralympians to help build stronger connections between Team GB and local schools the length and breadth of the country.

Conclusion

This is an ambitious project. Getting it right with the time and money we have available will be a major logistical and operational challenge.

But this is a once in a generation opportunity.

To take the inspiration of heroes like Geoff Hurst in 1966, Jonny Wilkinson in 2003 or Rebecca Adlington in 2008 and turn into something that touches every child in every school in the country;

To create a permanent sporting legacy for the London 2012 Games;

To offer young people more opportunities than ever before to get involved in sport;

To harness Olympic and Paralympic values to revive the culture of competitive sports in every school in Britain.

I hope you will join me and Michael in the challenge.

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