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**PROPOSALS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE BRITISH WATER POLO CHAMPIONSHIPS  
THE OLYMPIC LEGACY**

**July 2011**

**Objectives**

- Enhance the profile of British water polo across Europe
- Provide more high quality games for the leading British players
- Enable the best British players to compete in the LEN competitions
- Provide more opportunities for British referees to be appointed to European games
- Provide more opportunities for British table officials
- Provide more opportunities for British coaches
- Improve the prospects of a British administrator achieving membership of the LEN TWPC
- Cascade best practice from the World Class Programme (WCP) to the club game
- Encourage the leading clubs to develop a fan base, sponsorship opportunities and so generate income
- Generate a legacy from the investment in water polo

**How the objectives will be achieved**

- British clubs accept invitations available for LEN competitions
- British clubs to get through to the later stages of LEN competitions
- The British Championships to involve more games ideally played one game per weekend and home and away leading to a Grand Final set piece occasion

**The need for change**

The British Championships are the high spot of the domestic season. The standard of play has in recent years been the highest quality available to the players, referees and

table officials. However it is compressed into two weekends involving, for the men, three games in the first weekend. Three games in two days lead to a reduction in the quality of play from what might otherwise have been achieved. If the games were spread out the standard of play would improve dramatically.

The domestic season runs from September when the British League starts through to the end of February when the British Championships end. In most European countries the domestic season runs until May. International events dominate the summer months. The early rounds of the LEN competitions are in October to December. Some of the British referees have received invitations to the later stages of Len competitions in the New Year but complain of not being allocated to the important games.

LEN competitions provide experiences for the better British players to test themselves against some of the best players in the world. In recent years that opportunity has not always been taken by the clubs who have qualified through the British Championships. That loss is to the detriment of the GB teams and the players who aspire to the GB teams

The position is complicated by the approach of the 2012 London Olympics. The GB women propose to commandeer two clubs to enter LEN competitions in the 2011/2012 season. GB men are expected to be playing for foreign clubs this coming season and so will play no part in LEN competition for their home clubs and will not play in the British Championships.

When the current GB players return to the domestic game after London they will have experience of a very different sport. In order to retain this cohort of players in whom the country has invested hundreds of thousands of pounds the domestic game must change and develop. Those who administer the sport will quickly lose the confidence of those players if the sport is not seen to be developing in a way that mirrors the personal development of those players. They will have seen and experienced games played one or at most two per weekend, home and away fixtures in front of enthusiastic crowds, extended runs in LEN competitions, high quality refereeing and table officials, and equipment operating without fault. They are entitled to expect the sport in Britain to aspire to and achieve the same standards.

### **Changes under way**

The British League has moved to reduce the number of teams in the First Division. This is a positive move and will remove the embarrassing cricket scores in some of the more uneven games. It does not address the need to avoid playing three games per weekend in the early stages and all games are played at central venues preventing the development of home support and restricting sponsorship opportunities.

Traditionally the BS WPC has used the results of the British League to determine which teams are invited to compete in the British Championships. This change by the British League may provide the opportunity to look again at that policy.

### **Assumptions**

Now that entry for London has been secured for both the men and the women and the respective programmes established the focus of the BS WPC must switch to 2016 and 2020. It is assumed for the purposes of this paper that:

- Funding will continue for water polo from UK Sport or its successor at a level below the current funding level;
- Sufficient funding will be in place to allow BS to employ a men's coach and a women's coach;
- The players will no longer receive APA's and will have to pay for their sport rather than their sport paying them;
- GB players will be part time apart from those plying their trade abroad.

### **Maintaining standards**

In order to keep the standard of play at its maximum level and maintain fitness, players based at home will need more opportunities to play high quality games over a full calendar year. Younger players coming through need more opportunities to test themselves against better players. The LEN club competitions can be part of the GB programme if the GB players are involved. Entries for three clubs for both men and women ought to be taken up without fail. The emphasis in the months of October to December, and hopefully beyond, should be success in LEN competition rather than in domestic games.

For there to be any prospect of GB men and women qualifying for the European “A” Championships the current cohorts of players will have to be kept together and kept interested in the sport. The administration of the sport needs to be seen to be trying to meet the future needs of the players and for the sport to be seen to be “moving on”.

### **How might British teams make more progress in LEN competitions?**

The obvious point to make is that it will only happen if the teams are significantly stronger than the teams that have entered in the last few years. That can only be achieved by adopting two approaches:

- The best British players must play for the teams playing in the competitions;
- The standard of coaching and preparation must be improved.

In the men’s game the best players are spread thinly across too many clubs. This is less of a problem in the women’s games where the best players are concentrated in two clubs. Three potential options are proposed by this paper:

#### **Option 1**

A club could be formed based on the World Class Programme (say “British Gas WCP”) to which all the GB players are registered as a second claim club; the rules of the British Championships are altered to require the other clubs to release their players if asked to do so to allow them to play for British Gas WCP against the other clubs that the players are registered with; British Gas WCP select the GB players based in Britain; British Gas WCP are invited into the British Championships and thereby qualify for the LEN competitions; the players play for British Gas WCP in the LEN competition even if their usual club has also qualified for the LEN competitions.

#### **Option 2**

The model proposed by the GB women for 2011, (all GB players split between 2 clubs), could be developed further and applied to the men as well. For the GB players to play for another club other than their current club, they first of all need to be registered with the second club; there needs to be a system of domestic transfers compatible with the LEN Rules on the transfer of players – that will not be difficult to

achieve for purely domestic transfers; the GB coach would be given the authority to direct players to particular clubs and the clubs would be obliged to accept the registration of those players – clearly this would work best with the co-operation of all involved; those teams would be given a guaranteed entry into the British Championships to allow them to qualify for LEN competitions; the players would play for the second club both in the British Championships and the LEN competition, even if that was against their first club and even if their first club also qualified for LEN competitions.

### **Option 3**

The third option would be to ensure that by a system of transfers as set out above all the GB players were registered with four clubs invited to enter the British Championships; the British Championships would be contested between those four clubs with three qualifying for the LEN competitions; most but not all of the GB players would play in LEN competitions; unless transferred again the players would play in the following British Championships for their second club and the cycle would continue.

There are strengths and weaknesses in all three options:

- Option 1 gives the best opportunity for a British club to get to the later stages of a competition and allows the GB team to play together at modest cost to the World Class Programme; however, it would destroy the British Championships as that team would win every time, the other clubs would be unlikely to enter the LEN competitions as they would have lost their best players and so the only players to benefit would be those already in the team and the opportunity to develop fringe players would be lost.
- Option 2 meet some of the points made in relation to Option 1 but would mean the perpetuation of success for two clubs at the expense of others.
- Option 3 perhaps gives the most balanced outcome. It would have the advantage that it would encourage a wider group of players and coaches. The teams would be unlikely to go as far in the LEN competitions but over time

standards should be driven up and success should follow. The British Championships should be really competitive and produce good matches giving the clubs a product that they could sell to sponsors. In order to allow the clubs to develop they may need to be guaranteed entry for a predetermined number of years.

- It may be that the solution for the men and the women might be different.

Preparation of teams for the British Championships and for LEN competitions provides an opportunity to spread best practice from the WPC amongst the clubs. The GB coaches would be expected to take and direct training sessions. Promising coaches could be nominated to a club by the GB coaches to work with the club coach. Education of the existing club coach might well feature in the Schedule of Expectations between BS and the club. Preparation would be purposeful and focussed on the objectives set out above. The GB coaches would have the opportunity of assessing a wider pool of players beyond those on the World Class Programme.

### **Changes needed**

- The British Championships need to change to a four team format with multiple games played home and away ending with a Finals weekend and spread between early February and late May. This change should be piloted in 2012, from February to mid April, so that the GB players can see changes taking place and the competition can operate smoothly from 2013.
- Clubs would be required to enter into a Schedule of Expectations setting out what would be required of them in order to be invited into the British Championships and receive the support of the WPC that would bring.
- A domestic transfer system will need to be devised to allow the movement of players primarily in the summer before the start of the season but with a window in January.
- It would plainly be desirable if the clubs likely to be affected were able to agree on the changes proposed. If not the BS WPC will need to draft rules to make it happen.
- The WPC will need to own this scheme – the action on behalf of the women in 2011 show the perceived value to be gained from this

- The GB coaches will have an opportunity to engage with the clubs and be able to set and monitor standards.
- An option would be to adopt say Option 2 in 2012 and Option 3 in 2013 and beyond in order to maximise the benefit of the GB players for the European “B” Championships and the prospects of qualifying for the “A” Championships. That said this should be seen as a long term plan.
- None of this would affect the British League as players could play for their first club in that competition. What might be needed is a requirement that players did not play competitive matches say 7 days either side of a LEN weekend. The successful clubs in Europe such as Pro Recco have a LEN team and a domestic team with only some players playing for both. This would allow proper preparation and avoid players being over tired by domestic commitments making clear where the priorities lay.

The proposals contained in this paper are approved and adopted with Option 3 to be introduced for men and women for the British Championships 2012.

### **Proposed Option 3 Structure**

Each competition will consist of 4 teams invited by the BSWPC with the best of the remaining players from other clubs second claimed into a competing team.

The preliminary round will be a Home and Away round robin.

Maintain the Finals day event as the premium British Water Polo event of the year at a central location with Gold and Bronze play offs for both Men and Women.

In 2012 the finals day will be held in mid April and from 2013 onwards mid May.

This structure increases the number of games up to 7 games for all teams.

### **British Swimming Water Polo Committee**

Howard Cartwright Chairman

Alan J. Booth ASA Representative

Rhys Tamlyn WASA Representative

Ken Fussell SASA Representative and

Executive Chair British Water Polo Development Group

Sam Greetham British Swimming Board Liaison