

Information for BWPL Clubs:

In view of concerns expressed by a significant number of BWPL clubs regarding British Swimming Water Polo Committee's proposals for revamping the British Championship, I have been asked by BWPL chairman David Andrews to bring you up to date with latest developments.

The original document, prepared by BS Water Polo Executive Chairman Ken Fussell (who recently stood down from that role) and endorsed by BSWPC, was sent to BWPL and other interested individuals on 27 July; then circulated by BWPL to all member clubs. Since then, this has happened:

Emailed letter from David Andrews to Howard Cartwright, Chairman, BSWPC, 4 August (circulated to all BWPL clubs):

Dear Howard,

Re: Proposals for the Development of the British Water Polo Championships – Document dated July 2011

The above document was discussed at this week's meeting of the BWPL Committee. BWPL acknowledges that great strides have been made in British water polo in the build-up to the Olympics and you can be assured that we will continue to give full support to any move that ensures the domestic game maintains an upward trend of development up to and beyond 2012. However, having taken into account comments made to us by some of our most senior clubs (examples are given below), we consider the plan approved by your committee on 2 July to be seriously flawed.

Firstly, I must express our disappointment that no attempt has been made to consult with BWPL. This is despite the fact that, at two meetings with David Sparkes and one with Ken Fussell, we were assured the League has a key role to play in the "process" of development. Radical change requires the support of those people directly affected – the 50 or so clubs that we represent. Sadly, there appears to have been no attempt to talk to people at the water polo coalface. To make matters worse, the proposal document was circulated with extremely short notice of the deadline for comment and at the height of holiday season. We have contacted as many of our senior clubs as possible to gauge their reaction. The absence of lead officials on holiday means that, even now, some clubs will have had no opportunity to review the document.

In general, it appears to us that the list of objectives is admirable in most respects but, in reality, no more than a wish list that answers few questions – for example, who pays for the inevitable increased costs of a significantly expanded British Championships programme? (The assumption is that it will be the clubs. And the message we get from them is that their support would probably not be forthcoming).

One of our clubs comments that the tone of the document "smacks of central control of a sport rather than developing a vibrant, vicarious and developing sport." It is difficult to argue with that interpretation when the plan includes elements such as the forced migration of

players to “commandeered” clubs; clubs obliged to accept these players at the expense of existing home-based players (the very players who in the first place helped their club qualify for the British Championships). Worst of all, perhaps, we are informed that it would “plainly be desirable . . . if the clubs were able to agree on the changes proposed” but that, if not, “BSWPC will need to draft rules to make it happen.”

Surely, if the senior clubs in the country do not endorse and support a proposal, it should not be forced upon them! Also, if the BSWPC’s stated intention is to implement this with or without club support, what is the purpose of consultation?

Is there an alternative? Whilst we cannot support the proposals in their current form, we suggest this dual approach (in view of the LEN qualification process already established for women’s water polo, these comments relate mainly, but not exclusively, to the men’s game):

- Reinstatement of the British Championships to its original form where qualification is derived from finishing positions in the BWPL and registrations continue from the BWPL. This would allow the best clubs to compete against each other in a domestic, club-based finale event, at the same time providing valuable information for national coaches on developing players.
- Follow up with an inter-regional event – comprising anything from four to nine regions and constructed to mirror the Australian inter-State competition (where players revert to their region of origin) and include a limit (or not) on numbers of foreign players. The regions to be based on the existing ASA model or comprise combinations of adjoining regions or indeed the formation of a number of artificial (but geographically complete) regional teams (including Scottish and Welsh involvement). *It is this event that would determine LEN entry*, on the basis that a registration process could presumably be established to meet (i.e. circumvent) LEN qualification rules. The regional approach would encourage the spread of best practice from the WCP by basing regional training at leading clubs. It would also create a genuine competition where allegiances count for something and there is an opportunity to build local support, sponsorship.

It is our view that the already de-valued British Championship (2010 winners Bristol were bolstered by a strong contingent of Welsh players) would be even less of an attraction if based on the pick ‘n’ mix of players envisaged in the BSWPC proposals.

A sample of comments from some of our leading clubs:

The proposal supports an elite 15 to 20 men and women players at the expense of the elite competition for the top eight teams (100+ players) for both men and women. We

might be put in the position of changing the whole club structure to cater for 8-10 players who are left in the squad post-London 2012.

If we qualified for Europe via the British Championships but were obliged to include three or four outside players at the expense of our own up-and-coming players, I do not believe my club committee would agree to finance the venture.

The maintenance of clubs and their competition needs to be balanced and supported by the production of performance teams to enhance GB water polo and for athletes who are capable and willing to have a (part-time) career as a water polo player, similarly for officials, coaches and administrators who are willing and capable to commit themselves to this career/lifestyle.

The option to play home and away in a British Championship is attractive and a positive move, but only if it is with clubs. Otherwise, why would anyone look to raise money, support etc. for a group of people who do not live in the area of the club, have nothing to do with the club, and will play against them in a couple of months; and the (local) players who have played for the team are dismissed in favour of GB players parachuted in.

The concept of a "fixed winner" of an event with a manufactured team (the GB national team) winning every year is anathema to sport. No country which seeks sporting excellence dispenses with the key element in sport, namely competition. There is complete contempt for the views of the 1300 or so players and 50 clubs at the top leagues.

I shall be most interested to receive your detailed comments.

Yours sincerely,

***David Andrews
Chairman
BWPL***

Emailed letter from Howard Cartwright to David Andrews, 7 August:

Dear David,
thank you for your comments & I hope that the attachment is helpful in setting the context, whilst also providing assurance as to the BS WPC's desire to work with the BWPL & all involved in the sport.
Ken Fussell will continue with the consultation process & will be coming back in due course to the BS WPC with his recommendations. There is no absolute deadline on this & it may well prove impossible to reach a conclusion before the BWPL season starts.
I can confirm that we will come back to you before making any final decisions.

Best wishes, Howard

Howard Cartwright letter to David Andrews, dated 7 August:

Dear David,

Thank you for your letter setting out the response of the British Water Polo League to the BS WPC proposals for the British Water Polo Championships.

You say that there has been no attempt to consult with the British League but the whole purpose of the paper was to seek views and we have asked for your input into the proposals. The direction of travel has already been the subject of detailed discussions with the players, the World Class Programme and some of the clubs likely to be most affected so that a workable proposal could go out to wider consultation with a clear steer from the BS WPC of how we saw the future. We acknowledge that there are flaws in what we propose but if we had answers for all the issues and every thing were already determined, then there would be little point in consulting. We hope to have a constructive dialogue with the whole water polo community but dialogue in a vacuum is rarely productive, hence we have put forward clear ideas that we may need to “sell”.

The reason for the short response time is that if at all possible, I am anxious that the players and their clubs know the shape of the season ahead and the criteria for European qualification before the 2011/2012 season begins. However, the situation remains fluid, with it looking increasingly likely that 2012 will have to be a transition year. For example, even if changes are introduced this time, it looks probable that at least some of the preliminary rounds will be held at MAC on the 18/19th February.

There are some things on which we can all agree, as your letter demonstrates. Firstly the concept of “no change” is not an option. The London Olympics provide the sport with a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a fundamental difference to the sport for the benefit of all who are involved. We must be bold.

You have raised the question of finance as did your President when the proposal document was first circulated. The cost of water polo falls on the players. They pay their club subscriptions, training fees and affiliation fees. As the Questionnaire circulated by the ASA TWPC has revealed our clubs are almost totally reliant on their player’s payments – attempts to raise funds from commercial sources have met with little success. One of the bold moves that has to be made is to give more clubs something to sell to potential sponsors. Experience of our players abroad is that fixtures played home and away open the door to significant funding opportunities. The money that the clubs pay to you for their British League matches comes from the players. The money that the ASA puts towards water polo centrally and

through the Regions comes in large measure from affiliation fees from the players. That will not change. Forward looking clubs may see the proposals we have put forward as an opportunity over time to radically change their income sources. The product the top clubs will want to have available is play at its most intense and skilful – with the current playing resources available that means concentrating the best players in a few teams. How that is achieved is what we need to be discussing.

One of the problems looking beyond London is that the financial support for the World Class Programme after 2012 is unknown. UK Sport had previously said that an announcement would have been made around now. That announcement has been postponed until after London. The men and the women are funded separately, in effect. If both teams do well they are likely to have the prospect of funding post 2012; conversely if one or both do badly there may be no more funding. If both the men and women have funding post 2012 and their programmes use the British Championships as an integral part of the players' development, some funding to support European competition might be forthcoming. For now we must work on the assumption that it is not. The burden of playing in Europe will therefore fall on the players, as will the burden of all domestic competitions. The cost of a full domestic season from September to May will not be for everybody but we believe it is essential for those who wish to play for GB in the future.

The language of the proposal paper to which you take exception is nothing more than a reflection of the determination of the BS WPC to use this unique opportunity to drive through radical change in a sport that has some deeply conservative elements. That is not a criticism but a reflection of the attitude prevalent in most volunteer organisations. The BS WPC will fight hard to make the most of what the Olympics and the investment in the players at taxpayer's expense has offered. We want to work with leading clubs to make things happen.

You put forward a two-stage alternative:

- Leaving the British Championships as they are is not an option. The quality of play is undermined by playing too many games in a short space of time. The players are demanding home and away fixtures, as should the clubs if they want to improve their revenue streams. The invitation to take part in the British Championships has always been at the discretion of the BS WPC. We have previously announced each year that we would be guided by the results in the National/British League. We envisage different teams taking part in the British Championships from the League. One suggestion has been that clubs may choose to combine to meet the criteria we have suggested. We will continue talking to the clubs about the options available. We are open to ideas but want to have all the best players playing in four teams in the British Championships and in Europe.

- I am surprised you have resurrected the idea of a Regional Competition. I am reminded that you were a member of the ASA TWPC that proposed the establishment of just such a Championship. Not one Region was prepared to support it or spend Regional money on senior players. None of the Regions was prepared to join forces with another Region. That idea I am afraid is a non-starter. The idea of creating 4 teams on a geographical basis has been discussed and examined in detail. It has many attractions. However a “club” in each area would have to be created from scratch, would need to buy pool time, pay coaches, etc. and all at the expense of the players. Administration would have to be set up. Why go to that trouble and inevitable extra expense when we already have a club structure which may be capable of adaption? In any event the players would rather play for clubs. Clubs already have pool time and coaches and administrators. LEN will only allow clubs to play in their club competitions. What may be needed is to encourage a more co-operative attitude in our existing clubs so that they can work collaboratively together as well as being rivals.

The paper set out the back ground reasons for our thinking and Ken Fussell will use it as a framework to continue his discussions with players, clubs and the British League. We feel it is essential to have a radical debate and for the BS WPC to lead on a step change in domestic competition for the new era. In the light of this response, I hope you and those clubs who play in the British League will look again at our proposals and help us find the best way forward for our sport.

Howard Cartwright
Chair. BS WPC

Email from David Andrews to Howard Cartwright, 27 August:

It has been a week or two since we last communicated and the League continues to receive comment from our member clubs regarding your Committee's proposals for the British Championships. The views expressed continue to support our initial comments (our letter of 4th August) and, apart from a limited amount of interest from a couple of clubs regarding the possibility of reviving home and away matches, we have yet to receive any club's comment offering broad support to your proposals. Interestingly, we have also yet to find any club that admits to being consulted before the original proposal was issued.

I am not sure when your Committee is due to meet next and make any final decision on this but suggest it will find little or no support in its current form.