

Perhaps we should be grateful to England Athletics (EA) for confirming what most of us at the grass roots of the sport suspected, the 'Olympic legacy' was pure hype. The Olympic 'legacy' is an increase in registration fees to maintain an inefficient governing body which looks after itself at the expense of the sport.

Superficially, EA appears to have a point. Eight percent of its income comes from affiliation and membership revenue while 92% is funded by Sport England. It expresses concern that commercial sponsorship may fall away in the present economic climate and wants to ensure key functions such as insurance, governance of rules, welfare support, health and safety, maintaining standards of coaching, providing opportunities for young athletes in Clubs and Schools, support for local, regional and national competition, funding representative teams, protecting and improving facilities and providing a united voice for 'our' sport are maintained.

However, EA immediately undermines its position by announcing its proposals without consulting all clubs. Clubs in the North West have not been widely canvassed. Neither does EA protect or improve facilities which are usually funded and built by local authorities who, in many cases, even in good economic times, do nothing to protect or improve facilities. EA claims it wants funding and systems in place to enable the sport to 'continue with maximum efficiency, minimum disruption and the lowest burden on volunteers'. If the sport is running at maximum efficiency and minimum disruption why is the financial burden falling on the athletes and volunteers? Why is EA not reviewing its own standards of efficiency and inadequate performance as the governing body of the sport?

The additional monies from registration fees is motivated by EA's desire to take income (estimated by some as 1.2m) from athletes and keep itself immune from 'tight times'. EA appears not to realise that athletes too are living in 'tight times', particularly in economically depressed areas. The 400% rise in registration fees for track and field athletes is a strange way to encourage volunteers. The 'conscious decision not to charge volunteers an annual fee' is meaningless in the context of the failure to consult with clubs. Membership fees do not support officials or coaches most of whom provide their services freely. Meeting the expenses of those who do claim comes from race entry fees. According to EA's accounts it has reserves of just under **three** million pounds. There was a reduction during the year which can be attributed to the additional 500,000 paid to EA staff. Instead of exhorting clubs 'to look at the costs of running their club' EA should look at the costs of running itself.

EA provides misleading information about the impact of registration fees. Using examples from Welsh Athletics, it purports to show that the greater the increase in membership fees the greater the increase in athlete affiliation. None of the clubs referred to are named thus making it impossible to accurately evaluate how representative they are of the eighty six organisations affiliated to Welsh Athletics. A true comparison can only be made by considering a range of factors, including existing membership levels, geographical location and competition from other sports. EA boasted Welsh Athletics increased their registration fees by 300% for seniors, junior athletes 200% and added a fee for young athletes. EA neglected to mention the fees (in pounds and for all disciplines) were raised to 15 for seniors; 10 for U20 and U17; 7.50 for U15, U13 & U11. To quote Disraeli, there are 'lies, damned lies and statistics'.

EA suggests that 'when compared to the annual cost of training shoes, travel to events and other hobbies or activities it is unlikely to be subscription fees that are prohibitive in athletics.' They need to take a course in basic economics. All households have finite expenditure levels. It's as likely that parents will take the view that because registration fees have risen by 400% they can save on the cost of training shoes and travel to events by leaving the sport altogether. EA is right in one respect. It's time for a positive change by removing the source of all that is wrong in the sport and replace

EA with an organisation which listens to grass roots opinion rather than just talking about it.

EA is holding its AGM on 27 October. Clubs should seriously consider attending to make sure EA hears grassroots opinion first hand, notwithstanding that previous experience suggests it's unlikely they are interested in listening.

Dr Phil Thomas

01744 633476

drphil@blueyonder.co.uk.