

INQUIRY REPORT Wear Valley

Wear Valley

1. Introduction to Wear Valley

In 1997, Ian Hirst's two sons wanted to play basketball, something quite easy I would suggest, find a club with a team of their age group and off you go..... Living as they did in the rural south west of County Durham, an area that has many social and economic problems, an area where transport is a serious issue with car ownership low, and public transport intra-structure expensive and irregular it was always going to be a problem!

Upon researching the sport, it was found that the nearest club of any description playing at any level for young people was Newcastle, over an hour's drive away with sessions at 5.30pm on a Thursday night at Benfield!

So Ian started his own club. It initially had 13 players, all under 12 in 1998, but by 2008, it had over 300 junior and senior registered players, competing in both junior and senior national leagues as well as a local league.

In hindsight, the programme was riddled with holes. The club had coaches and a committee, it held SE Clubmark accreditation, and we were the first club in the North East to achieve 3 star accreditation from EB, but only now it is realised that Ian was the 'driver of the club'. The same can be said of other programmes across the nation, Joe Forber in Manchester being one of the best examples in the country.

Today the club does not exist as Ian and his wife decided to try and hand the club over to others to run but no one wanted to take the responsibility and therefore the club ended in 2009. However, Ian shows below the fantastic journey that they took and the fantastic opportunities they created for young people from all areas and sectors of the community.

At the time of creating the club Ian was a serving Police Officer in the Durham Constabulary and starting a club 'seemed like a good idea!' The time required to run a club is enormous as Ian was to find out, but the effort put in generated fantastic results, not just on the playing surface but with the impact it had on developing the life skills of young people.

During his time as a coach, Ian provided sessions to all abilities from low level learning to senior national league. Ian coached the North East Development squad (under 13s) for four years and attended seminars all over the country in order to gather information and develop the club.

In 2004, Ian won the following awards:

- BBC Sports Personality of the Year (Unsung hero) award;
- ITV/Sport England Coach of the Year;
- County Durham sport volunteer of the year; and
- North of England Press Leading Light in Sport.

In the same year, Ian coached the largest rural Comprehensive School, Wolsingham Comp, in the England Schools National Championships, at under 19 level. The average age of the team was 16, the school didn't have a sports hall and so all games had to be played away from home, and some of the players were part of the Positive Futures programme, both as referrals and as peer led mentors. The school had never entered such a competition in its 390 year history. This team went on to win the final at its first attempt beating Barking Abbey in the final in Nottingham. In the following year the team reached the quarter finals before losing to a school in Cheshire. Today the school doesn't even enter the local school competition!

As a serving police officer, these awards were fantastic but Ian felt that they were for the whole club, and he used these achievements to fight the local authority which was close to the club's home at Spectrum Leisure Centre in Willington.

In July 2007, Ian's charitable company took over the running of Spectrum Leisure Centre and since 2008 when he retired from the police he has held the position of Chief Executive of the Trust.

2. The Benefit of Basketball

In 2002, Ian was working as a Detective for Durham Police Major Crime Team, when he was offered the opportunity to start the Positive Futures Programme in County Durham, as a secondment from his employer. Ian

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took up this role and as coordinator of the programme he engaged young people at risk of crime or anti-social behaviour and used sport to engage with them.

With his background, basketball was the obvious choice. Positive Futures was specifically to target designated areas, but the programme allowed the use of a peer-led approach for engagement and through the medium of basketball Ian was able to integrate young people into a sporting environment where codes of practice, discipline, understanding, learning, opportunities and, above all else, fun and engagement were the main stays of the development.

During the development of the club, they took the project to the Secure Unit at Newton Aycliffe School where sessions were provided in a structured way to the young people housed in this environment. Ian developed a scheme to provide an educational element in life learning skills based on health and fitness, personal welfare, healthy eating, etc and linked directly to the delivery of the game of basketball.

Basketball is without doubt one of the most engaging games for young people, and in an area dominated by football, the project developed teams that were able to compete against the inner city areas. This allowed young people to travel to towns that they hadn't previously been to, to meet like minded people, and with the advent of social media, strike up relationships with people in other parts of the country who they knew had the same passion for the sport.

Basketball isn't just about playing the sport, it has a culture to it, a meaningful culture that young people in particular will 'buy into' but the main issues that Ian experienced were as follows:

- The cost of playing and travelling - this included the cost of officials and court hire and, in many cases, the money came from the coach's own pocket, not just for Ian, but also for many others across the country;
- Funding was always a problem along with providing the evidence required by potential sponsors; Ian believes that many potential sponsors didn't understand the cost implications of running a game of basketball (e.g. a local Saturday football team can hire a pitch for a game at £30 per session with the cost of the officials being in the region of an additional £30, but to run a local league basketball game the court hire costs would be £80 for the game plus £35 for the official!) The difference between the two is huge and taken to junior national league level, the cost to host a home game is in the region of £185 per game;
- The governing body for basketball is extremely supportive of clubs, but levels of funding given out are extremely low. For example, when Ian took possession of the Spectrum Leisure Centre, serious refurbishment was needed and basketball was a priority sport. They worked with the governing body and SE, but 'jumped through many hoops' to secure £17,000 of funding out of a project refurbishment cost of £600,000. The work taken to secure this sum took longer than it did to finalise all other funding streams; and
- The issues have since been increased with the decision to remove basketball funding. The development of basketball from the grassroots will now over rely on the goodwill and financial input from the coaches themselves.

Ian first played the sport in rural County Durham in 1973. He closed the club in 2009, although many things changed over that period of time. Ian believes that the bottom line is that the development of the sport has moved in recent years, but is now destined to go back to those dark days of the 1970s for basketball. He says that young people want more today and basketball can deliver that, but without the necessary funding streams being available, and investors being prepared to help develop the sport, basketball will always remain a 'second class' sport.