Kevin Bowerbank
British Canoe Union Regional Development Coach
Case Study No 5

The South West Talent Development Centre is a joint initiative between the University of Bath and Sport England. Its objective is to maximize the potential of people from the South West to progress to elite levels in sport by providing support to and building the capacity of National Governing Bodies to implement their talent pathways in the South West.

The Southwest Talent Centre was a pioneering initiative which aimed to enhance promising young athletes’ long term development by providing them with specialist support through their teenage years. The multi-disciplinary Talent Centre team worked to implement Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) properly with the aim of enhancing the athletes’ ability to acquire skills and to facilitate a smooth transition into elite senior programmes through improved all around athleticism. This multi-disciplinary approach works best when the athlete’s sport specific coach is fully engaged in the process and the coach who has worked most closely with our team is unquestionably Kevin Bowerbank, the British Canoe Union Regional Kayak Coach in the Southwest.

“‘To get the absolute most out of the Talent Centre programme, you need the coaches on board,” said Kevin. “Coaches like me are expected to be jack of all trades but it’s impossible to know everything. When I realised what was on offer from the Talent Centre I grabbed the opportunity. This programme was a perfect fit.”

Kevin is a familiar sight in the University of Bath gym during the weekly Talent Centre strength and conditioning sessions. “He was fully committed. He attended every session his athletes came to,” said TeamBath strength and conditioning coach Ed McDermott. “And he was a breath of fresh air because he came with an open mind, a willingness to work collaboratively with us and a desire to learn. He understands long term development and isn’t fixated on performance at junior level so we’ve been able to combine our knowledge as strength and conditioning coaches with his kayak knowledge to develop good athletes not just good kayakers.”

Kevin already has a proven track record in developing juniors into elite Olympic discipline sprint athletes. World Champion Ed McKeever, European Champion Jon Schofield and Hannah Brown the 2010 WildWater World Champion who is now part of the Olympic sprint racing U23 programme were all coached by him as juniors. All three began in the non-Olympic river racing discipline before switching to Olympic distance racing aged 20. River racing requires athletes to develop a good endurance base and the boat handling and watermanship skills of a slalom racer to cope with the rapids. Kevin believes it is an ideal way to develop athletes before they specialise in the Olympic disciplines.
“Many of the top European kayak nations like Slovenia take a similar approach with their juniors who all combine river racing and slalom racing before specialising at a later age. It may be a non-Olympic discipline but the standard in European river racing is very very high,” said Kevin. “My athletes get used to winning at river racing and they bring the mentality over to sprinting with them when they cross over. When Jon made the switch in 2006 he told the BCU straight away his goal was to go to the Beijing Olympics. No one took him seriously, in fact he was told ‘you need to get realistic’. In the end he missed qualification by one place and it made him even hungrier to get there. Now he’s European champion and a solid medal prospect for next year.”

“I wanted to break the traditional mentality that kayakers do weights in winter”, said Kevin. “The Talent Centre approach is nothing like our traditional approach to gym training but it’s now the benchmark for our junior programmes. The screenings in particular made a big difference. Hannah Brown was out of the boat for 18 months when she was a Training-to-Train athlete due to an injury. We’ve been able to avoid that altogether with this current group thanks to the screenings.”

“Training in the University of Bath gym alongside athletes from other sports has also made a big difference. It took about a year but the athletes now think more about the long term benefits they’re getting. Training at Bath has become a real status thing at the club. All my athletes are a lot more professional in their approach now and the girls in particular have benefited from seeing international athletes like the women’s skeleton team training alongside them in the gym. They’re a lot less self conscious and now they just get on with it,” said Kevin

Although Kevin believes that the real benefits to his athletes from the Talent Centre support will come two or three years down the line, the support is already paying dividends. Six of his Southwest Talent Centre supported athletes were selected for international representation this year.

“Twelve months ago Tim Escott and James Missen weren’t even on the national radar. In the last 18 months since they’ve been part of the SW Talent Centre programme they’ve moved up from race Division C to Division A where they’re making finals. Going from C to B is easy but B to A at age 15 is hard because most of the other competitors in Division A are 17 year olds.” Tim and James are already competitive. Both were selected for Great Britain representative teams this year and James won 6 medals at the National Sprint Championships - one in every boat class he entered before finishing his 2011 season off with a gold medal at an international river race in France.