

HK can do better, but it takes more than throwing money at the problem, writes Richard Castka

The Olympic dust has now settled and memories from Athens are fading fast, as we look to the distant future and the next major international sporting competition.

Hong Kong sent a relatively large delegation to Athens, along with the requisite number of hangers-on. In four years' time there are likely to be more hangers-on than athletes, as local officials jockey for position to break out their newly tailored team blazers and head for the Chinese capital in anticipation of reflected glory.

The changing of the guard, that will see the Sports Development Board replaced by yet another faceless administrative body, will not guarantee that Hong Kong wins any international medals, or in fact see local athletes even meet Olympic qualifying standards.

This is a somewhat pitiful situation for a city of seven million souls; a city that boasts some of the best sporting venues and equipment that money and a benevolent Jockey Club can buy.

The recent ill-considered suggestion that mainland athletes should be imported into Hong Kong to win surrogate medals have been mocked by many people at the sharp end of local sport. New Zealander Ben Bright cringes at the sight of local sporting facilities effectively going to

waste, and also the suggestion that they should be turned over to B-standard mainland athletes who can't – or won't be able to – make the grade over the border.

"That's just a short-term fix," said Bright, a former triathlon world junior champion, who has for the past three years worked as a coach in Hong Kong. "It's the quick-fix answer – there's a problem so let's throw money at it and mend it that way.

"Obviously there has to be money invested in sporting progress, but from what I can see there's plenty of money already invested in Hong Kong sport – it's just badly directed. Athletes in Hong Kong are far better supported than athletes in New Zealand. The focus sports are pretty well funded here, although the coaches are always saying that they need more money, but comparatively they're getting very good funding."

Bright competed for New Zealand in the Sydney Olympics, and although he proudly wore the team blazer emblazoned with the fern leaf, he had to cover part of the cost of competing himself. "It should never cost the athlete anything to compete in the Olympics," says Bright. "I doubt that any of the Hong Kong squad in Athens had to dip their hands into their own pockets."

Bright, 30, says Hong Kong needs to change its focus and decide what it really wants. "Does Hong Kong really want a sporting culture and to be a presence on the world stage? If the answer is yes then we have to refocus our plans," he says.

"The first thing that needs to be changed is the focus in schools from 100 per cent education to a balance between sport and education. That's going to be the biggest step because at the moment parents want to see their kids study hard to get a good job so that they can make a good salary.

"The second thing that needs to change is the coaching. We need to use expertise from overseas, not only to coach the athletes but also to educate the coaches themselves. We also need the coaches who are based here to travel overseas and to learn from other successful coaches.

"The third thing we need to do is to provide more exposure for our elite athletes through international competition. We need to take the focus off Hong Kong and Asian competition as a benchmark, and place it firmly on international events and results."

Bright confessed to being embarrassed by his own country's lack of medals at the Sydney Games. "After the [Sydney] Games it was the usual post mortem of

why didn't we do any good?" he says. "We competed badly as a team. We got just one gold medal. It was a major embarrassment – you really feel it in a small country. Post Olympics there was a massive uproar until the next All Blacks game and they got beaten, and then the moaning shifted to, 'what's wrong with the All Blacks?'"

With Dual nationality [a Kiwi father and an Australian mother] Bright has competed internationally for both Australia and New Zealand, and at his best was ranked in the world's top 10 in triathlon. He currently coaches a number of local athletes, including Olympic swimmer Hannah Wilson and promising triathlete Andrew Wright.

Bright said Australia had undergone a similar poor performance in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, and that a decision had been made to do something about it.

"I'm not sure whether it was one person or a committee who decided to build the Australian Institute of Sport, but it happened in the early 1980s and they're seeing the results of it today," he says.

According to Bright, Australians are now dominant in a number of sports because of structured training programmes, but also because of an industrial-sized helping of self-belief.

"It's a hard one to pin down and I think about it a lot, because not everyone in Australia is out there on the beach in their Speedos going for it," says Bright. "There are plenty of people in Australia who are overweight and obese – the same as there are in most first world countries. The difference is that Australia stakes its identity on sporting prowess – Australian kids ask each other what sports they've signed up for at the beginning of school term rather than what academic subjects they're going to do.

"The key to any successful programme is to create a system that's going to stand the test of time and that consistently produces good athletes. What should happen in a well-run programme is that good-quality athletes are consistently produced and once in a while you get someone that comes along who's a superstar – like Lee Lai-shan.

"If your programme is already in place to take that person through, he or she will only excel. The foundation should stay the same and would not change all that much, but once in a while a super talented athlete will pop up and be able to take advantage of the programme and rise to a very high level, such as San San has done."

Bright says the dedication Lee has shown to the sport of windsurfing should be a prime example for others to follow. "It takes a certain type of person to want to be a top athlete," he says. "And even more so in an endurance sport because it's just bloody hard work. Basically, endurance sport is all about pain management. How much pain can you control?"

"Endurance sports basically come down to hard work – there's no getting away from that fact. The Kenyans and the

Ethiopians have very little to do with sports science – in fact they probably wouldn't have one fifth of the budget that Hong Kong athletes have. They just get out there and run. When they're a bit tired they go and run. When they're not feeling very good they go and run. If you're used to going out there every day and training your butt off you'll just go out and get on with it.

"The biggest misconception we have in Hong Kong is that the talent is not there. From what I've seen the talent is definitely there, but it's just not looked after – it's not focused.

"A big part of it is whether the SDB or the government, or whoever, wants to start working with the education system more and saying look, this athlete or group of athletes has got very good sporting ability, but if they're forced to complete the same workload as every other kid then they're going to drop sports.

"There needs to be a middle ground for the promising athletes to be able to continue their studies, maybe on a lighter workload that's stretched out over a longer period of time, which happens a lot in Australia and New Zealand where kids do a year of school over two years. The schools are willing to do that because if they've got great athletes it creates posi-

"The biggest misconception in Hong Kong is that the talent is not there. From what I've seen the talent is definitely there, but it's just not looked after"

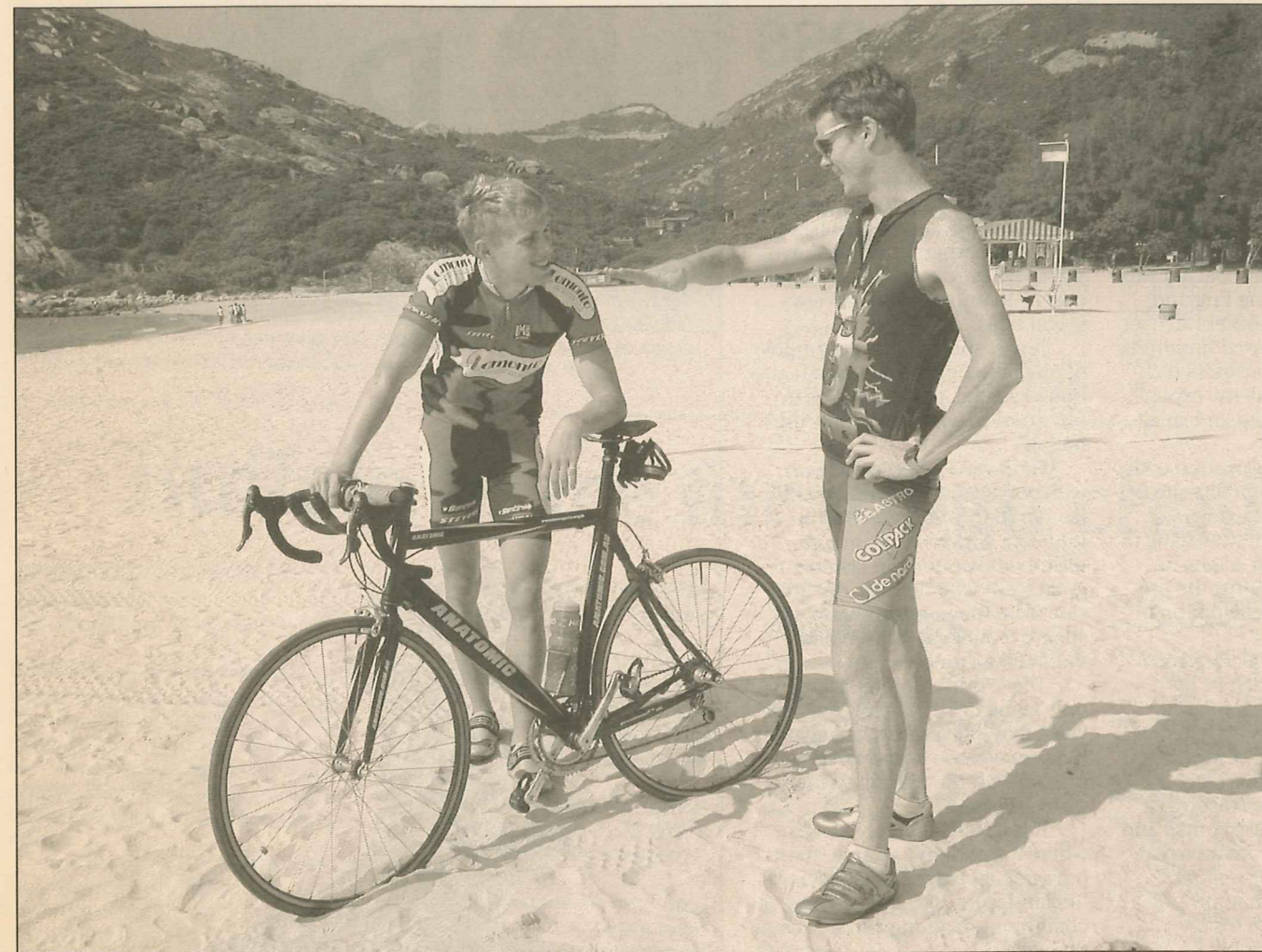
Ben Bright
Triathlon coach

tive publicity for the schools, and of course also allows the kids to develop their sporting careers."

Bright says Hong Kong triathlete Daniel Lee Chi-wo has emerged as a home-grown world-class triathlete who has the ability to go on to much greater things.

"Daniel has improved a hell of a lot over the past few years simply because he's started to believe in himself," Bright says. "He still doesn't have the self-belief that he really needs but he's got a lot better. I trained with him for two years and I can honestly say that he has the ability to beat almost anyone in the world. He's extremely talented – he's got it all. But he still needs to take that next step, mentally.

"Daniel travels so much he's been able to learn from others and to experience what it takes to get to the top. He's so well rounded and open minded about things compared to other local guys of the same age who haven't travelled and had those experiences."



Triathlon coach Ben Bright (right) talks tactics with Andrew Wright after a training session at Shek O (top). Photos: Richard Castka

Games, they caution. The authors, led by Andrew Tatem of the University of Oxford's Department of Zoology, acknowledge that their computer model does not take into account "numerous confounding influences" such as environmental variations, national boycotts and the potential use of illegal drugs.

But they say they found no evidence to support popular assertions of a plateau – that sprinters today are now close to reaching the upper limit of human capabilities.

Nor, they say, do they find anything to back allegations that women improved quickly in the 1970s and '80s because of doping and that this improvement began to sag as soon as rigorous drug testing was introduced.

Overall, there has been a continuous, straight-line improvement by women ever since the first female 100m in 1928, they say.

The 1928 100m final in Amsterdam was won by Elizabeth Robinson of the United States in 12.20 seconds.

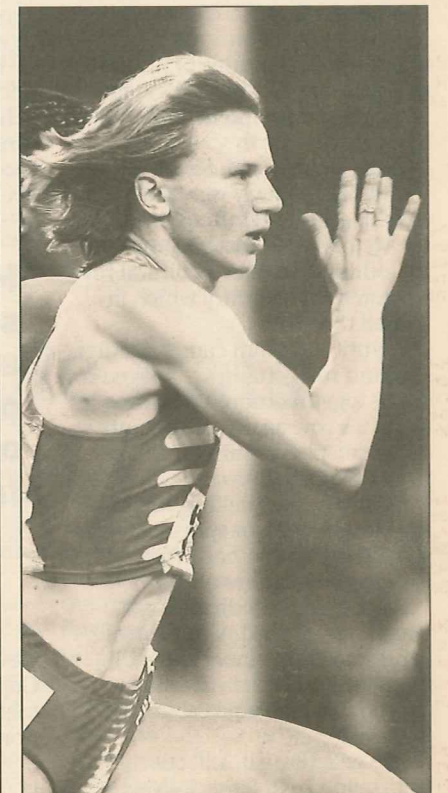
Although the first modern Olympics were staged in Athens in 1896, the data for the males' 100m starts with the 1900 Games in Paris, won by Frank Jarvis of the United States in 11.00 seconds.

In addition, the scientists point out, only a tiny proportion of the world's female population has been allowed to compete in top athletics.

If the net is cast wider so that better potential candidates come through, it is only logical that women's performance times should improve, they say.

The study appeared in full in *Nature*, the weekly British science journal, on Thursday.

Agence France-Presse



Yuliya Nesterenko of Belarus wins the Olympic 100m in 10.93. Photo: EPA