

Michael Afilaka interview

What was your athletic background prior to coaching and how do you think this has informed your coaching philosophy?

I retired in 2000 from athletics, having competed for about 10 years in track. Over the 200m I was ranked as a top 10 British sprinter a couple of times, made the AAA's final, won the Scottish champs, BUSA (indoor & out) and anchored Britain to a 4x100m silver at the World Universiade in 1995. I became very inquisitive and passionate about getting faster and the different training methods in the sport. I never wanted to coach though. My search for knowledge took me to great coaches like John Smith, Dan Pfaff, Tom Tellez and recently Lance Bramann and Michael Holloway. A lot of my beliefs and practice is built on science, solid technique and a clear understanding of loading, progression, regeneration and recovery. As an athlete and a coach I also worked and learnt from British coaches including Ted King; Ron Roddan, who coached me from 1994-97; Lloyd Cowan; the late John Bailey and Mike Smith to name a few. I have learnt different things from different people and arrived at my own philosophy.

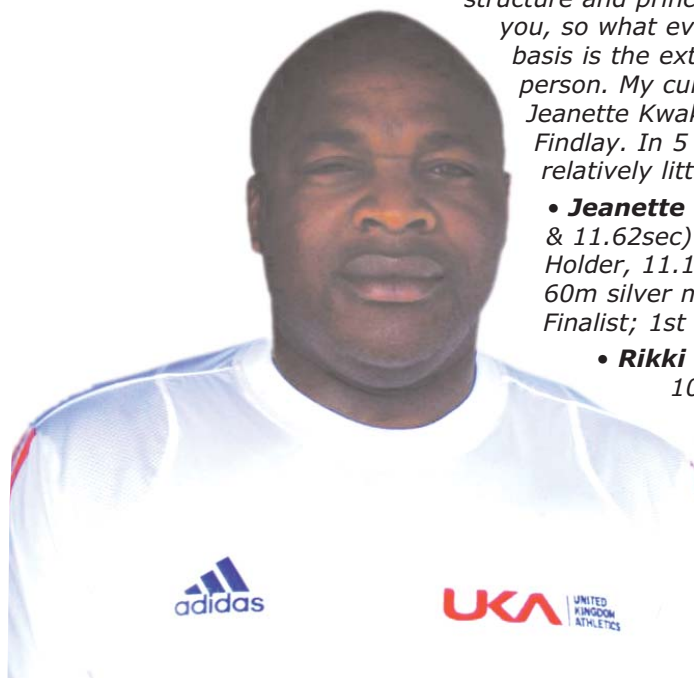
What athlete success have you had and how far do you credit the role of the coach in their achievements?

Firstly, I think the role of a coach is very important. I started in coaching by running monthly regional camps and weekly talent programmes in the Midlands between 2002 and 2004. I did not start my own coaching group until winter 2004. I am BIG on discipline, planning and a sound structure around what I do and I try and extend this to my athletes. The great UCLA Basketball coach John Wooden once said, (& I completely agree with him), "if all we do as coaches is make our kids great basketball players then we have failed as coaches." That is the embodiment of MY coaching fundamental: making athletes responsible; making them understand and respect themselves, their sports and the TEAM that is helping them get to where they are going to. If you keep on learning and developing as a person, then you can apply yourself to most things using the same structure and principles that the sport has taught you, so what every coach sees on a daily basis is the extension of the athlete as a person. My current athletes include,

Jeanette Kwakye, Ashleigh Nelson and Mark Findlay. In 5 years of coaching I have had relatively little success:

Michael Afilaka MSc, BA(Hons).

Michael is regarded as one of the leading British sprint and hurdle coaches and has worked with a number of elite athletes both on the track and in other sports. He is currently working for UKA as a senior performance coach based at Lee Valley Athletic Centre in London, where he works with world class elite and development athletes and is in charge of the Great Britain 4x100/4x400m junior women's programme.



• **Jeanette Kwakye:** (Joined me at 7.50 & 11.62sec) 7.08sec 60m British Record Holder, 11.14sec -100m - World indoor 60m silver medalist, Olympic Games 100m Finalist; 1st GB woman finalist since '84.

• **Rikki Fifton:** (Joined at 20.91 & 10.52sec) (2004 -2011) - Former European U-23 200m medalist, 2008 Olympian, Former No1 European 200m ranked, 100-10.16sec, 200m-20.46sec

• **Angelita Broadbelt Blake:** 110H - (2008-2010)

improved from 14.2 to 13.20 sec, progressed in the 2 years from 28th in the UK to 1st for pure hurdlers (Jessica Ennis was ranked 1st overall).

In between 2005-2007, I also coached some national level athletes, (all of whom have moved on): Leon Baptist (200m -20.80sec, 100m -10.3sec), James Ellington (100m -10.3sec), Sarah Claxton (12.93sec), Gemma Bennett (14.10 to 13.17sec) among others.

For me all these results were achieved coaching on a part time basis in the evening like most coaches when I was back from work. I did not coach FULL time until Oct 2009.

What value do you place on general strength qualities in the progressive development of speed potential?

General strength is important in all I do. My starting point is that weights/strength training is a means to an end, not the end in itself i.e. it is not the main activity but it helps us execute our activity better. So getting the athlete strong enough to carry out the particular activity at the required and the highest level is very important in my programme. For example, if an athlete can't pull to the top in clear lift, then they can't fully extend and would not be able to fully extend out of the block on their first few strides. In that case we step back and address the obvious lack of body part strength that we need for that particular movement, rather than be obsessed with how much they can't lift. I work very closely with Raph Brandon (National EIS S&C lead), who understands our weekly and yearly plan. I feel his understanding of what we do is important, so both the strength and track training can be integrated at the highest level. We produce programmes individual to the athletes, but also one that is incorporated into other aspects of our training e.g. Speed session, plyo's, throws, multi jumps etc.

From day 1 our max strength regime goes together with our speed development sessions, which in the early GPP phase is twice a week. We also divide the strength programme across the year - weights work, what we call S&C (this we refer to as muscles robustness/muscles integrity work) e.g. muscle activation work, development of weak hip flexors. Some of this includes slow movements, movements under tension, posture and isolationist development.

What performance value do you see to purely technical improvements in athletes?

With regard to running and movements, my overall philosophy is 'until an athlete makes the fundamental technical changes then they can't improve'. So when you see an athlete with BAD technique, it's a combination of what they are doing and what their body would allow them to do, so they might not be not strong in certain areas or be body aware in their movement pattern. If it's the latter, I spend a vast amount of time teaching and changing what I need them to do. For example, acceleration - we will cue, video work (via biomechanics - to improve flight time, contact time), via different drills over a long period of time so they can master the skills (start in October).

What strategies do you implement to monitor and/or control fatigue in speed focussed athletes, considering so much of their weekly programme is explosive in nature?

This is quite simple. The athlete needs to develop their CNS battery doing work that is 95%+

intensity. The moment there is an obvious change in the movement of the athlete regarding the particular objective of the session (e.g. speed session) and quality drops, I stop the session. I use film (during sessions), watch fatigued movement, sessions before and after (density of sessions weekly and cycle) and a lot of therapy during the week. Some of my women sprinters have specific kinesiology/physical tests that we do to determine what they can handle for the day. We track figures of our past good scores to decide if certain sessions are done and also I take a lot of consideration from the impact a woman's menstrual cycle has on the kind of work we are doing as the joints, SIJ and the general oestrogen level are down so we plan for that as well. Yes we want to develop speed but a lot of speed work is SUB MAX in nature in the course of the yearly speed programme as the body cannot run fast all year round in training.

What are the biggest problems you see in the coaching of speed in the UK?

Picture fruits on a tree being the highest point of that tree. The roots, trunk, branches and leaves would be at a lower level. Your main activity or event always sits at the fruit level, which is the activity in itself. Now if you relate each element of the work we do to the structure of the tree from the bottom (root) up, circuit training would be at the roots level as it's too far from the 'fruit', bounding would be slightly upper in the chain, blocks starts might be the leaves as it's closer to the activity.....Max Velocity would be the fruit as it's closest in nature and intensity to the event. So the simple answer to your question is that a lot of coaches stay too far away from the activity in the preparation phase and leave it to the last minute to do the quality work- speed in this case. They spend a vast amount of time 'building a base' or 'getting fit'. Most of the time the 'fitness' is not related to the activity; it takes the body more than 2 weeks to get speed. In fact you might argue that it's the hardest component to achieve out of all the energy pathways and it's the focal point for most of the energy systems e.g. speed endurance. One of the other problems we have especially from junior to senior athletes is that we don't make a lot of technical, fundamental or strength changes as they grow up. Another issue is coaches that do too much too soon with the speed instead of building it in gradually through the periods/cycle/year, while also managing it with regards to other work components.

If you had a key fundamental lesson you have learned in your years of coaching speed athletes, what would it be?

For speed lesson, maximum absolute speed can't be achieved unless the athlete moves correctly, on the ground and in the air. I have learnt to manage my speed component through the year, while incorporating extensive learning and technical changes. As I said above, it's about CNS stimulation and development to cope with that particular event. Generally, I have an open mind, respect your peers and understand how they get their results. Be a little more patient in the early days and most importantly, NEVER stop learning and caring about your athlete. It's a joint relationship that requires both parties input for it to work, the key is for each party to know where their boundary lies and own it, master it.