

John Isaacs: Born To Coach

John Isaacs, one of the best athletics coaches in Britain, nods a greeting to yet another youngster in the crowded cafeteria of the New River sports centre in Haringey, north London. Here, he is almost as well-known as Sebastian Coe, whose picture - along with those of other stars from the Haringey Athletics Club - looks down on us from the cafe wall.

One of the Amateur Athletics Association Southern League. 'We were doing really well,' he says. So why did he decide to leave?

He answers in one word - racism. 'Things have changed a lot in Hackney since then, but at that time the people who ran the club didn't even know what equal opportunities were. They thought I was bringing too many black people into the club, and they didn't like it.'

Hackney's loss was Haringey's gain. Since Isaacs - and the athletes he took with him - joined it, Haringey Athletics club has become one of the most successful in the country.

Not only has it attracted major stars like Sebastian Coe, but it has also produced a spread of home-grown talent that has enjoyed more championship successes recently than any other club in Britain.

Isaacs' talent for spotting gifted youngsters, and then motivating and training them to reach the peak of their abilities, was what originally brought him into coaching.

One of the first black athletes to represent London in the English Schools Championships, back in 1965, he drifted out of athletics until, at the beginning of the 1970s, he saw 'some kids messing around in the park, trying to do a bit of sprinting. They didn't have a coach, or much idea of what they should be doing, so I decided to help them.'

One of the youngsters he helped was Mike McFarlane, a 12-year-old from Isaacs' old school, who went on to win a Commonwealth gold medal and challenge Alan Wells for the mantle of Britain's best sprinter.

McFarlane is still coached by Isaacs along with four other Olympic finalists, among them Heather Oakes and Shirley Thomas, the two British 100 metres runners in the Los Angeles Olympics.

Yet Isaacs does not concen-

trate exclusively on the elite. 'New River is one of the few genuine community sports centres around,' he says. 'We try to involve people of all abilities and from all parts of the community - men and women, young and old. We have to get the track relaid almost every year, it's used so much.'

A great supporter of the principle of 'sport for all,' he also says he 'can see the rationale behind the arguments in favour of non-competitive sport in schools. The strong and the gifted dominate ordinarily, and the not so gifted get pushed out.' Ideally, he thinks school should 'emphasise participation, with competition taking place elsewhere.' But he is worried that 'in an unequal society this would just result in some children being denied the opportunity to compete at all.'

Isaacs' priority has always been to help black youngsters. Surprisingly he has faced not only social pressures but opposition from parents who regarded him as a 'negative influence,' particularly before black athletes like Daley Thompson made it big. 'Not many black people had made it in any kind of sport at that time, and there was no money in athletics even if they did. Most parents just wanted their kids to concentrate on their education.'

In fact, according to Isaacs, many of the youngsters he worked with had been 'written off by their teachers. They were failures at school and a lot of them were on their way to getting involved in crime and drugs.'

Far from holding back their education, athletics 'gave them a new sense of their own value. It took them away from the ghetto lifestyle, and opened them up to what was happening and was possible in the world.'

Their achievements in sport showed them they could achieve things academically too. 'We've got some of the best-educated athletes in the country here,' he says. 'BAs, MAs, PhDs - you name it, they've got it.'

In 1985 John Isaacs' experi-

ence and commitment led him to the Federation of Anglo-Asians in Sport. He says that the FAAS had to seek funding outside athletics because of the institutional racism which permeates his sport. Not one official of the Amateur Athletics Association, nor one member of the British Amateur Athletics Board, is black. And although over a third of the British athletes at the Los Angeles Olympics were from ethnic minorities, all of the team's 18 coaches were white.

But Isaacs believes that the system, not individuals, discriminates against black athletes. 'Micky McFarlane could have got a medal in Los Angeles with the proper support,' he argues. 'And what about Tessa Sanderson? She had to speak out recently to say that she wasn't getting the help she needed even though she was an Olympic champion.'

Black athletes have to fight to get recognised, but if you speak out the system colludes together to keep you down.' This is exacerbated by the fact that, 'most athletes want to succeed for themselves, for selfish reasons if you like, so there's not much solidarity around a lot of the time.'

He expresses disappointment that more athletes don't share his views on political issues like anti-apartheid boycotts. 'Sport and politics go hand in hand,' he says. 'I'm firmly with the boycotts, for example, to show my disgust and abhorrence of that regime. But if you're a competing athlete and you want to get to the top, it's best to be non-political.'

The answer to that problem, he believes, is to become so successful that the athletics establishment *can't* silence you. And, as he dashes off to his second training session of the day, the urge to get back among his athletes written across his face, he demonstrates once again his single-minded personal commitment to achieving that sort of success - for himself, his athletes *and* his community. •

Steve Plan



Seb Coe: Isaacs' star pupil

A mile away is the Broadwater Farm estate, scene of the Tottenham riots in October 1985, and on the floodlit track outside, several youths from the Farm are among a large group of mixed ability athletes warming up for the evening's training session.

John Isaacs has been at the New River centre - and with Haringey Athletics Club - since 1977, when he walked out on the Victoria Park Harriers in Hackey, east London. In five years he had helped to take the Victoria Park club from Division Five to Divi-