

Episode 7 – Dan Thorp

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Simon Fisher, Rich Hurst, Dan Thorp

Rich Hurst

Hello and welcome to Spotlight on Inclusive Coaching a podcast series brought to you by Active Herefordshire and Worcestershire, and the University of Worcester. The series aims to inspire and inform aspiring coaches across all sports and disciplines who are interested in gaining knowledge about how inclusive coaching can have a huge impact upon the athletes and the differences in similarities about how it should be approached. So, we're inviting coaches to engage with us, take away some tips, and see how they feel about inclusive coaching. There are six podcasts in the series covering a mixture of sports, ice skating, football, tennis, athletics, rugby, and basketball. In these interviews, we're going to discover how our coaches have adapted and rounded their skills to become more inclusive and what it requires. Each time they step on the pitch the court or the arena with their athletes to talk about the challenges faced and the incredible rewards. This episode is a conversation I had with Dan Thorp. His main coaching background is in tennis coaching locally in Worcestershire, before ending up as a head of coach development at the LTA for several years. He's also coached and run tennis academies in China. He now runs Redgate Sports, which is a Worcestershire based programme which delivers sport to children who don't normally get the opportunity to play. They deliver sport and mentoring, wellbeing sessions for children who are in the care system from low-income families and have special educational needs or a vulnerable in some way. He talks about using his experience as a volunteer to tailor what he does, putting the athlete and their needs first, which is a great example of inclusive coaching. Here's what happened when I chatted to him.

Dan Thorp

My name is Dan Thorp. So I do a few different things in sports. But I suppose the coaching role that I'm mainly practically coaching at the moment is in my work with Redgate sports, we deliver sports to kids who, I guess might normally not get included in sport. So we'd like to help kids get involved. We'd like to help them get involved and get active. But we also like to help them through sports as well. So it's getting them active, but it's also using sports as a vehicle to support them, so that they can develop their skills and sort of develop their outcomes in the rest of their lives as well as as their sport.

Rich Hurst

And on your coaching journey. What's that involved? Because I know you've been heavily involved in tennis previously. Tell us about that.

Dan Thorp

So yeah, so I've been I've been in sport my whole career. And tennis has been the majority of that. So I started off locally. So, I started off in Malvern. So, I started off as a tennis coach, and got involved in lots of coaching around the county, coaching a whole range of different players. And then from that I progressed into a few different roles, I ended up getting involved in coach education. Again, a few more roles there. And then I ended up working at the LTA where eventually progressed to head of coach development at the LTA. So I was based down in London, and running the coach education programmes around the country. So I did that for about seven years. And then from that I then went to work in China, which is a bit of a crazy one. So I went to work in China and ran a chain of tennis academies in China. So when that finished, so I did about 12 months in China, I then came back and one of the things I wanted to do was to sort of build my work a bit closer to home. So all along like London, China, all those things I've always lived in Worcester. And so one of the things I want to do is to build my career a bit closer to home. So that's where I started getting involved in the projects that I'm in now, including Redgate Sports.

Rich Hurst

Just take us into a bit of detail about the programme itself.

Dan Thorp

So Redgate sports, we work with mainly with schools, or other organisations who are we would call the referrers. So what they do is they refer children to us who they think would really benefit from being involved in sport, and from the other support that we offer. So generally speaking, the children that come to us are either in the care system, so they looked after children, they might be on free school meals, they might have a special educational needs plan. Or then we have a sort of a fourth category, which we call sort of vulnerable due to some other situation, which is a little bit of an open category. The first three categories are specific groups of children, the fourth one is deliberately a bit more vague. So, generally, schools will refer the children to us. And then what we do is we go to them, and we deliver, deliver the programme in their venue, so in their school, so sometimes that'll be one to one, sometimes that will be small group. If it's one to one, then we deliver sports but with a mentoring programme that goes alongside it. If it's a small group, we deliver sports but with, with a focus on well-being. So we sort of develop those sort of other skills that come with sports, so communication, confidence and those kinds of things more sort of verging towards leadership type stuff. In terms of what sports we deliver, we deliver a wide range of sports. So the idea is we go in and understand what the kids might like. And we deliver that or might have already had some experience. If they've done something we start with that. But we also very much try and give them an experience of a range of sports. So we sort of, you know, we'll do quite a bit of tennis or cricket, or rugby, basketball, those kinds of things, stuff that they might not normally have tried. So often, if you go, you know, most of them have done some football, but we might actually try and take them away from that quite quickly and try some new things, we think that that tends to work quite well. So that's the programme. And then we, the I suppose the important point about the programme is that it's open ended, it's not some sort of six week programme, we just go, we go in, and we keep going until, until the kids are ready to move on to something else or the school have had enough of us. It's not a it's not a fixed term. And then what we're, what we're trying to do is to think about how we can sort of move the kids on and develop the

kids involvement in sport. So that might be within the sessions. But it also might be starting to progress and to be involved a little bit more in school sports or an after-school club. Or it might be even about starting to join sport outside of school. So a crucial part of what we do is that progression on to being an established participant. It's not just a one off sports experience. It's about trying to take the kids and develop them through as a way to support them in life. While we're doing that. That's, that's what we try. And that's what we try and do.

Rich Hurst

And do you find is that part of your experience coming through there, where you're kind of putting them in places, you know, and those like those sports that they haven't tried before? So kind of a little bit of out of that comfort zone, but still in under that broad umbrella of coaching

Dan Thorp

Within the sessions? Yeah, very much. So and I think so it's the, I think the variety is, is really important. So you know, give them some of what they already know, and what they already like, and let them have some of that. But also challenging them to try something new that they haven't tried before, I think works really well just in terms of it works really well with the kids in terms of just it gets them all, if you've got a group of kids, and you've got two of them have played football and one of them hasn't doing football is difficult. Whereas if you've got a group of kids, and actually you do cricket, then actually none of them have played cricket. So that puts them all in the same position, which is good. But also the fact that they're trying something new opens a whole range of stuff in terms of how you talk about it, the questions that they ask and the things that they learned from it, you know, they can then go and start to learn about the game or whatever. So, so that idea of going with what they know, but trying to get them to find new things, and it's a really important part of the programme.

Rich Hurst

Good balance. And would you say Redgate is the place where you kind of most experienced that idea of inclusive coaching?

Dan Thorp

Yes, I think I've always, in my in all my work in coaching particular, my work at the LTA, we've always discussed inclusive coaching. So it's always been a theme that's always been talked about. And it's always been something that I felt I had a grasp of, I think it's been interesting, it's been a bit of a journey for me to actually get involved, sort of back at the coalface a little bit, and to really understand what it is and what's needed. And, and I suppose that's been quite interesting for me, because it's sort of I realised that some of the things that I thought previously aren't necessarily the case. So it's been a it's been sort of a fun thing to get involved in.

Rich Hurst

Which leads me into the next question, I suppose about those lessons you learned. So what sort of things would you say became more and more obvious as you went along that journey?

Dan Thorp

I think the most important thing that we've figured out, as we've sort of started to work with a range of different a range of different kids through the programme is that we've got to be flexible. And we've got to, we've got to really work hard to understand the needs of the children that come to us. So that we can make sure that we adapt the programme to give them the to give them the sport experience. That's, that's right for them. And that helps them that helps them progress. So I guess it's, it's that sort of, not over planning, and understanding that we need to really learn about the children that come and then build the programme around them and their needs. I think that's where we've had the most success because we've been able to, to build a programme that's right for them. I think the other thing has been about listening to the people who are already supporting those children. So you know, all the children we work with are already somewhere they're always been there they've been looked after with by an agency or by a school or something like that. And those teachers that are working with them know those kids better than anybody else. So the easy will always for us, is to make sure we have a good chat with them talk about the programme and figure out how to best to go forward from there.

Rich Hurst

And were those the biggest challenges in getting it right kind of getting to know I suppose not just the children but those people around them as well. And using that and taking that into the coaching side.

Dan Thorp

I think the biggest challenge has been, I think the biggest challenge for us currently is getting enough coaches to come and join us and to deliver the programme. Because there we've got there's lots of demand out there and there's lots of kids that need help getting into sports, but actually getting coaches that can come and deliver the programme and really right to work with us, is the bit that's probably the hardest. So in terms of our, you know, what's what is that if anything's holding us back at the moment, it's actually about coaches to come and work with us and deliver.

Rich Hurst

And on that, what is it about them that needs to be to be right for them to be able to do it in that environment?

Dan Thorp

I think the most important thing is that the coaches is interested, and wants to play a part in terms of in terms of helping the kids. I think it's not that there's some sort of coaching skill out there that most coaches are missing, I think is actually just finding coaches who are who are available and are interested in this space. I think if, they're both of those things, and I think we can work with them and explain how the programme works, so we can get them up and running quite quickly. So, it's not a it's not like a coaching skill that's lacking. It's more like availability of the right people with the right kind of interest. That's the bit that probably holds us back the most.

Rich Hurst

And what's the solution there? Do you think? Or what would you suggest? Is it about just admit the idea of people broadening horizons?

Dan Thorp

I think, no, I think it's about us, I think we've got to go in, we've got to go and tell people about the programme and get them to come and get them to be interested in to come and join us. I think that there's lots of young coaches out there, who I think we can provide some great day time work to. And I think once they find out about the programme, I think gets their interest to come and join us and work with us. I think there's also lots of people out there who are in slightly different fields who can also come and work with us and add a huge amount of value. So, for example, we're now working with a few teachers who might have a day a week free, and maybe they work maybe three or four days a week. And actually, we're getting them to come and work with us for like half a day a week or something like that. Because the experience that they bring from the teaching side is just huge. So that we can sort of bring them bring their experience into the programme, and that's been working really well.

Rich Hurst

So take us through some of your experiences, and where you think, you know, occasions or programmes where you picked up, a lot that you took into your coaching and the way you do it.

Dan Thorp

I think the things that have got me here, and I think that I've got to be delivering well here is I think I'm probably good in terms of understanding people. So I think I'm quite good at getting to know the people that are in front of me getting to listen to them and understand, I suppose what's brought them to this point and what's, what are they trying to get out of this and what are their needs. So I think that's, I think that's an important skill to be liked that I've developed over the years. I think the thing that specifically got me to this point in terms of running this programme is actually not a sport thing. It's actually from outside of sports. So that was because when I finished working in China, and I came back and decided to start building my work a bit more around Worcester, I got involved doing some volunteering for a children's charity. And I was doing so I was working as a mentor for the children's charity. And so I got in, that was a bit crazy, because it was something I'd never done before. And all of a sudden, I was working with some kids as a mentor. And these kids came from a range of different situations and different challenges. And that was quite a learning experience for me. And then it became quickly apparent while doing that, that none of these kids were playing sport. But actually, sports had a really valuable role to play for some of the challenges those kids are facing. So it was that then made me think that I need to start connecting these worlds together. And I'm sort of starting to meet these kids through the mentoring programme. I've got all this sports experience. And actually, I need to try and connect these two things up and see if I can actually help some of these kids get involved in sport and also help them through sports. So for all my different coaching experiences, it was actually that experience as being a mentor for the children's charity that actually got me to this point.

Rich Hurst

And the irony, I suppose that that was actually away from the intensity in the environment of pure sports coaching. Do you think it was that element of it that made it I suppose help complement things later on.

Dan Thorp

It was certainly it was just it was a massive learning experience for me. And it made me think about everything that I had experienced previously in sports. So when I was in sport previously, I felt that I

was involved in making things inclusive, whether or not that's the right word, but I felt that I was making, I was helping making things inclusive, because maybe we were thinking about access, or maybe we're thinking about price, or there was a few things around there that I was saying, Okay, I know about inclusion, I'm doing this. What was interesting when I started to do the mentoring work is that I was meeting kids who were so many steps away from sports, that the work that I was doing with my sports hat on was irrelevant, because they were so there were so many issues and barriers and there were so many steps away that they were never going to get near the programme that I previously been working in. So that made me realise that if we wanted to really help kids get involved in sports, we needed to go and get them and then help bring them across into sport. So what the sports sector tends to do is create sports programmes and then say we want to be inclusive please come and join us. And that works to a certain extent that gets the people that are just on the periphery of sports. And so the learning experience for me was to go and meet some people that when I sort of started to speak to them about their experience and their life experience, I realised that they just they didn't even know that existed. So, I realised that something much more was needed. Where it was this idea that we have this idea of we go and get them and we help build the bridge across that brings them eventually into the, into sports. So that was the thing that that was just really significant for me in terms of in terms of Redgate Sports happening.

Rich Hurst

I hope you are enjoying the spotlight on inclusive coaching podcast so far, and taking some inspiration from our guests. We'll get back to that conversation shortly. But we just wanted to make you aware of the other episodes in the series, there are going to be six interviews with the different coaches, plus an introductory episode where we sit down and discuss all of the coach's chats with the people behind the podcast, the active Herefordshire and Worcestershire partnership, and the University of Worcester. That introduction episode is available right now. Plus, there's the conversation we had with wheelchair basketball coach Simon Fisher, he's had experience at the Paralympic Games and European Championships. And he talked to us about understanding things from your athletes, he engrossed himself in his sport, in the early days.

Simon Fisher

I think the biggest thing about wheelchair basketball, for many people is understanding, you don't have to be in a wheelchair to play the game. So we have many people that what we call walk to court that could be able bodied, there could be amputees, and they get into a wheelchair to play. So therefore the ability to move a chair is actually one of the hardest things. So I spent probably a good part of that first year I was coaching, actually going to the sessions and join in, you know, my arms, my shoulders hurt at the end of it, but they could see that I made the effort to try and be part of their sport.

Rich Hurst

That episode with Simon and all the other episodes are available at www.activehw.co.uk . There's more details there. Or if you want to just search for spotlight on inclusive coaching, right now, let's get you back to this conversation.

You know, taking it down to those introductory stages, how do you convince someone who doesn't know anything about the sport or, you know, for whatever reason, doesn't think it's the right thing? How

do you go about convincing someone to take up a sport? Because that's part of the coaching, if nothing else before the sports even started, isn't it?

Dan Thorp

I think it's good question. I think that the first thing is, is that generally, people tend to refer children to us who they feel would have some sort of interest. So, what they're what the schools or the carers are not doing is saying, Well, I've got a child here that has no interest in sports. I know I'll send them to a sports programme, they tend to think actually, they're not playing sport, but this would we think this would be great for them. So they tend to so we're onto a bit of a winner there already. Yeah, having said that most of the children that we receive are not playing sport, currently. But if I'm honest, we've never had a problem, we've never had a problem convincing anybody. Because if you get the environment, right, and you, you make it to meet their needs in the first place, then you're always on to a winner. So, we set ourselves up to win. We have small groups, we've got great coaches, we find out what sports might be of interest, we've got an idea about which sports tend to work well. And we create an environment that when the children arrive, they want to they want to take part. So it's not about a sell, really, it's about creating something where there's a welcoming environment, and there's a feeling of safety. And then they want to Yeah, great. Let's get involved. So it's there's I don't think there is a sell.

Rich Hurst

Does that mean you form almost like a checklist of what makes those sessions and that element of sport, inclusive and easy to take part in? Does that mean you know, you mentioned about group sizes? Can you just maybe expand a little bit more on that? And what is what you think is required to make that possible?

Dan Thorp

Yeah, so group size is key. So definitely, we're talking about children who have not played much sport and who have significant barriers in place towards getting involved in sport than you need to be winning in terms of group size.

Rich Hurst

Is there a set number for that? And a drill down? Is there a set number or is it completely depends on the activity or the coach?

Dan Thorp

It depends a bit but we work one to one sometimes, okay. And then probably the biggest group we might go to would be maybe a one to five or one to six, but we like to work in either one to one or one to three tends to work quite nicely, one to four can work quite nicely as a group.

Rich Hurst

And is that purely just to be able to divide attention?

Dan Thorp

Yeah, it's just to make sure if you've got children that have so for example, if the child's got some educational needs, then you just need to make sure that you've got the time within the session to be able to, to be able to work with them and support them. So that they can thrive within the session, if you create a big group scenario where you've got 10, kids, lots of noise lot of people running around, then just immediately that tends to tends to be a bit of a struggle. So the small, the small group really helps. I think the next key for me is about developing rapport quickly in the session. So I think the first, the first 10 minutes is really important. And I think you've got to become an expert at how to develop rapport. And you've got to be aware that a lot of the ways that we traditionally develop rapport are actually quite intrusive. So to how we think about developing rapport. So like where we came in, we started chatting about today, we start talking about, I start, I was asking you about where you work, I think you were asking me about my breakfast, we ask each other, we get into each other's lives quite quickly. Now actually, that's, that works with us. So that natural methods development poor doesn't always work. So sometimes what you got to do is things like, so things like sometimes what I'll do is I'll leave my equipment in the car or leave the equipment off the court. And so the kids arrive, and might just say, actually, I'm not ready yet, can you? Can you help me get set up? So we'll just go. And we'll just go and get the kit. And then, so you create a sort of something that's happening. And then in that you can then say, you know, what you've been doing today? Or what, tell me about those shoes, you know what I mean? You just find this sort of neutral things to talk about. And that's the starting point in terms of report. And from there, you can then start saying, you know, tell me something good, that's happened to you today? Or, you know, how did you tell me about home or, you know, that's a it's a bill to get to those points. So that's the starting point of the session and that ability to develop rapport from children who might be struggling a little bit. I think that's, that's really important.

Rich Hurst

And not right to step in expect to start the coaching from the word go. Yeah, that especially but and I suppose that works a lot better in a smaller group as well.

Dan Thorp

Yeah. And I think the other thing that we do, I think this is just good coaching, but I think we probably do it, we do it well in our sessions is that we, we don't break the sports down too much into their fundamental skills. So too much a sport, too much coaching is, is stuffs broken down too much in coaching. So you might see, like kids doing like a, like a single skill of the of the sports. Whereas I think what we try and do is we're trying to not only teach the skills, but we're actually trying to teach the awareness of the sport. So I think we get very quickly into, into adapted full game situations, where the children is getting the sense of this is what the, this is what the sport is, and this is what the sport feels like. So I think you need to get that sense of the sport very quickly. And then once you've done that, a few weeks down the line, you might then start to say, actually, should we practice some of you know, remember, remember that when we were playing this last week, let's practice some of this. But it was bowling or free kicks or whatever, whatever it is, from that particular sports. So I think a lot of coaching starts with skill first. And I don't think that works as well, in this situation, I think you need to go into open and to and to get people into quite adapted, but very realistic feeling situation so they can get the energy and the excitement of the game. And then you can get through that you can then start to tie them in further down the line in terms of learning how to throw or learning how to bowl or hit it or

something like that. So we have that we have lots of lots of like game early. I think that's it, that's another thing we do well in the sessions.

Rich Hurst

So group size, that establishing rapport and breaking down? No, I suppose not breaking down.

Dan Thorp

Not breaking code too much. So you've got to break it down. Yeah. But you've got to keep it looking like the sport. So you break it down, but you break down, like the way that you score, the amount of the rules, the way that the rules are interpreted. So it's obviously so you have to make it easy to access. But it needs to look like the look and feel like the full thing. I think if you can do that, then you'll get the kids into it much more quickly.

Rich Hurst

I was gonna say yeah, and then and then what kind of in you've seen it and you experienced by doing that, what are the better results you get from that? What does that achieve by, you know, going through those kind of three important steps?

Dan Thorp

I think when you get their engagement in the session, and they start to develop some enjoyment of the developed enjoyment of sport. And then and then through that, we then start to build in the other aspects of the session, which is about trying to develop their communication, develop their self-confidence and those sorts of things. So those things start to develop as well. But they sort of get a bit of a love for the sport as well. So ultimately as a programme, that's where we're trying to aim for is can, we get them to a point where they start to think about actually I've really enjoyed doing these sessions, usually within school or maybe I'll think about doing something you know, outside of school or joining a club or something like that. And when we achieve that, that's our gold standard achievements. That's a little happy day where we managed to make something like that happen. And we have to. So it's we've had some real good examples of success, where kids have actually started to join football clubs, cricket clubs, rugby coaching, mixed martial arts, I don't know where they got that from, because they can get it from me. But so, we've got kids that have started in the programme with us having not played sport, who are now members of a club in their local community, which for them, in terms of where they started is, like, you know, is a massive achievement.

Rich Hurst

Where does that rank in your kind of proudest moment as a coach, seeing those sort of things happen?

Dan Thorp

Yeah, good question. I think it's up there. Yeah, there's been a few that have been that have been up there and have been a bit sort of, you know, it's like tugging on the heartstrings slightly. So, I suppose, I suppose it's hard, actually, because I've got such varied things. So, you know, I've got kids who progressed into national competitions in tennis. So that's, you know, that's pretty big. In terms of me, personally, you know, achieving, like getting the role at the LTA was big. But I think, you know, it's very different. But it's, it feels just as exciting that we managed to get a kid go from not starting at all, and not

being included to actually joining a sports programme locally. It sounds crazy. But, for me, that journey is, is as big as that journey from beginner player to national level competition.

Rich Hurst

Yeah. So, is there what can you remember, in particular, one piece or good piece of advice that you've been given that you pass on to coaches who are looking to do that, that same thing and take people on that same journey?

Dan Thorp

Advice. So, advice I would give somebody?

Rich Hurst

Or that you've been given that you'd pass on?

Dan Thorp

I think first thing I would say is do it. So I think there's too much talking about it. And one of the things where my programme came from is I was working in the sports sector. And I was involved in lots of conversations and lots of meetings that were talking about being inclusive. And I suddenly realised that actually, everybody was just talking about it. And I then started with a mentoring programme. And I was like, well, hang on, we're all talking about it, but this kid isn't doing anything. So that would be my first thing is actually well just get out and do it and make a difference. And then you'll learn about it as you go. Rather than you know, don't overdo it at the start, just get out and get involved. I think, second bit, which we've covered on a bit is focused on the needs of the children, I think that for me is, is massive. And I think the final thing I would say, and this is, again, something I think we try and do in our sessions, and I would look for in, in other sessions, when I go and watch them is coach with the same purpose in your sessions with, with children, that you come into contact with an inclusive type programme, coach with the same purpose that you would coach if you were coaching, like a, you know, a performance player in tennis, or were a top under 14 football team. So I see. I think that the coaching sessions, all children deserve the same sort of purpose and intensity in the coaching session. And you just need to understand that you might deliver it in a slightly different way. But you're, you're sort of your goal, your aspiration for the for the player has to have the same sort of intensity, as it would do. If the player was going for a national title, sort of what we're trying to create is something that is that really treats them as individuals and understands what they want, gets them involved in sport and thinks about how they can progress. So, we have this idea of this purposeful journey that we want them to be on and our coaching will reflect.

Rich Hurst

so, there we have it. A huge thanks to our guest and of course to you for listening to this episode of spotlight on inclusive coaching. Remember, if you want to know anything about the coaching academy or get more support on your coaching journey, then go to the Active Herefordshire and Worcestershire website, which is www.activehw.co.uk We'll see you soon