

University team get England in great shape

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The England support and coaching staff including Dave Hemborough (second right). Picture by Steve Parkin

If preparation is everything, then England's Commonwealth Games squad are giving themselves the best possible chance of medal success in Glasgow.

Not only have the squad been working hard on the practice tables at training camps in China, Lilleshall and Glasgow, but they have had the input of a team of sports scientists.

Strength and conditioning, psychology, physiotherapy and nutrition and hydration have all been part of the programme supervised by Dave Hemborough and his team from the Centre of Sport and Exercise Science at Sheffield Hallam University.

Hemborough, the squad's strength and conditioning coach, has a pedigree of working with table tennis athletes for the best part of a decade and has been helping the squad work towards Glasgow for 18 months.

He said: "It's been the last couple of years I've worked more closely with the players – I prepared some of the players for the 2012 Games and then specifically for the Commonwealths over the last year and a half.

"They've had lots of hard work and they've got a good base, a good foundation, so they should be feeling fit and strong and sharp. We're building confidence and people get confidence from preparation."

Hemborough, who has also worked with athletes in volleyball, golf and boxing, continued: "From my perspective we've all got the same muscular structure, the same body, the same function but then the way in which we use that and apply it in sports differs.

"The approach I've taken with the guys is to get the basics in order. The programme I've delivered has been a foundation programme to make sure everything's working as best as possible and then you start specifying the programme towards table tennis and specific training.

"As you get closer to a big competition you become more specific, you intensify."

The Lilleshall training camp aimed to build an understanding by the athletes themselves of daily self-monitoring of hydration, soreness and sleeping patterns, so they can identify and rectify any areas of concern.

"This is being put in place now so they can take that to the Games and really have a good understanding and control of where each of them are as individuals," said Hemborough. "Again, this builds confidence in preparation.

"We've positively influenced training habits. We've got a phrase: one person's warm-up is another person's workout, certainly what they did in the past and found difficult – some of the exercises, some of the drills, now they're doing and it's not taking anything out of them.

"Physically that's part of the habit and the routine they'll take on now. That's some of the routine they'll not take just into the Commonwealths but probably into their playing career after that."



Some of the players go through their routine at Lilleshall. Picture by Steve Parkin

Another member of Hemborough's team is Kathryn Cassidy, physiotherapy practitioner and lecturer at Sheffield Hallam, who has been working not only on treating injuries but also on preventing them.

She said: "The injury reduction side of things involves identifying movement patterns that the athletes make, seeing if there is anything they're not the most efficient with or which are restricting them, and setting them prehab programmes to reduce the likelihood of injury.

"I think it's becoming more prevalent within sport, but it's been in play for quite a while. There's more recognition of the role of the physio in identifying the risk of injury and doing something about it.

"It's how you educate your athletes and give them a good understanding of the purpose of it and how you're going to achieve the result. It's got to be relevant to them and they need to understand why they are doing it.

"I've had a really positive experience, whether it's screening or treatment or advising them around play.

"It helps being in a supportive background, and the coaches have been very supportive."

Dr Peter Olusoga, lecturer in sports psychology at the university, has also had a key input into preparing the athletes for Glasgow.

He said: "We've been particularly working on dealing with the distractions they might face. There will be a lot of things going on so we want them thinking on the right things at the right times.

"It's not mystical – to get to the level they have got to they have to have a lot of mental skills already, like staying calm under pressure and maintaining concentration.

"I want to work with the skills they have already got and try to enhance them."

With competition for medals likely to be fierce, any edge the England players can get over the other nations could make all the difference.

As Hemborough concluded: "They understand we're doing things that the opposition aren't and that's really important too when they're stood the other side of the table and look at their opposition and think there's no way they've prepared as well as we have. That'll give them a great advantage."

By Russell Moore (July 19th, 2014)

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