

SA sports need a funding strategy

THE post-Commonwealth roller coaster reached new heights at the weekend with an open-top bus parade through Johannesburg for Team South Africa's medallists.

For the athletes, winning medals is a great achievement, and I do not begrudge them the opportunity to bask in the all-too-brief limelight.

Olympic and Commonwealth sports are front and centre in the "shop window" only once every two years — for perhaps two weeks — before they return to the small print in newspaper sports results sections.

So, medal-winning performances should be celebrated. If only the federations of these sports had professional management teams — including brand managers and marketing staff — who could leverage success into ongoing corporate sponsorship.

But that's a separate issue ...

What is more concerning is the interpretation of Commonwealth Games successes and failures, which (again) seem to lack perspective or calibration.

There is, to repeat something I wrote during these Games, a difference between celebrating the athletes' performances and managing them for future performance.

The latter is the responsibility of those in charge of sport and, in order to do it effectively, considerable sporting equity has to be created around understanding what determines success and failure.

We are well behind global standards in this regard, and the media's coverage of Glasgow 2014 has been symptomatic of this lack of sporting equity. The most concerning problem relates to funding and the accountability for under-performances.

Credit is as easily claimed as blame is apportioned, but money remains the greatest barrier for

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sports federations. I cannot stress enough just how difficult the life of a sports administrator involved in high performance is in South Africa.

Each sports federation is reliant on the SA Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee to distribute lottery cash, but the amounts and timing of this funding change constantly and are, frankly, difficult to understand and never enough.

Planning for sporting success is by nature a four-year project, but should ideally be done over six to

“In a competitive world such a strategy cannot sustain success

eight years, using two Commonwealth and one Olympic Games to build to a desired medal.

We make this impossible to do, because our high-performance programmes and coaches receive no assurances about how much funding they will receive from one year to the next.

As a result, the usual programmes that would improve the health of a sport and win medals — coaching education, international competition, facilities, athlete support and development programmes — are cautiously rationed out rather than

rolled out. In the aftermath of the London 2012 performance, funding to each federation was capped at R2-million a year.

With little regard for the specific strategies and expenses faced by each sport, support for some federations decreased, despite their successes. Accountability, however, did not change.

An expensive sport, such as rowing, cannot survive, let alone thrive, on R2-million per year.

But that's what happened — a successful system, poised to capitalise on its gold-medal winning success in London, suddenly found itself at the same funding level as sports that don't even send athletes to the Games.

Meanwhile, the policy continues to be that only realistic medal prospects receive direct financial support from Sascoc, thus taking a load off the federations. Sascoc also has a stated policy that only "winners" will be sent to both the Commonwealth and Olympic Games, which is fair enough.

But you can see the dilemma this forces on each sport.

They are required to produce world-class athletes but have insufficient funding to develop a large group of athletes for the future. Only once they produce a world-class athlete does their burden get lighter.

It is the ultimate catch-22.

What this sequence ultimately creates is a situation where "chance" is the strategy because we wait, collectively, for an exceptional athlete to have an interaction with a competent or exceptional coach.

That explains how athletics, with basically no functioning high-level sports system, was able to win nine medals in Glasgow.

In a competitive world, while other countries invest in systems, such a strategy cannot sustain success, and so the roller coaster continues.

Boshoff injured as Lions thrash Bulls

CHUMANI BAMBANI

AFTER an impressive 41-13 win over the Blue Bulls in their Currie Cup opener, the Golden Lions may have been dealt a blow with an injury to pivot Marnitz Boshoff.

The flyhalf, who marshalled the Johannesburg side with aplomb in their victory at Ellis Park on Saturday, missed the last 30 minutes after sustaining an arm injury which coach Johan Ackermann said was "concerning at first glance".

The extent of the blow is not yet known, but the Lions are likely to get clarity today after Marnitz has had scans on his arm.

"There's a bit of a dent, we are a bit concerned," Ackermann said.

Although the Lions coach is hoping the injury is not serious, he is

confident his squad will have adequate backup at flyhalf if needed, despite the absence of Elton Jantjies, who is in Japan.

Ackermann unleashed 20-year-old Jaco van der Walt, who debuted for the side as replacement for Boshoff on Saturday night.

The 1.82m, 85kg Van der Walt played his first senior Currie Cup game with confidence. Another debutant who impressed was centre Harold Vorster.

"What was most pleasing for me was the youngsters — Harold (Vorster) and Jaco van der Walt. It's good for us if these guys can show that kind of maturity so early," said Ackermann.

Should Boshoff be ruled out, Ackermann knows who his replacement would be.

"Jaco will be the first choice to take that role," he said.

Despite the defeat, Bulls coach Frans Ludeke was equally impressed with his young charges.

The Bulls had three novices on Saturday — centre Burger Odenaal, who was given a starting berth at No 12, and substitutes lock Nicolaas Janse van Rensburg and utility back Jesse Kriel.

"I thought all three did well. Jesse and Nicolaas came on and did a good job," said Ludeke.

But the Bulls coach was frank about his team's performance.

"The basics let us down. Our scrums were not good enough, we gave away penalties and couldn't keep the ball in contact situations. But those are things we can fix," Ludeke said.

Women's World Cup woes for Springboks

THE Springbok women finished the pool stages of the Women's World Cup in France without a win, tryless and with the possibility of returning home with the wooden spoon.

On Saturday Lawrence Sephaka's side suffered their third consecutive defeat when

they went down 35-3 to Wales, following losses to Australia and France.

Their best moment of the match against Wales came in the sixth minute, when flyhalf Zandile Nojoko slotted in a penalty to level the scores 3-3 after the Welsh scored a penalty. But that

was the only time the South Africans would have any say as Wales took control to claim their only win of the tournament.

The defeat meant that South Africa finished in the bottom four in the tournament, alongside Spain, Samoa and Kazakhstan. — Chumani Bambani