

BSF EXECUTIVE WEEKEND MEETING REPORT: 7-8 JANUARY 2023

The BSF Executive held its annual face-to-face weekend meeting on 7-8 January 2023 in Manchester. Below is a report on the main discussions and decisions.

Attendance

Present: Ieuan Gale (President), Laura Burkhardt (Treasurer), Liz Graham (Competitions and Membership Officer), Pete Saunders (Technical Officer), Mike Lott (Coaching Officer), Mike Jennings, Lesley Morisetti and Stella Ackrell (General Officers), Bob Fromer (Administrator).

Apologies: None.

Guests: Chris Rawlings, Leah Holmes and Gary Anderson (BSUK) attending in person and Chris Knoblock (BSUK) attending remotely.

SATURDAY

Quick discussion points

- BSF Technical Officer Pete Saunders will have a slot at both the League Heads Forum and the 2023 BSF AGM in February to emphasise stricter application by BASU this year of the rules regarding alcohol and smoking in the dugout at all tournaments held under BSF auspices, and he will clarify the rules on jewellery.
- The BSF will ask Baseball/Softball Outlet to stock catcher's masks and helmets in their store at Farnham Park. The BSF is currently re-drafting the rules on under-18s participating in adult sport to include requirements for catcher's masks and gum shields to be worn by under-18 pitchers and first and third base players.
- After an interview process, Beccy Adams has been appointed Team Operations Manager for the GB U-18 Men's Fastpitch Team and is also helping to organise the new U-16 Men's Fastpitch Team.
- Nicola-Jane Dyson from Manchester has agreed to organise the BSF Single-Sex Nationals and will also put her name forward to join the Executive as a General Officer.

National Softball League

The 2023 National Softball League will consist of three divisions – NSL1, NSL2 and NSL3 – with 12 teams in each division.

The hope – field availability at Farnham Park permitting – is that the BSF can launch an eight-team NSL4 in 2024. There seems to be a demand for this, but once that division is in place, NSL will essentially have reached saturation point.

The criteria for teams to bid for a place in NSL4 will be that they are BSF members and that they are willing to play in a number of tournaments in 2023 to demonstrate that their players will participate on multiple tournament dates. Alternatively, they can agree to pay upfront for all NSL4 weekends in 2024.

NSL1 and NSL2 will continue to have separate National Championships in September, but NSL3 and NSL4 (when it comes into being) will play a three-weekend league schedule only.

BSF Competitions Officer Liz Graham will canvass NSL1 teams to see if they still want to end NSL league weekends with semi-finals and finals to determine a winner and placings, or whether they simply want to play out the league schedule with longer games.

European Under-16 and Under-18 Men's Championships

It has been confirmed that only five countries have entered both the European Under-16 and Under-18 Men's Championships this year, which will allow Softball Europe to schedule games so that Under-16 players can, if required, play for both teams.

This will be helpful to the GB Men's Team programme, with the Under-16 Team being put together this year for the first time and the Under-18 Team looking for more players. A tryout day was held in Chichester last year to look for new players and further tryout days will be held in Bristol and Manchester later in January.

Financial matters

In the 2021-22 financial year, the BSF budgeted for a deficit of around £17,000 and in the event ended the year with a deficit of around £3,500. There were various reasons for the underspend, but it provides more flexibility for 2022-23 while still allowing the BSF to keep reserves at a reasonable level.

The largest element in last year's outcome was about £7,500 more than expected in membership fee income as softball leagues rebounded from the pandemic. Another important factor was that BASU very kindly covered the costs for umpires we were required to send to European competitions in 2022; in the past, the BSF and BASU had shared the cost. After the halfway point of the 2021-22 financial year, the BSF was no longer required to support the salary and costs of a Fastpitch Development Manager position shared with BSUK because the post was changed to a different role supported solely by BSUK. Sadly, there was an underspend on development grants and projects, though the BSF hopes to reverse this in the current financial year.

Reserves at the end of 2021-22 were around £43,500, a very healthy level relative to annual membership income.

The accounts for 2021-22 were approved by the Executive and will now go to the auditors.

The budget for 2022-23 projects a deficit of between £4,000 and £5,000, but some elements are still to be determined.

Accounts for 2021-22 and the projected budget for 2022-23 will be included in the AGM Pack and members will be asked for approval at the AGM. Other financial matters discussed included the following:

- **Registration system.** The BSF will not be using the Spawtz league management system going forward, and Membership Officer Liz Graham has found a free Canadian site called Teamlink that looks like it could cover our needs for registration and provide other facilities as well.
- **Slowpitch coach development.** The BSF has budgeted £1000 in 2022-23 for slowpitch coach development, and BSF Coaching Officer Mike Lott would like to see this used to support coaches taking BSUK Level 2 slowpitch courses (which the BSF would like to see happen more often), to run regional player clinics and to create and circulate material on drills or perhaps even make a drills video.
- **Support for GB Men's Development Team.** The Executive agreed to pay the full entry fee plus the organiser's fee for a GB Men's Fastpitch Development Team to play in the European Men's Super Cup. While the BSF only pays half the entry fee for club teams to enter European Cup tournaments, it has in the past supported GB Development teams by paying full entry fees.
- **Support for vacancies on the Executive.** Working through university softball teams, the BSF will contact universities to look for students who might like to take on a placement working with the BSF Treasurer or in a communications role.

BSF container at Farnham Park

Dehumidifiers that BSUK has installed in the BSF container at Farnham Park at the request of the BSF have somewhat reduced the damp conditions in the container, but not by a huge amount.

Anything at all perishable must be stored in sealed plastic bags and everything has to be off the floor.

BSF General Officer Mike Jennings has now done an inventory of what is in the container, trying to identify what belongs to the BSF, GB Fastpitch, GB Slowpitch, the GBFL etc.

To address the need to have lockable storage areas for different users, General Officer Lesley Morisetti will research the cost of three or four small sheds which would be put in the container. There is already a separate shed in the container used by the BSF.

Post-Presidential roles for Ieuan Gale

The Executive has approved two roles for Ieuan Gale after he steps down as BSF President following the AGM:

- Ieuan will remain as one of two BSF representatives on the BSUK Board to maintain continuity. It is likely that he will serve on the Board's Development Committee.
- Ieuan will also retain an official role as an International Representative for the BSF, to take advantage of the contacts he has made over the past two years with people and organisations in Europe, as well as with MLB and other organisations in the UK. How long Ieuan continues in this role will be reviewed once a new President is in place and has bedded in.

Ieuan is also the BSF's representative on the MLB Legacy Steering Group, tasked with ensuring that there is a significant legacy for both baseball and softball from the London Series games. Girls' fastpitch is a key strand of the group's work.

Attendance at WBSC Europe Congress

The Executive confirmed that Ieuan Gale will attend the WBSC Europe Congress in Belgrade on 11-13 February as the BSF's representative.

The Executive also invited BSUK Performance Director Gary Anderson to attend as part of the BSF delegation.

Team Finder terminology

BSUK is revising and updating the Team Finder that appears on the BSUK and BSF websites, and the BSF was asked to define categories to be used to characterise softball teams, clubs or leagues.

After some negotiation with BSUK, the categories will be:

- Fastpitch Softball
- Slowpitch Softball
- Youth Softball
- Fastpitch and Slowpitch Softball (where a club offers both)

BASU report

BSF Technical Officer Pete Saunders reported that nine leagues have now signed up for BASU online courses this year, with two of them (Cardiff and Solent) hosting Beginners Courses.

Athlete Representative

The BSF would like to add an Athlete Representative to the BSF Executive to provide feedback on views and opinions from the community.

The Executive is aware that there are effectively three formats of softball – slowpitch, men’s fastpitch and women’s fastpitch – but having a representative from each would be unwieldy. So the hope is that the Athlete Rep will form and chair a small Athletes Commission with at least one representative from each format and then bring a range of views and issues to Executive meetings.

The position will be advertised shortly and individual athletes may be approached to determine interest. If there are multiple candidates, the Executive will organise a community vote.

SUNDAY

BSUK Public Relations Officer Chris Knoblock joined the meeting remotely for the first session on Sunday morning, where the following topics were covered:

Enhancing BSF National Championships

Chris feels that the BSF could – and should – do more to make BSF National Championships, especially the NSL Nationals, pinnacle tournaments by enhancing the experience for players and spectators beyond what happens on the field.

His initial suggestions were around food and drink served at different fields rather than just at Home Plate, some sort of entertainment for children and more use of media, including webstreaming. Additional suggestions will also be considered.

BSF Style Guide

Chris Knoblock feels that the BSF needs to develop and adhere to a Style Guide, and the Executive agreed. There is already a template for this in the BSUK Style Guide, and the outcome will include a range of template elements, such as letterheads, slide decks etc, as well as the Guide itself, and will underpin all elements of BSF communication.

It may be that separate Style Guides will be needed for the BSF and GB Softball.

BSF Digital Media Report 2022

The report on BSF digital media that Chris Knoblock produced in October 2022 suggests that the BSF has recovered from the pandemic in terms of engagement – but engagement, particularly with the website, is low. People are going to the BSF website for information – events, standings etc – not to read articles, and even social media engagement is mostly around events.

This raises questions about what the BSF website is for, and whether it would be better for it to become a mostly static information site with brief news snippets delivered through social media. Further discussion will be required.

Development Plans

The next two sessions on Sunday were given over to discussion of the revised Fastpitch Development Plan and the in-progress Slowpitch Development Plan produced by BSUK. Head of Development Chris Rawlings and Deputy Head of Development Leah Holmes were at the meeting to provide background and context and to answer questions.

The Plans under consideration are only two of a Series of development plans that BSUK is producing, including Plans for baseball, children and young people, and baseball and softball in Scotland and Wales.

The Slowpitch Development Plan, which is mostly headlines at the moment without a lot of detail, sets out a “high level direction of travel” to improve the experience of participants. Once the Plan is agreed, the idea is to establish working groups consisting of BSUK staff and community members to develop methods for implementation.

The Fastpitch Development Plan is at a more advanced stage and has undergone some revision since being initially circulated to the BSF Executive late last year. Again, once the Plan has been agreed, the idea is to establish working groups to help with implementation.

The Slowpitch Development Plan has been organised around the following areas of development:

- Competition
- University connection
- Secondary schools
- The Slowpitch Academy
- Coach education
- Equality, diversity and inclusion

The Fastpitch Development Plan has been organised around these areas of development:

- Schools
- Clubs and leagues
- Competition
- Performance pathway
- Coach education
- Officiating

BSF General Officer Stella Ackrell is compiling a list of comments and reactions to the Plans from the Executive to feed back to BSUK, and the Executive will also share the Plans with a range of community members for comment. BSUK staff members will introduce the Plans during the BSUK session at the BSF AGM in February.

Development Charter

Leah Holmes gave the Executive an update on BSUK’s Development Charter.

All BSF leagues, clubs and teams are automatically signed up to the Charter, but nine leagues and 31 clubs or teams have engaged more proactively.

A League Heads Workshop on the Charter was attended by nine leagues (though none from the North), and a Slack channel has now been established, with 11 leagues signed up, as a discussion platform.

Leah reported that the BSUK Facilities Fund attracted more applications from softball in 2022, though there is clearly less incentive for slowpitch clubs or teams to apply as opposed to baseball or fastpitch. Leagues can also apply, and applications were received last year from Milton Keynes and Manchester.

Development Charter Health Check

Leah Holmes also gave a presentation on a “Health Check” exercise for leagues and clubs that BSUK is currently carrying out in relation to Development Charter opportunities. The aim is to collect data that can establish baselines and help BSUK measure the impact of the Charter in a more formalised way, with the ultimate aim of achieving more good practice and governance.

The Health Check has been piloted with the Milton Keynes and Windsor & Maidenhead Leagues, using personal conversations as well as an online questionnaire. At the end of the exercise, each club and league that participates will get a summary that can help with prioritisation and identify where BSUK can help.

Leah said, “The Health Check is a mirror to help clubs and leagues reflect on policy and practice and on areas that need to be addressed”, and safeguarding is a key element. BSUK hopes to carry out this exercise with all BSF member clubs, and information obtained will be shared with the BSF.

Leah explained that, for BSUK, the difference between a “club” and a “team” is not just about a club potentially having multiple teams, but more around governance and aims. The Development Charter and the Health Check are aimed more at “clubs” than at loosely organised teams that only want to turn up and play.

Other development topics from BSUK

Chris Rawlings and Leah Holmes also spoke briefly about the following topics:

- **BUCS Softball Finals.** The 2023 BUCS University Softball National Championship will be held at Farnham Park on the weekend of 18-19 March and the final will be webstreamed on the BSUK YouTube channel.
- **2023 Coach Summit.** This year’s Coach Summit will be held on the weekend of 28-29 January at the National Sports Centre at Bisham Abbey. The annual BSUK Coaching and Volunteer Awards will be presented at a dinner on the Saturday evening, but only a small number of nominations for softball coaching awards have been received to date.

- **Softball in Regents Park.** BSUK has been instrumental over the off-season in trying to maintain access for softball at Regents Park in London, which has been used by a number of London leagues over many years. One major success is that Regents Park has now granted a licence for winter use.

Next BSF meetings

The next BSF Executive videoconference meeting will be held on the evening of Thursday 9 February.

Anyone from the Executive or the community with items to bring to the meeting should contact BSF Administrator Bob Fromer. [bob.fromer@britishsoftball.org]

The BSF will also host two more remote meetings in February: the annual League Heads Forum on the evening of Thursday 16 February and the 2023 AGM on the afternoon of Saturday 25 February.