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# Free us from Sport England's dead hand

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I attended my first table tennis tournament for a decade on Sunday to watch Tom Jarvis defeat Sam Walker in a fabulous match in the English national men's singles final. They hit the ball true and early, the rallies fizzing with intent. Afterwards, Jarvis — who won 4-2 — hurdled the barriers to hug his dad David, older brother Ross and lovely mum, Julie.

It was wonderful to behold, this love and support between the family, none of whom I had met before. As Tom, 22, held his father, both in tears, a mobile phone was handed to the champion. His grandfather was on the line. "It was so wonderful to talk to grandad," Tom told me later. "He drove me three times a week from Skegness [his home] to Grantham for practice sessions. My family has poured so much money and love into my development. This trophy is theirs, not mine."

But alongside these wonderful scenes, there is another, less edifying story to tell about table tennis. I was aghast to discover

that Tom's cheque for winning the most prestigious competition in England was a measly £800, perhaps representing less than 0.5 per cent of the cash his family has spent on his development. Hell, this is significantly less than what I earned for winning the same tournament a quarter of a century ago.

Depressingly, though, this was just one sign of the regression in the sport over the past decade. The competition wasn't broadcast on BBC1, BBC2 or Sky Sports. It didn't even make it on to Eurosport, despite the desperation of rolling sports channels for content. Instead, it was "hosted" on a peripheral page of the BBC Sport website and therefore gained no more than a few hundred viewers. In the university sports hall in which the finals took place, there were dozens of empty seats and an atmosphere that felt, at times, funereal.

What is Table Tennis England, the governing body, up to, I asked people? How can the main advert for the game be so inadequate? It didn't take long to identify a culprit: Sport England, the quango that operates as the principal funder of table tennis but whose actions are often dangerously counterproductive. In this sense, the state of table tennis in this country (which receives more than £11 million in public cash over each four-year cycle) is emblematic of a wider tale of waste, inefficiency and bureaucratic empire building.

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First, the back story. Sport England, for the uninitiated, was set up in 1996 with a mission to boost sports participation, something it eventually sought to do by setting the objective of increasing the number of people playing three times a week. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strategy was an abject failure (it was never realistic to expect bureaucrats in Whitehall to inspire behavioural change in communities such as Southall and St Helens) with participation plateauing over the next decade and more, despite the boost of a home Olympics in London 2012.

Indeed, the plan probably had a negative impact upon English sport by forcing coaches and volunteers to navigate an ever-changing “funding landscape” to access subsidies. I well remember coaches bribing youngsters to come to sessions, who would then sign their name on a form and leave, so they could artificially boost the numbers on which they were being judged. The whole thing was a gravy train largely detached from the important work of helping the nation to become fitter.



Jarvis won the English national table tennis championships in front of a sparse crowd  
TABLE TENNIS ENGLAND

But despite this failure, Sport England shifted the goalposts. Instead of measuring the number of sessions of sport each week, it started to smuggle in things such as jogging and walking: activities that were already increasing in wider society

and in whose reflected glory they wanted to bask. The statistical gerrymandering was brazen but ministers were too busy to realise they were being conned, so the money kept flowing. As of last year, Sport England's annual budget was £300 million.

And this brings me back to Table Tennis England, an institution that showcases why Sport England keeps failing. By micromanaging and subsidising from above, it denudes the individual governing bodies of initiative. As far as I could tell, none of the 40 staff of Table Tennis England put in a call to Sky or BBC to get the National Championships on television, nor did they seek major sponsorship. Indeed, one insider patiently explained that he was too busy getting up to speed with new Sport England guidelines detailed in a 100-page report. It's like something by Kafka.

What makes this particularly depressing is that in my last couple of years as a player, I tried to boost table tennis, not least by promoting televised events at prestige venues such as the Royal Albert Hall, all of which enjoyed sell-out crowds and decent prize funds (the winner's cheque for the last event was £30,000). In 2002, I founded a charity alongside friends Alan Sherwood and Mike De Giorgio called TTK Greenhouse, which mentors and coaches thousands of youngsters from deprived backgrounds, funded by millions in private-sector donations. The board includes the chief executive of the Man Group along with other leaders from the business and voluntary sectors.

The point is that sport in this country can thrive both commercially and in terms of participation via the dynamism of

entrepreneurs and volunteers — but only if it is liberated from the deadweight burden at the heart of the ecosystem. Few people within sport ever dare criticise Sport England because its tentacles are spread so far and wide that almost everyone is dependent on it, not least the former sportspeople who end up on its payroll, whether as coaches or bureaucrats. It is really rather cynical.

Yet, it is people such as the Jarvis's that I feel most sorry for, a family that has worked hard to help their son reach his potential but whose achievements will not receive anything like the recognition they deserve. His victory in a university sports hall in front of a derisory number of spectators is a waste in more ways than one. For without a strong media profile and commercial vitality, table tennis will never fulfil its promise to inspire millions of people in this country to become more active.

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