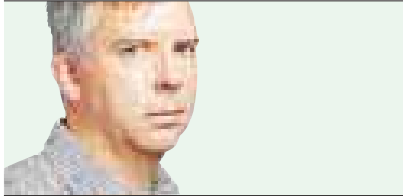


'My constant worry is that we get 70% right, but not all of it'



Donald McRae

Former investment banker in charge of organising London 2012 is desperate not to miss the big picture

Five years ago the headhunter charged with the task of finding the best person to organise the London Olympics reacted with contempt when he took a call from an aspiring candidate called Paul Deighton. Hearing that Deighton was a senior partner at Goldman Sachs, where he had worked as an investment banker for 22 years, his response matched the attitude most people feel towards a reviled profession. The idea that a city banker should be responsible for the budgeting, vision and organisation of the 2012 Olympic Games sounded disastrous.

Deighton, the chief executive of Locog, the organising committee of the London Olympics, remembers that conversation with amusement. "The headhunter said: 'The last thing we need is some testosterone-crazed investment banker.' But they ended up mentioning it to Seb Coe, who said: 'That's exactly what we need - call him back.'"

Coe has been credited with winning the Olympics for London after a combination of his sporting pedigree, lobbying skills and an impassioned presentation swept aside a more favoured bid from Paris. But he made an equally significant contribution in appointing Deighton. Coe might remain the public face of the Games, but the likely success of 2012 rests on Deighton's considerable managerial ability and impressive character.

Next Tuesday it will be two years to the day that the Olympics begin, and solid foundations are in place. Deighton has shown a calm purpose and clarity of

foresight which meant he secured all the sponsorship money needed to underpin a £9.3bn budget before the global economic crisis erupted. He also developed a cohesive team that inspires confidence London is on target for a memorable Olympics.

"It's now time we turn to the UK population," Deighton says at his office in Canary Wharf, "and remind them: 'You really need to start planning your own Games experience.' We've got this big ticket campaign and so far 1.4m have already signed up which is great - because we're not even selling tickets until next spring."

Before Deighton outlines some boldly inclusive plans with regard to ticketing and volunteers it seems apt to consider his unlikely journey from investment banking to Olympic organisation. He first heard London had won the bid in his Goldman Sachs office in July 2005. "I thought: 'This is the biggest thing in the world and it's coming to my town and it touches on all

the things that are important in my life - like sport and the impact it has on young people.' My relationship with my kids has been built mostly around sport. It touched something profound in me but I soon got back to work.

"A few months later I was on my bed, half-watching football on a Sunday afternoon, when I came across the newspaper ad. I thought: 'Wow! Wow!' I showed it to my wife and she said: 'That's you.' She bullied me into phoning the headhunter."

The 54-year-old is about to celebrate his 25th wedding anniversary with his American wife - which finally trumps his years at Goldman Sachs. "When this job came along, I'd had a longer relationship with Goldman than anyone else apart from my mother and brother. Of course there is the stereotypical view of the investment banker - but my experience was that the best people at Goldman were not flash at all."

Deighton was powerful enough to have become the 458th richest person in the country when he applied for the Locog position. He could afford the massive

pay-cut - but had he started to question the dubious morality of modern banking? "We all have those moments of existential angst. But I was incredibly lucky that I was doing fascinating things with really good people and that kept me going. It's still true I was ready to do something else with my life."

He laughs at the suggestion that his decision to leave banking shows the depth of his insight into a collapsing industry. "In hindsight I'm even smarter than I thought," he jokes. "No, it's sometimes better to be lucky than smart. But getting the Olympic money sorted out before the credit crunch, particularly with sponsors, has been powerful. And the Olympics is such an incomparable mission it helped me attract exceptional people."

It is still hard to predict the kind of Olympics London will present. "I could give you the answer in our vision paper," Deighton says, "but I'll tell you what I really think. Every team coming here will have a significant indigenous fan-base. It's such a melting pot - so the atmosphere we create in welcoming the world is helped by the fact that the world is already here. There'll be an extraordinary celebration. Beijing had spectacular venues that were not situated anywhere particularly interesting. We have slightly quirker venues built with value and legacy in mind. That's very sensible and they're all situated in brilliant locations, from beach volleyball at Horse Guards Parade to archery at Lord's."

Deighton's Olympic vision is now concentrated on ticketing and volunteer helpers. He emerges as a relatively radical enthusiast for ordinary people rather than his old corporate friends. "We'll have 75% of the total tickets in the ballot for the general public. Compared to a football World Cup final or a rugby World Cup that's a really high number. They've tended to have a much higher percentage

of corporate tickets to get the yield up. Of the remaining 25%, about 16% will be sold to the international general public through



the respective National Olympic Committees. The remaining 9% gets distributed to corporate hospitality, broadcasters and the IOC. So we're treating people right.

"One of the big disappointments in Beijing was that, even though they'd sold all the tickets, venues were far from full. That's a travesty. We'll do everything we can to keep the stadiums full - and the way to do that is to place tickets with people who really want to come. In Beijing they also had six-hour sessions of beach volleyball. Now you might be the world's greatest beach volleyball fan but no one wants to sit through six hours. So we've shortened the sessions and we want to make tickets accessible and affordable."

Deighton concedes that opportunities to see Usain Bolt in the 100m final will remain strictly limited - and that "people with privileged access will be there". But he argues that "someone like Bolt will be making eight or nine appearances and so there'll be a big chunk of the general public at different sessions".

Apart from generating interest in less mainstream events, Deighton is evangelical about the kind of volunteers he would like to welcome overseas visitors. "We've had about 300,000 people sign up and we need 70,000. But we have to be careful. I'm not saying I'm going to reject the people who are great at doing it - but we don't want just the obvious suspects. We're very conscious that, in the five boroughs, there

is the most ethnically diverse and extraordinary community. We have to be proactive in finding ways to make sure they are included. A Bangladeshi housewife is not naturally going to sign up. So we are very conscious of the fact that it will be a much better volunteer force if we really get the face of London."

How does Deighton move beyond "the obvious suspects" - the white middle-class - and include his specified "Bangladeshi housewife"? "By working in the communities and by actively going out and meeting groups. You target them and you pull them in. It's the same

way we've got them to work here.

"I am relentless in saying this workforce has to look like London. I tell the guys responsible [for Locog's recruitment]: 'We've got these schemes to hire black people and we're at 18%. With the next 50 [employees] do we go to

19% or down to 17%? Is it dilutive or accretive?' They know it had better be accretive or someone isn't trying hard enough. With this project you can make a difference if you're tough enough and you just bang it in to everybody's head each step of the way. We're hiring like that now."

Deighton sounds less like a cloistered investment banker than the visionary London needs to present a multicultural Olympics. He also has a light touch. "You can't go too soon with the British public. It's a slow-burn psychology. We're getting to the point where one or two are starting to think: 'This might just be all right'. I think of my mother. I'd come home and say: 'I got nine As at O level and she'd be like: 'OK'. That's how the Brits are."

Has his mother expressed more enthusiasm for his Olympic role? "Unfortunately she has quite severe dementia. I try to explain it but she's actually wondering what I'm doing on 20 December when I keep talking about 2012. But people have said my father [who, before his death, was a factory foreman in Croydon] would've been very happy about the Olympic job."

Do his two sons, aged 22 and 20, and at university in America, regard

him as a cool dad - now he's running the Olympics? "I'm sort of all right. But you know boys. They tend not to phone unless money's required. But I got a call when it was wrongly rumoured, in the Guardian, that I was taking over as Arsenal chief executive. This was before they appointed Ivan Gazidis [in November 2008]. My son said: 'Is that true, dad?' He was genuinely impressed."

Deighton grins when asked whether, as an Arsenal season ticket-holder, he would secretly like to ask Arsène Wenger to open the 2012 Olympics. "What about Tony Adams? We could get the old Arsenal back four raising their arms in an offside appeal as we light the torch."

Instead, Deighton will do the right thing, methodically and immaculately. He is also bullish about the 2012 legacy, even if it falls outside his remit, and believes the East End's regeneration will match the "magic dust" of the Olympics. But he remains thoughtful: "My constant worry is that we'll get 70% of it right - but not 100%. Sometimes I get frustrated we're so caught up in some organisational aspect, and over there is the big picture."

Deighton pauses, oblivious to the danger of giving former investment bankers a good name. And, in that moment, it appears likely his team will end up closer to the mythical 100% mark. "Intellectually," he says, "I'd always got the fact that sport has this emotional connection and that it can make a difference to people's lives. But since I've been here I've been surprised by the strength of that intensity to inspire. It's much more powerful than I ever thought. We have a real obligation not to waste it."





Usain Bolt is likely to make eight or nine appearances and will be watched by a 'big chunk of the general public'

Portrait by
Felix Clay for the Guardian



A Bangladeshi housewife is not naturally going to sign up to be a volunteer. You have to pull them in





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