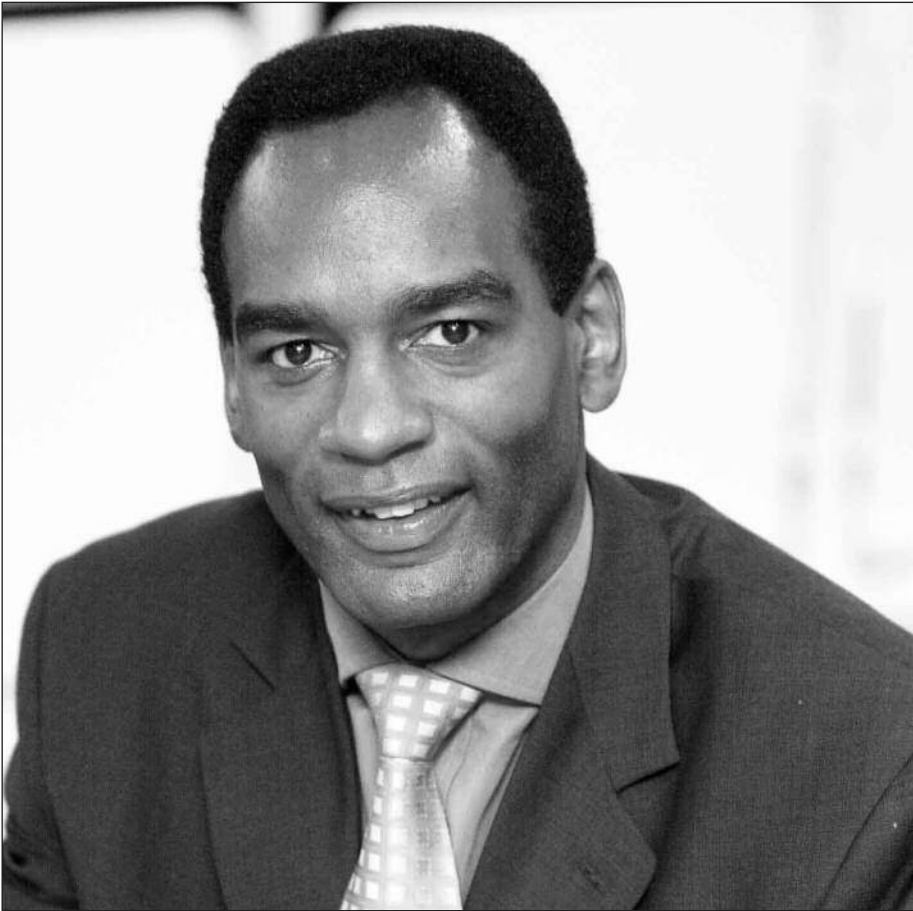


Interview with Nigel Walker



Nigel Walker is currently Head of Sport for BBC Wales. He was born in Cardiff in 1963. He represented Great Britain at the 1984 Summer Olympics in the 110m high hurdles. He won 30 vests in total representing GB in all the major championships winning bronze medals at the European and World Indoor Championships in 1997. After failing to make the GB&NI team for the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 he retired from athletics to pursue a career in rugby. In August 1992 he commenced training with Cardiff RFC and played his first game for the club on 4 September. In March 1993 he played for Wales in the five nations match against Ireland. During his rugby career he won 17 caps for Wales, and scored 12 tries, before making a final appearance in February 1998 against England. He is actively involved in fund raising activities for Cancer Research Wales, George Thomas Hospice Care, and the NSPCC.

You first gained fame in Wales as an Olympic hurdler in 1984. Can you explain when you first identified your athletic ability, and whether you consider there to have been special events (positive and negative) and people crucial to your success?

I was 14 years old, and in Green House, Caradog, Rumney High School. It was Sports Day, and I was asked to run the hurdles, to fill in for someone else. There was no pressure and I ran it in 14 seconds, and became the school's hurdle champion. Two weeks later I ran in the county championships and won, and 3 weeks later I was in the Welsh Championships – so everything happened in the space of three weeks. I was lucky, and in the right place at the right time. I was not the most technically proficient. Colin Jackson,

with whom I trained, was much better technically, and while we are similar heights, his inside leg is longer than mine – by 2 inches!

To my parent's disappointment, I left school at 18. After spending the start of this 'gap year' on the sofa, and following much persuasion from my mother to 'get a job or else...' I took a job in civil service, and worked in the Welsh Office for 10 years, before moving to the Sports Council for Wales as a Development Officer in 1993. I hadn't taken athletics too seriously training twice a week in the summer and playing rugby and football in the winter. This changed when I turned 19 and I upped my training to six days a week and gave up all other sports. Two years later at the age of 21, I was selected for the 1984 Olympics.

I competed in the 1986 European Championships, in which I came fourth in the 110m high hurdles. I was disappointed, but I remember Andy Norman, the promotions officer for the British Amateur Athletics Board approaching me afterwards and complimenting me on my interview performance rather than my race performance! I enjoyed English at school and consider myself to be good with words.

At that stage in my athletics career I couldn't make enough money to become a full-time athlete, also I am very risk averse by nature, and so at the age of 26/27 I became a part-time athlete, supplementing my athletics by part-time work, and I was also supported by my then partner, who is now my wife (and my rock).

You turned to Rugby in 1992 which must have taken enormous courage; to switch sports halfway through your career. Why did you make this switch and was rugby a natural successor to hurdling. What other options/sports did you consider?

After coming 4th in the European Championships I did a reality check. I have always been a realist and I knew I needed to be in the top three to succeed. I trained hard, but I failed to qualify (coming 5th) in the 1992 Olympic Trials. I was 29 years old, and I just decided to switch to Rugby. I had always been good at Rugby, as well as other sport at school, having played tennis, basketball, baseball, cricket and football. Speed is the basis for most sports, and I found that I was able to take well to most sporting activities.

Both professional and gifted amateur sports people appear to have special qualities and skills. What do you think these are, and which may be transferable to 'ordinary' jobs?

I think you have to be committed, dedicated, and ambitious and have a dream goal that you are prepared to work towards. These qualities can be applied to all walks of life, and it isn't the most intelligent or most gifted people who succeed – it is the people who make sacrifices.

During my time at Cardiff Amateur Athletics club I was not the most talented. There were several others who were more talented, but they never went on to succeed. I squeezed every last drop of talent out of myself, and as I mentioned, luck is also important – these factors can take you past others

who are more talented. Everyone has a gift; you just need to find it.

Sports preferences in Wales are very diverse. How does the BBC cope with this?

There are certainly different sports preferences across Wales. Football is more important than Rugby in North Wales, while the reverse is true for South Wales. We know from our research at the BBC that North Walesans have a strong interest in football teams such as Manchester United, Everton, Liverpool, and Wrexham has a large following. These diverse interests present a challenge for broadcasters, and we try to get the balance right with regard to programming. I would hope that everyone in Wales would say that they get something out of the BBC whether it's watching Eastenders or Belonging, listening to Radio Wales, Radio Cymru, Radio 1,2 or Five Live or consuming the incredibly diverse online offering – if not, I feel we have failed.

You are fortunate to have inherited your talent for sport and to be able to carve out a career from it. Many people would consider BBC Head of Sport a dream job. Can you give us an idea of what your job entails?

I have been in post at BBC Wales for 4 and a half years. There is a team of around 60 people involved in the production of sport output. My responsibilities as Head of Sport include the commissioning and scheduling of all BBC Wales sports output in both English and Welsh – on TV, Radio and on-line. Most of the sports output on BBC is broadcast at the weekend, but there are also programmes on BBC Wales and S4C during the week (e.g. rugby highlights, Midweek Sport). The sports we are able to broadcast depend on which sports rights we have secured i.e. we need to secure rights to the games first. Currently, for example, the rights for Football Association Wales games are with Sky having been with BBC Wales for twenty years. This means BBC Wales is currently unable to show any of the home games.

Do you have a view regarding how the people in Wales have or could benefit from taking part in sporting activity, in a wider sense than simply social inclusion?

I think that sport exerts a great influence on nations and on individual welfare. For example, Wales played Italy in football 3 years ago in front of one of the biggest TV audiences of all time in Wales. People were greatly anticipating the game, and talking about it for weeks after as Wales won 2-1 - It created a 'feel-good factor'. Research done in the 1970s showed that if Wales won a game on the Saturday, productivity went up throughout the following week. This is a small country which is partly why so many of us delight in achievements which raise its profile. Sport can provide opportunities for inclusion and improved well-being. It is difficult to measure how far it goes, but it is important nonetheless.

Do you consider the Millennium stadium to be an economic asset or simply an attractive and useful building?

I am certain the stadium is an economic asset. I have been to a large number of stadia in my time, and this is one of the best. It has put Wales on the map for many who were unaware of it, and its city centre location is good for Cardiff. Most stadia are located outside city centres. Obviously the level of impact varies between events.

What do you consider to be the economic advantages and disadvantages of staging the Ryder Cup in Wales? A lot of thought is going into maximising the social and economic impacts of this sporting event. In terms of programming, we have already had a meeting with John Phelps, the Commercial Director of the Celtic Manor to discuss programming ideas between now and 2010. In the build up to the event in Straffan, County Kildare this September, BBC Wales will give people in Wales an idea of what to expect in 2010. We are also examining how such events can be used to raise the profile of

golf. Obviously the Cup will bring a lot of American tourists. What will be more difficult to assess is the nature and extent of the longer term benefits. We first have to live through the experience.

How can we in Wales benefit from the 2012 Olympics?

The Olympics are likely to bring much smaller impacts to Wales directly, but hopefully there will be plenty of interest in the event from the people of Wales. The Sports Council for Wales and the Assembly will certainly be working with the relevant bodies associated with the 2012 event to make sure that any opportunities arising for Wales are fully utilised. For example, teams that are not acclimatised to London may want to do some advance training, and the UK regions may be able to benefit from hosting these teams for weeks or months beforehand, and preparations will already have been made to secure some of this action.

And finally, can you tell us what you would most like to see changed in Wales, and what you most love about it?

It's not so much "changed in Wales" but more changing the perception some in other parts of the UK have about Wales. i.e. that Wales is some backwater mainly inhabited by sheep and where the main occupation is coal mining!

I have lived in Cardiff all my life and while I enjoy life in and around the City centre the thought of being able to jump in the car and within forty minutes being able to walk in the Brecon Beacons or on Mumbles Beach makes Wales a perfect place for me to live.

Nigel Walker. Thank you very much.