

<b>Title</b>	How St Helens can benefit from the 2012 Olympics
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<b>Audience</b>	Parents and Sports Development Officials
<b>Background</b>	This document is based upon the author's personal opinion and is not a scientific study. Hopefully it stimulates some debate and internal reflection amongst readers.

## **The Challenge**

Within St Helens and surrounding areas, Athletics is a minority sport in comparison to Football and Rugby League. However, the area, and indeed our club, regularly produce elite level athletes and have done for many years. A good percentage of athletes competing in next year's Olympics will come from the North West, but most don't receive the recognition in local media or around the dinner table that their talent, dedication and results deserve.

Today, we can see that the balance of most Junior Sections in Athletics is heavily weighted towards female athletes, as opportunities for them in sport are limited. There is hardly any junior netball or hockey in the St Helens area so Athletics ranks quite highly alongside Dance as an option for young girls. By comparison, there are many local Football and Rugby League clubs for boys and they are brought up aspiring to be the next Steven Gerrard or Paul Wellens via parental and media exposure.

Some sports psychologists call this process "ignition" but I think most people would recognise it simply as wanting to be like someone famous that they see on TV or in the news every week. They can then buy the shirt and "play" this character in the park with their mates or on their games console.

To date, athletics locally has not been able to generate interest in the same way.

## **Can it?**

There are many thousands of aspiring young rugby players and footballers in the North West that will never reach elite level. There are many reasons why this may be and commitment, interest and physique could all play a part.

However, how many of these youngsters are just lacking opportunity because they are a small fish in a huge pond? Not everyone can be a star.

How many of these youngsters are in a sport where physique limits their opportunities at a young age to the point where they never catch up? (See my blog on relative age effect)

How many of young footballers have the speed or stamina but have lousy ball control and get stuck in the nets out of the way? The same applies to wingers and full backs in mini rugby.

The penny is starting to drop and two coverts to athletics are in with a good chance of medals at the 2012 games.

Lawrence Okoye is a gold medal prospect in the Discus having previously failed to secure a top level Rugby Union Contract. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2011/jul/30/london-olympics-lawrence-okoye-great-britain>

Dai Greene was on the books of Swansea City FC as a youngster and is a huge Manchester Utd fan but he switched to athletics and is now our leading men's 400m hurdler.  
[http://www.espn.co.uk/athletics/sport/video\\_audio/122204.html](http://www.espn.co.uk/athletics/sport/video_audio/122204.html)

Many footballers and rugby players convert to athletics at the end of their career and choose running as a way of staying fit and avoiding the rounding effects of middle age. However, if more young sportsmen tried athletics alongside football / rugby they would have more than 1 sport in which they could excel and they would benefit from a more varied training programme that lessens the likelihood of injury and provides better all round fitness, agility and coordination.

Final thought provokers....

- Q1) How do athletics clubs improve their media coverage and ensure that success is celebrated?
- Q2) How do we highlight local athletes that went on to representative honours?
- Q3) What partnerships can be created with football and rugby clubs to offer their members close season training and competition?
- Q4) How do we capture the imagination of children and ignite a desire to be an athlete?
- Q5) How do we spot potential elite athletes that won't make the top grade in other sports?