

# Management Horizons

by Gerry Carver



**B**read and circuses it may have been, but Wembley's Recreation Management '88 was also an important watershed for the leisure industry. It brought together all the changes taking place at present. Seasoned visitors know it was not just another annual reunion.

The strong exhibition presence of architects and health and fitness companies was itself indicative of trends as were the hotel and fitness seminars. Wembley was also the first national platform for discussion of compulsory competitive tendering.

When David Cross walked across the Wembley stage he tripped himself up, intentionally he said - or was it? The courage and enterprise of the Crossland Leisure founders, especially in the face of the early risks they took, is to be greatly admired. However, local authorities can take heart from David's presentation.

The difference, it would seem, between commercial and local authority leisure management is not in staff wages, nor in programming or pricing. Few would be convinced the marketing approach he described was any more positive than many enterprising local councils. Their managers are primarily drawn from local government. So where are the differences? Essentially between David's caricatures of an old fashioned, traditional and bureaucratic local council and his high class management model.

Whether either is true is a source of great question and debate. What we can be sure of though, is that it takes particular skills to manage any operation within the public sector. Not to have those skills or the necessary patience does not make the case for dismantling the public sector!

David's positive presentation did highlight very clearly what local authorities need to do to be in a position to compete. The requirements are for clear policy objectives, sound operational management and delegation for good managers to get on with the job. Every council has the chance to do this and get in the stalls - once

they are in it is an open book.

There can be no doubt, however, that one of the attractions of private involvement will be the potential for capital investment. Many local facilities entering their second decade are in great need of refurbishment. As the screw tightens on local government expenditure private investment may prove an important carrot.

## Value judgement

Hannibal was preparing to cross the Alps as the Seminar considered sport in schools. I am sure the majority of those interested in sport for young people view with concern the trail of impressions left by McEnroe, Souness and Botham. It is as if there were not enough problems to overcome in providing sports opportunities for young people, developing the best attitudes and maintaining standards!

I remember very clearly an observation made to me by Edward Grayson, the distinguished sports barrister, that a corruption, corrosion and erosion of values at the root of our problems in sport and society. Values are certainly at stake both in competitive tendering and the future of sport for youngsters, in or out of school.

There are strong indications that we could drift towards something akin to the continental system of sport for youngsters where the role of the school is negligible. The rights and wrongs of that drift are a major debate in themselves.

In France, Germany and Austria sports clubs and volunteers provide the backbone of opportunity with far less provided by local councils. In the UK at present I believe we are more fortunate, with a blend of school, club, private and public opportunities. The blend is worth developing!

As we adapt to changing trends and circumstances the recognition and maintenance of the values, not just the costs, of leisure management will be the crucial issue. We will trip ourselves up if we become over-concerned about who should manage and do not spell out the values of it all clearly enough.