

A History of the British American Football Coaches Association

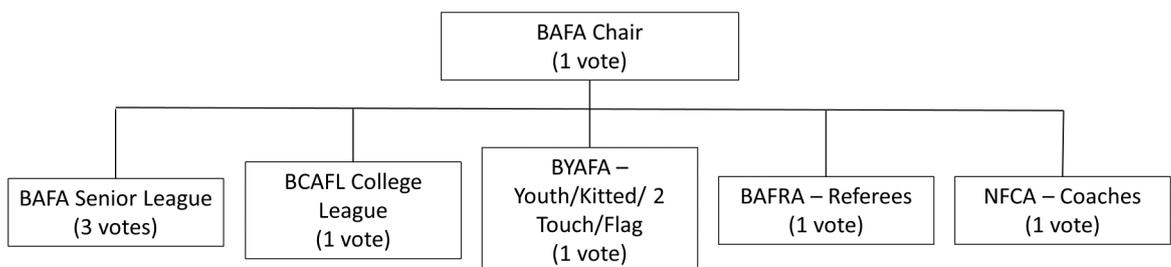
The roots of a coaching association for UK American Football can be traced to 1986 with the establishment of the BFCA by Dr Kurt Smeby and Rodger Goodgroves. The organisation was launched with a blast of publicity in First Down magazine and individual approaches to coaches by phone. Whilst it was set up with the best of intentions, the association quickly got dragged into the politics of the game at the time. A reflection of the thriving nature of the game in the eighties, it attempted to introduce mandatory coaches' contracts and salary arbitration which did not go down well with everyone involved in the sport. The BFCA dissolved in 1991 leaving the path clear for an all new, and all-representative coaches association.

The National Football Coaches Association (NFCA) was established in 1992 with its constitution and bylaws produced by its founders; Executive Director Lee Rowlands, and President Tony Allen both of the London Olympians. The association received official governing body recognition from BAFA on the 1st June 1993.



The organisations remit was to 'maintain the highest possible standards in football and the profession of coaching American Football; to provide a forum for the discussion and study of all matters pertaining to football and coaching; to make the game as safe and entertaining as possible through the rules of play; to have a strong voice in the domestic legislation affecting football programs; to exchange freely information on coaching methods and technique, and to promote good fellowship and social contacts within the Association.'

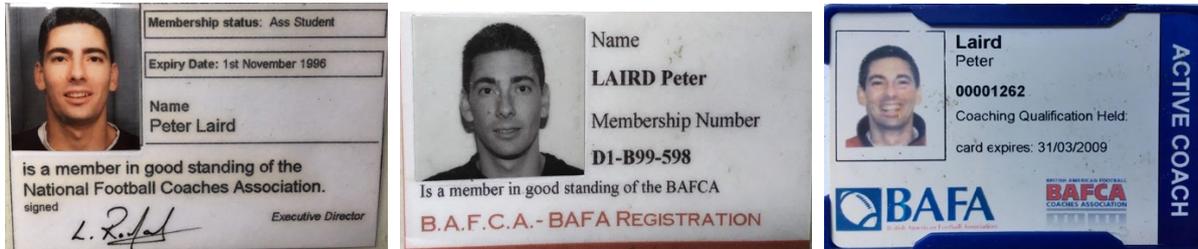
The early years of the NFCA were about establishing the association as one of the voices for change in the game. An early proposal from the NFCA proposed changes to the structure of the BAFA board that would be incorporated by the governing body and give the coaches a voice at the table that oversaw the game in the UK.



BAFA Board Structure, American Football in the UK, a Plan for the Future (NFCA 1994)

Perhaps the most telling of the associations earliest successes came when BAFA passed an amendment to its constitution which enforced every team in every league to have at least one NFCA registered coach.

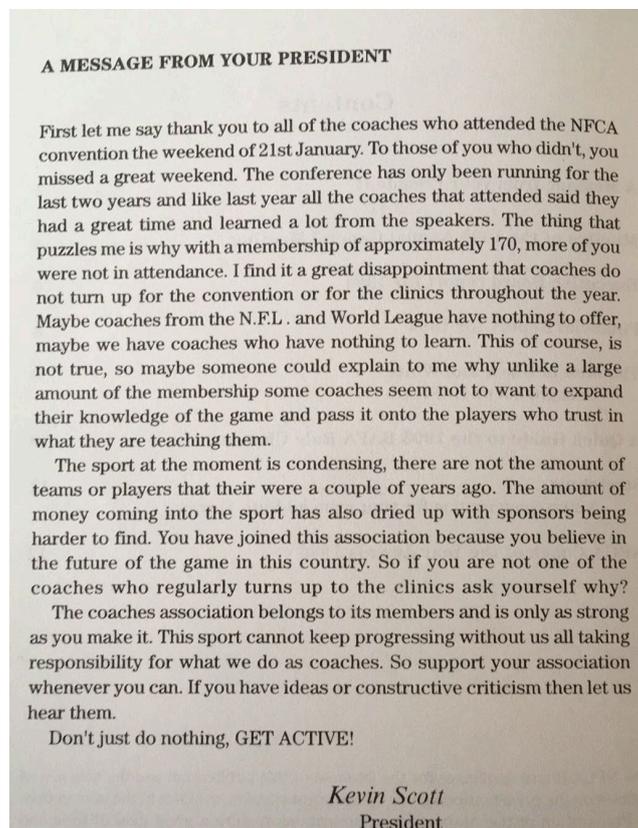
This initiative was held in tandem with a £25 membership fee and a requirement that members sit a BRM (Basic Requirement Module), a test adapted from the US as a minimum standard of competency. Membership cards were issued and had to be presented on game day as part of the card check process.



Members Identity Card

One of the areas the association was also active was publications. As well as educational material for the BRM, a coaching manual was produced for its members containing contributed coaching articles. Members also received a 'coach's directory' which listed points of contact for teams at every level across the UK (in the days before GDPR!).

The first annual coaches convention was held in 1992 and are a staple of the association to this day. The 1995 convention was held in January at the Apollo Hotel in Birmingham and had just 41 members in attendance. An article by President Kevin Scott decried the turnout:



Minutes of the BAFCA AGM and Convention (1995)

The Spring of 1996 saw the introduction of the quarterly (although this was rarely the case) newsletter 'Sidelines' which kept members up to speed with coaching courses, coaching articles, and minutes from the AGM. Membership numbers still hovered in the low hundreds and there was often resistance by the wider coaching community to become involved. An editorial by President Jim Messenger foretold the Britball community that mandatory membership of the association would be a thing of the future.

There is still a resistance to membership and qualification by coaches. This appears to stem from two main sources:

- Indignation from experienced coaches, as in, "who are you to assess my abilities".
- Insecurity. I suspect that there are some coaches out there who are afraid of having their shortcomings exposed.

In the first case, we desperately want those experienced coaches to prove their knowledge and then share it with us. In the second case, people need to get in touch with what is happening in the sports world today. They should realise that coach qualification is a fact of life in most other sports and is likely to become a legal requirement in the not too distant future.

Jim Messenger, Presidents Report (1997)

By the spring of 1997, the Coach Education programme had developed to include Level 2 (positional coaching modules), Level 3 (Co-ordinator – achieved by completing four Level 2 awards) and a Head Coaches award, Level 4, which required two of the three coordinator modules to be completed.

Craig 'Chip' Buttery had taken over the reins of Executive Director with Jim Messenger as president, but with one more important change. The association's title was to be changed to the British American Football Coaches Association (BAFCA). The decision was explained by Chip Buttery at the February AGM; he had 'received phone calls from people who think we are a soccer coaches association...as well as emails from people who think we are located in the States'.

By the turn of the millennium the role of Executive Director had been removed and the role of President was now the head of the association.

For a short time, the Association, had a partner organisation in Scotland, the SGCA, run under the convenorship of Steve McCusker. The SGCA was supported by the Scottish Claymores and held their own annual conventions with contributions from a number of the Claymores staff. NFL-Europe also operated a highly popular observer program allowing BAFCA members to be imbedded with the team for a week.



Scottish Claymores 1995-2004

Regional coaching clinics have become a feature of the Association over a number of years, with many coaches hosting ad-hoc clinics when visiting coaches have appeared in the UK. This was particularly prevalent when coach Mike Leach (then of Texas Tech) and one of the leading proponents of Air Raid was invited to present at clinics by former BAFCA president Tony Athersmith.

There were major tensions during this time as BAFCA clashed with the governing body over the administration of its members, and issues around the National Programme (GB team). Tony Athersmith stepped down as president in 2005, frustrated at a perceived lack of support from BAFCA and the major teams in supporting mandatory membership for all coaches on staff.

As membership of the association grew, so did attendance at the annual convention. Big name speakers from the NFL, NCAA, and previously the World League/NFL-Europe has lent an event atmosphere to the conference. BAFCA have been very fortunate to have hosted some marquee coaching names who have travelled to present at the annual convention. Some of the headline names include: Geoff Collins (Florida State Temple/Georgia Tech), Hal Mumme (godfather of the air raid), Mike Sherman (Green Bay Packers), Al Saunders (San Diego Chargers), Jim Criner (Scottish Claymores), Scott Peters (Tip of the Spear), Pat Ruel (Seattle Seahawks), Mike Hankwitz (Northwestern), Chris Peterson (Boise State), RC Slocum (Texas), Jeff Rhienebold (CFL/Sky TV), Ken Margerum (Chicago Bears), Dan & Cody Hawkins (UC Davis), and long-time BAFCA contributor JB Wells (Bowdon).

Under the stewardship of Jim Messenger, BAFCA moved the Coach Education programme in 2006 to be more in line with changes in the wider coaching community. Linking the award to the format of the UKCC (United Kingdom Coaching Certificate) the aim was to introduce additional coaching modules delivered by Sports Coach UK/UKCC (e.g. Working with Children, Safety in Coaching).

Problematically for BAFCA the now restructured awards did not fit so easily with a Level 2 and 3 award, which struggled both to be fit for purpose and delivered practically across the country and eventually saw the Level 2 awards stall. The dilemma for the Association: the more popular it became, the more it struggled to provide enough resources for all its members, delivered entirely by volunteers.

These pressures have occasionally led to crisis points for the Association, with volunteer board members often struggling to deliver the high quality provision expected from its members whilst balancing their own work and coaching obligations. Most notably the resignation of a raft of Board members in 2013-14 saw BAFCA become stretched to breaking point during this time.

Now entering its 27th year, the Association has grown from a small organisation with only a hundred members and a one day convention for about a third of those; to an association nearing 1700 and a 3 day conference that attracts some of the biggest names in the sport.

Its remit has long since been surpassed as it not only gives a voice to the coaches of British American Football, but has taken the lead on some of the most important issues that have affected our game to date. BAFCA have led on coaching ethics, child protection, sport governance, and were one of the leading activists on keeping the head out of the game since its inception. A special mention should be given to a two hour debate at the 2005 conference which outlawed smoking on the side-lines.

Its simplified aims are to: Engage, Educate, Energise. With a goal to grow a love and understanding of the game for players, coaches, students and the whole football community.

'BAFCA is dedicated to making the game better and safer through coach education. Nothing should stand in the way of a player's safety, wellbeing and excitement for the sport. Working with our

national governing body BAFA and other key partners we support the evolution and growth of the sport through coach education standards and best practice, to advance coach and player development. Our commitment to develop a safer game inspires us to provide the best qualifications, resources and programmes, keeping the spirit and integrity of the game alive for everyone who enjoys the fun and benefits of playing football.'

