



# Game on

**Martyn White meets Martin Hebden and Alan Cross, the men responsible for ensuring Jersey's success in the Commonwealth Games early next year**

**J**ersey's elite athletes won't be over-indulging this Christmas. The 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne is fast approaching and preparation for the Jersey team has reached a critical stage.

For Martin Hebden and Alan Cross, the president and secretary of Jersey's Commonwealth Games Association, it represents three years of behind-the-scenes planning and development, which hasn't been without its troubles.

Arguments over selection procedures and rules on eligibility for the Jersey team have always raged. Yet the build-up to this Commonwealth Games has been different. In fact, Jersey is taking its biggest ever team to the Games since it first began sending a team to the Commonwealths back in 1958. Thirty-five local athletes will soon be competing against international stars from Great Britain, Australia, South Africa and other major nations.

Martin and Alan's promise to send every qualifying athlete to Melbourne

when the Games officially begin next March has been kept, but it's been a struggle to get there.

Approached by a number of local sports people after the Manchester Commonwealth Games in late 2002, the retired pair was asked to recommend ways to put a stop to the red tape that was slowing the progress of the association.

With the association in the midst of much bureaucratic wrangling, something needed to be done. Jersey's elite athletes wanted a change and Martin and Alan, with their background in education, sport and culture and the International Island Games Association, were seen as the ideal candidates.

"Over a number of months we discussed certain recommendations that in our view could be adopted," says Martin. "We both recognised a need for a more transparent selection criteria and all of the workings of the association needed to be brought into a more modern context."

Both were asked to put their names forward for office soon after and set about modernising the organisation. Selection standards for the Games, which are set by each individual 'nation', were set and validated and a number of new initiatives proposed. One major area of contention was the voting rights given to each member sport.

Martin explains: "Previously the sport of shooting, for instance, was able to have six votes because of their various disciplines. Bowls was the same because the mens and ladies were treated as two different sports. This has changed and now each sport only has one vote at our meetings."

Since they've been in office they've encouraged the association to set up working parties and focus groups, which were broadly representative of all 14 member sports, to review and rewrite the constitution for the association.

"We also put in written guidelines for selection procedures and set up an appeals panel, which wasn't allowed before," points out Alan. "We've tried very hard to make the organisation more transparent and we feel, with the help of each member sport, that we've achieved that."

For Jersey's athletes to be selected to represent Jersey at this level, they need to have competed in national competition over the past two to three years.

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"We decided that performances within Jersey were not sufficient. Competitors have to be competing at a national level, such as national championships, and they have to show a sustained level of performance as well," says Alan.

Martin adds: "The qualifying standards are set at a high level of competition because we want our athletes to compete with integrity. We don't want them to just go there for a jolly or to embarrass themselves. Every one of the Jersey athletes that are going to the Games deserves to be there."

As well as 35 athletes, Jersey is sending a big backroom staff to Melbourne. Team managers in each sport of athletics, badminton, cycling, lawn bowls, shooting, swimming and triathlon have been appointed. And for the first time, three medical staff – a doctor, masseur and physiotherapist – will support the athletes. It brings the total size of the official party to 51. Team building days and talks from Sports UK members are also planned.

"We have a great diversity of sports, ages and people within our team, so it's absolutely necessary to get them together to understand each other's sport," says Martin. "They'll all be living together in purpose built accommodation, so hopefully it will bond the team before we get to Australia. The whole team ethic is something everyone can benefit from. Everyone in that team, whether they're competing or support staff, is representing Jersey."

For Martin, seeing Jersey athletes winning medals at the Commonwealth Games isn't the ultimate goal. However, when Daniel Halksworth won gold for Jersey at the Youth Games earlier this year, it represented Martin's proudest moment so far. "To be in the swimming pool arena when Daniel Halksworth took gold in the 400m individual medley was a very, very emotional experience for me, especially when the Jersey flag was being raised at the medal ceremony," says Martin, who oversaw Jersey's first entry in the Youth Games and hopes that the island will one day host the event. "It confirmed that we were going along the right lines as an Association and bodes well for the future."

With both Martin and Alan enjoying a healthy respect for each other and agreeing that they're "very like-minded in our thinking", the future of Jersey's Commonwealth Games team appears to be in good hands.