

# TOUR DE FORCE



ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST BEST-KNOWN COMPANIES OF ITS TYPE, TRACK AND FIELD TOURS CELEBRATED ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY LAST WEEKEND

**D**AVID BARNETT has been one of the best-known faces in British athletics for more than 30 years.

He was a good runner in the 1970s when finishing sixth in the English Schools junior boys' 800m. He had a best of 1:54.1 at the age of 17. However, it was for organising travel to the major athletics events that Barnett made his mark.

To celebrate Track and Field Tours' 25th anniversary at England Athletics' Hall of Fame Dinner, Barnett awarded a club group prize package with tickets and accommodation to Stockport Harriers for 25 club members (20 to be under-16) to attend the 2017 World Championships.



David Barnett: speaking at last weekend's England Athletics awards, where he offered a raffle prize that will see 25 youngsters visit London 2017

GARY MITCHELL

Barnett said: "A lot has been said about inspiring the next generation, not just to be good athletes, but to hopefully go on to become club officials, team managers and volunteers, so we decided to offer our award as our contribution towards this goal. "If just one youngster is dazzled as I was at such an impressionable age to make the sport a lifetime activity then that would be perfect."

Still active at his local Chelmsford AC as a team manager and having coached in the past, Barnett is all too aware of athletics' reliance on the volunteers that are the mainstays of all sports clubs. Hence the sponsorship by Track and Field Tours of the England Athletics hall of fame dinner

in recent years as an opportunity to give something back to the sport.

Barnett started organising athletics tours, having been inspired by attending the annual Coca-Cola meeting every year at Crystal Palace since his teens.

He said: "I was lucky that Essex Beagles had the inspirational Dave Green as my coach from when I joined, aged 13. He organised a group to the Crystal Palace event every year and those amazing nights under floodlights were magical. I was a decent club athlete but never likely to join my team-mates Graeme Fell, who I trained with, Colin Reitz or Daley Thompson at major championships, but I could go and watch them."

Barnett's first tour, after he left university in 1983, was a European expedition with 18 clients taking in Weltklasse in Zurich, the Van Damme Memorial in Brussels and Koblenz, for which in its heyday 10,000 fans mostly stood to watch the event held at a club stadium. This was the period of the 1980s athletics boom with Coe, Ovett, Ed Moses and Carl Lewis at their peak.

He explained: "As I had wanted to see these events I placed an advert in *Athletics Weekly*, which revealed that I was not alone in having this curiosity."



Track & Field Tours (left to right): Lindsay Walsh, Claire Hardy, Lee Munn and founder David Barnett

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A few clients were also booked for the inaugural World Championships in Helsinki in 1983 and, by 1985, the then annual tour had 80-plus fans. By 1986, the combination of the European Championships in Stuttgart where Thompson won the decathlon, and Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh where Fell took the steeplechase, brought hundreds more fans and, allied with organising trips for athletes training camps, a full-time business was developing. This was merged for several years into Sportsmans Travel, which similarly rode the 1980s running boom through until the early 1990s.

Track and Field Tours was officially started in 1991 when the Tokyo World Championships was its first tour.

Prior to Tokyo, the IAAF announced that their World Championships would be every two years, so with at least one

major championships every summer it was possible to have a standalone full-time track and field athletics tour company.

Its staff has now grown to four, with Lee Munn, who had previously worked at long-time Olympic Games agent Sportsworld joining in 2005. Along with Lindsay Walsh and Claire Hardy, the business now handles thousands of athletics fans, training-camp athletes – from swimming and other sports too, veteran athletes and road runners. Munn, with almost 20 years in the travel industry, heads the training camps programme for individuals as well as club, school and university groups of all sizes.

Barnett said: “It is a very important part of our business and Lee and the staff do a good job as all training camps are tailor-made, often with a great variety of specific requirements. You need a lot of patience – more than I often have. In 2008, Lee had to arrange a trip for the Paralympic team to Portugal which involved transporting over a ton of equipment to Monte Gordo!”

Since 1991, the business has grown from clients in their hundreds to thousands, but Barnett says that events are now more challenging than they used to be.

“Many organisers that once embraced companies such as ours now think that direct access to the public via the internet is the only option they have to consider,” he said. “As ticket sales are limited, this does not work for large groups of friends that want to pay separately but sit together not



**Many hardcore British athletics fans have benefited from the experience of David Barnett's travel team**

just for one but several sessions. They want someone to co-ordinate this. Ticketing, that was once the easiest part of what we have been doing for so many years, has now become one of the trickiest. Here in the UK we are fortunate that British Athletics and the British Athletics Supporters' Club, whom we both work with, are on top of this but increasingly abroad this is not the case. It seems to some that getting to new clients is more important than looking after the existing long-term ones. The European Athletics Association and IAAF are doing their best to intervene (in support of Track and Field Tours).”

With the demise of many other similar worldwide companies, Track and Field Tours now has a loyal following of individuals and small groups of fans in countries all over the world to join the Brits.

In the UK during the past 25 years, five athletics travel companies have disappeared, in some cases because of the financial climate, but Barnett's company remains strong and has been a regular advertiser in AW over the last quarter-century.

Barnett took 650 clients to the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in 2015 and 480 travelled to Moscow for the World Championships in 2013. He is hopeful that, boosted by young athletes inspired by the 2017 World Championships, there will be a continual demand for supporting British teams at major events.

Barnett, who broke three hours in his one and only marathon, has himself witnessed every British medal in major championships of the last 30 years. At the one championships he could not attend – the 2006 World Indoors in Moscow, which clashed with the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne – Britain failed to win a medal.

