

The Future of Sport in Australia

An Overview by Martin Sheppard, Managing Director, Smart Connection Company

The Minister for Sport, Kate Ellis welcomed the release of *The Future of Australian Sport* from the Independent Sports Panel yesterday (17th November 2009).

The Rudd Government has undertaken the biggest review of sport in more than a decade to ensure that Australia is prepared for the critical challenges facing sport and our community in the future. The review scope was very broad and with over 650 submissions there were no doubt many issues and suggested solutions put forward

Underlying challenges have been emerging for Australian elite sport over a number of years that need be addressed, to ensure Australia's continued success on the international stage. As a nation it is also clear that the opportunity for community based grassroots sport and recreation activity, to be placed at the centre of preventative health efforts, aimed at tackling serious emerging health issues such as obesity, had not been realized.

The report from the Independent Sports Panel, Chaired by David Crawford recognised that it was not possible to address all, or make recommendations on the multitude of issues that had been presented. The Panel believes that focusing on the key fundamental issues will provide a basis to prepare the Australian Sporting system for future challenges at both the elite and community levels.

The Report is therefore structured into eight chapters, each addressing one of the fundamental issues and provides priorities in the form of the 39 'must do initiatives' or recommendations of the 365 page document. The Panel believes that these matters need to be addressed if:

- Australia is to continue to be successful at the elite level;
- All Australians are able to participate in their sport(s) of choice; and
- The health and wellbeing of our population is improved.

An overview of the key issues is provided in the following section:-

Issue 1: Defining our National Sports Vision

Probably one of the best written pieces of text I have read questioning the role of elite sport, the funding for Olympic and non-Olympic sports and questioning what is really important to

Australians when it comes to sport. For instance why does Water Polo receive as much high performance & AIS funding as golf, tennis and lawn bowls put together. Quoting the price of an Olympic gold medal of around \$15m, the report questions whether this is providing value for money to Australia.

Continuing on the theme of success, the report suggests that, there will be a benefit in defining elite sporting success in the context of prioritising those sports which capture the country's imagination and represents its spirit and culture.

Priority sports could be linked to national pride and psyche, or there could be an emphasis on team sports and not just individual success. Focus may also be on sports with a life-long participation potential and not just focused on a small group of elite participants. Interesting concept!

Issue 2: Reforming the Australian Sports Commission to Lead the Sports System

Reform is needed in both the sports system and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) to be able to provide the role of managing the changing sporting environment. The report reads; "the current Australian sports system is very complex, inefficient and cumbersome".

With so many levels of government and so many players involved in the sports system, the focus of the 'new' ASC must be one of facilitation and cooperation with others. Also possible conflicts of interest will be separated from the ASC, including the Active After School Communities initiative and the Australian Institute of Sport. The leadership of the ASC and National Sporting Organisations (NSO's) needs to be more focused on the skills needed to meet the new objectives.

Issue 3: Merging our Institutes of Sport

The report identifies that the AIS has become a competitor to the state and territory institutes and academies (SIS / SAS) and the issue of competition and lack of co-operation is effecting the system and outcomes that everyone is supposed to be working for.

The recommendation is for a single organisation to cover all present institutes and academies and the Panel believes that no more net funding is needed, managed by the Australian government. The report recognises the role of local government in the developmental programs. This is surely a good move and follows the Canadian and European models.

Issue 4: Building Capacity of Our National Sporting Organisations

Recognising that the 90 plus NSO's vary in size and capacity, the general view seems to be that there is duplication between NSO's and State Sporting Associations (SSA's) and that the NSO's should take a more strategic ownership role of programs at both the elite and grass roots participation levels. The example of the AFL is given and the benefits it can bring. Interestingly, the role of high performance is discussed with emphasis on the NSO to purchase their elite programs from others, including the new AIS, Universities and other providers. Will different sports be soon providing the elite programs for other sports? I'm sure that the Universities are already looking for these opportunities.

Issue 5: Putting Sport & Physical Activity Back into Education

"After years of decline, it is time to once again make sport and physical education a priority in our education system. Teachers need better training and schools need better facilities." states the report.

The issue of making sport a higher priority and a stand alone key learning area is recommended. Encouraging Government funding and upgrades to school facilities will make a difference and encourage better local programming. The opportunity for local government, NSO's and SSA's to utilise these facilities outside school hours is explored.

Issue 6: Building Community Sport with People and Places

The first two paragraphs of this section of the report considers what everyone in grass roots sport and local government already know!

"The infrastructure of community sport, made up of both people and facilities, is under threat. The supply of volunteers, often the backbone of any club or association is under pressure. There is no coherent approach to building community sports and the physical facilities they require.

If participation levels are to grow, or even be sustained, policy makers and sports administrators must find new ways to encourage and support volunteerism. Governments at all levels

will have to increase their investment in community facilities if grass roots sport is to flourish. "

A national facilities initiative to fund the community sports and recreational needs is recommended together with \$250m per annum for four years to begin this implementation. A focus on the drought proofing of facilities is recommended.

Issue 7: Ensuring Australia's Sports System is Open to All

Within the context of lifestyle changes and cultural diversity, administrators and policy makers need to be aware of why some people choose an active lifestyle and why some do not.

The report considers that the sports system needs to be inclusive of all of these demographic and community changes, to ensure that all Australians are encouraged to participate.

The report identifies nine areas of focus for the new ASC to understand physical activity determinants and encourage the removal of existing barriers. Examples of low participation demographic segments include: women; ageing population; young people; indigenous communities; time poor; the disadvantaged (low SES and access issues); people with disabilities; migrant communities and homophobia & sexuality discrimination in sport.

The first key recommendation from this issue is focused on building strategies for each of the nine areas. The second key recommendation suggests choosing several geographical locations across Australia where many or most of the nine areas can be seen facilitating collaboration between agencies, providers and government to address these issues, using sport and recreation as a vehicle.

Surely this is an opportunity for local government to stand up and be counted?

Issue 8: Sustaining the Funding Base for Sport

The commentary in this section is best reflected in the six recommendations provided below:-

8.1. The Australian Government should maintain sport funding at current levels and should consider supplementing this funding on the basis of the agreed targets for high performance and participation outlined in the national sports policy framework.

8.2. The Australian Government should provide to the new Australian Institutes of Sport (AIS) at least the existing level of funding allocated to the Australian Institute of Sport by the Australian Sports Commission and the combined allocation of state and territory governments to the state and territory institute and academies of sport.

8.3. The Australian Government should not introduce a HECS style contribution scheme for graduates of the existing Australian Institute of Sport, state and territory institutes and academies of sport or the new Australian Institutes of Sport (AIS), but rather it should introduce a scheme that requires graduates from these institutions to donate time and or expertise to the Australian sport system.

8.4. The Australian Government should not introduce a national sports lottery at this stage, but should negotiate with state and territory governments to provide a share of existing lottery revenue for sport and recreation facilities and programs.

8.5. The Australian Government should review the governance, structural and operational arrangements of the Australian Sports Foundation to raise awareness within community sporting groups of the Foundation's purpose and benefits.

8.6. That the Australian Sports Commission in conjunction with the Department of Health and Ageing should explore the viability of tax rebates, voucher or another system, designed to reduce the cost of participation and the likely contribution of such schemes to increasing participation levels

Summary

For many of the past decades, the Australian sports industry has been viewed by the rest of the world with envy, indeed many countries have either copied or 'borrowed' Australian coaches to establish and drive their elite programs. The challenge that is facing the western world is one of increased sedentary lifestyles, unhealthy consumption and detrimental health outcomes, through being overweight and obesity. This has been recognised by the Rudd Government both in the Preventative Health Strategy, *Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020 (30th June 2009)*, (this document can be accessed via <http://www.preventativehealth.org.au/>) which was recently released and this Independent Sports Panel report. This is why there is a shift of emphasis to the local participation and grass roots involvement. If the base of the pyramid is not wide and strong, then in decades to come there will not be the pinnacle that we have come to expect from Australian Sport.

We do need to change now and build that strong base. But we must not forget the sporting pathways that provide access to the

elite level. Everyone should have the chance to achieve their best and Australia is still very supportive of elite sports participants who provide us with the continued opportunity to support Aussie success.

This report provides a realistic balance between making a difference at the grass roots and focusing the Government's commitment to elite sport. It promotes stronger leadership, a spring clean to the sports system, the removal of duplication and internal competition and the encouragement of collaboration between all levels of sport, government and the public and private sectors.

Let's hope that the funding that is needed to make this happen, does in fact happen!

This may be the only opportunity we get to ensure that Australian sport is sustainable at every level for our future generations.

Congratulations to David Crawford and his team for doing the near impossible, providing a sensible framework for the future.

A full copy of the report is available from the Department of Health and Ageing's Independent Sports Panel website at www.sportpanel.org.au

Australian Leisure Management also covered the report on the day of issue. Their website is www.ausleisure.com.au

Smart Connection Company is an independent consultancy and training company, working with all levels of government and sport to provide strategic advice, tactical solutions and training qualifications for the sport, recreation and leisure industry.

Smart Connection Company have worked with state based and national organisations providing support for many of the 8 issues raised and would welcome the opportunity for further discussion with clients and colleagues who wish to prepare themselves for this opportunity.

Let us know your views on this as we will be doing a feature on the industry reaction for the next publication of the Australian Leisure Facilities Association (ALFA) publication.

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