

AUSTRALIAN ATHLETES' ALLIANCE

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Discussion Paper, 23 October 2008

The Australian Athletes' Alliance has committed itself to the development of a comprehensive policy platform that will inform the AAA's policy and lobbying activities.

The Charter of the AAA Policy Development Committee identifies a number of priorities, including:

- *“measuring and advancing the economic, social, cultural and political contribution made by professional athletes to Australia;*
- *professional athlete development; and*
- *planning for the international competitiveness of Australian sport and the role of the professional athletic career path in maximising that competitiveness...”*

This paper suggests the top short term priorities for the AAA to pursue that will build the foundations for a substantial policy effort and contribute meaningfully to the strategic positioning of the AAA. The six priorities are:

1. sporting citizenship;
2. sporting skills shortage;
3. sporting infrastructure and investment;
4. new technologies, media and communications;
5. the centrality of the professional sporting sector; and
6. the professional career path for elite athletes.

1. Sporting Citizenship

Sport is uniquely placed to set a better example for Australian citizenship. In keeping with the AAA's strategic framework, Australia's elite athletes have an important role to play in building and developing Australia's social fabric.

Policy areas where the AAA and athletes can play a leading role include those already identified in earlier AAA discussion, such as:

1. *responsible use of alcohol*
2. *healthy bodies/eating right*
 - a. *eliminating childhood obesity*
 - b. *curing eating disorders/creating positive body image in young people*
3. *volunteerism/ encouraging others to contribute to their communities*

Leadership in such areas will also importantly help position the AAA in its formative stages, and build relations with governments willing to leverage elite athletes to drive key messages in these areas. The AAA demonstrated this in its work in 2007 when illicit drug use by professional athletes was politicised by the then Australian government.

2. Sporting Skills Shortage

Australian sport is about to confront an acute skills shortage, the resolution of which is essential to the retention and enhancement of Australia's international competitiveness.

Historically, Australia has enjoyed two great pillars of competitive advantage: (1) a deep love of sport and a culture of participation which has enabled the natural development of elite athletes in many sports; and (2) since the disappointment of Montreal, sophisticated investment in high performance programs and sports science which has placed Australia at the cutting edge.

These twin pillars are under threat at two levels.

At the community level, the traditional strengths of volunteer based clubs are being challenged by time poor Australians who are increasingly sensitive to safety issues and require children to play in a highly structured and supervised environment. Children are less active in a prosperous nation, resulting in higher levels of obesity. Australia will have to replicate its natural advantage in a structured sense.

At the elite level, the investment being made by Australia's competitors has the potential to dwarf Australia's. The standards of international sport will continue to explode.

Consequently, Australia needs to develop a new way to produce elite athletes in changing times. Australia will need to deliver the new system to Australian children in a structured way (such as around their schooling) and at even younger ages. International competition will be so high that the quality of the system (especially coaching, programs and competition) will need to be extremely high from the time a child is introduced to a sport. This will require a more specialised approach to coaching and development.

Australia presently does not have adequate numbers of sufficiently skilled coaches and sports administrators to address these demands. The resolution of this skills shortage is essential. The opportunity to address this may lie in the retirement of Australia's first generation of full-time professional athletes looking to transition into life after sport as well as the development of new models of program delivery (e.g. schools and the private sector as well as clubs and associations).

3. Sporting Infrastructure and Investment

The inclusion of playing fields and sporting facilities must be a compulsory aspect of Australia's planning policy – a matter for state and local governments.

Access to fields of a playable quality is crucial. As a sporting nation, we cannot afford to deny children the right to participate in their chosen sport through a lack of opportunity.

At the elite level, government investment in stadia needs to deliver economic outcomes to the tenants that provide the content – sporting associations and clubs – to ensure the viability of professional sport in this country. Elite academies and training programs need to be adequately resourced to world class standards and take into account the

international career path of many sports. Bases in Europe and the United States are essential.

Australia needs to plan holistically for the future of the professional sporting sector in Australia and ensure our infrastructure will meet the demands at the following key levels:

- local/State, having regard to projected participation levels (club, association, school, private sector);
- elite development/academies; and
- stadia, for both league and international competition.

The latter point is particularly important. Much of sport's policy in recent years has been focused on major international events. However, viable professional sports leagues are essential to the development and growth of the professional sporting sector, and stadia economics and requirements will be different.

4. New Technologies, Media and Communications

Since the 1950's, the media industry has singularly transformed the working environment and conditions for professional sports. Media revenues remain the most significant driver of the economics of professional sports, although (as noted above) these are now being matched by stadium economics in the world's most sophisticated sports leagues.

Athletes are, of course, both the "product" and the "labour force" for media's most compelling content – professional sports. Athletes are viewed as content in all aspects of their lives as media corporations seek to constantly promote their sports content through the 24 hourly news cycle.

For much of the 50 year commercial involvement of the media in professional sports, the media companies have held the upper hand and arguably only the AFL has been able to leverage genuine competition for its media rights. Old fashioned notions drive public policy in this area, such as the anti-syphoning list, which uniquely denies sports the right to leverage their most valuable asset in accordance with the demands of the free market. Few industries, if any, have this right taken from them without just compensation.

Genuine competition for sports media rights is crucial to the future viability of professional sports in Australia. Only competition will enable sports to negotiate the best possible commercial and sporting media rights deals.

Encouragingly, new technologies including digital have the capacity to open up new levels of competition in this field, with the fragmentation of the media market likely. The impact of these developments will hugely impact the professional sporting landscape in Australia.

Presently, the policy landscape in this field is dominated by the existing commercial interests of free to air television and, to a lesser extent, Foxtel. For example, media interests have presently combined to reject genuine multi-channeling through digital television.

Given their central role within the Australian media, it is problematic that both the sporting industry and the performers in that industry have such little impact on media policy. Equally troublesome is the rejection in Australian law of basic notions of privacy and image rights for the performers that are the very subject of such valuable media content.

5. The Centrality of the Professional Sporting Sector

Government policy has historically focused on two key levels: (1) grass roots participation; and (2) international success. The tier between these two levels – the professional sporting sector – is arguably the most important despite often being overlooked by government and left as a matter for each sport.

Australia's strongest sports all boast outstanding competitions at this level: AFL, cricket, rugby league and rugby union. Football and netball have each recently made important investments at this level for their lasting benefit. Basketball is reviewing its governance structure again acknowledging the centrality of professional sport. Baseball is another sport that has sought to invest in a viable semi-professional national sporting competition.

A viable professional sporting competition enables the employment of players, coaches, referees and administrators to feed a sport's development. Governing bodies need to manage their sports in a way that achieves a delicate alignment between the grass roots, the professional sector and international competition. Similarly, government policy around sport – including in the noted areas of infrastructure and media – needs to acknowledge the importance of achieving this alignment. Stadia that suit national level competition and the packaging of a competition's media rights with its national team are important examples. Both rugby and football have benefitted from this approach, an approach that could be placed at risk, for example, by a narrow policy approach to the anti-siphoning list.

6. The Professional Career Path for Elite Athletes

In order to be internationally competitive, Australia must provide the best conditions for Australian professional athletes to work. This involves players not only realizing their potential, but finishing their playing days as better people and well equipped to contribute to the broader society. The AAA has immediately begun work in this area by focusing on tax and superannuation.

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