



AUSTRALIAN ATHLETES' ALLIANCE

2009 AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT: INDEPENDENT SPORT PANEL

“THE FUTURE OF SPORT IN AUSTRALIA”

RESPONSE OF THE AUSTRALIAN ATHLETES' ALLIANCE

23 DECEMBER 2009

1. The Australian Athletes' Alliance (AAA) is the peak body of Australia's professional players' and athletes' associations. The member associations of the AAA are the Australian Cricketers' Association (ACA), AFL Players' Association (AFLPA), the Australian Netball Players' Association (ANPA), the Australian Swimmers' Association (ASA), Professional Footballers Australia (PFA), the Rugby League Players' Association (RLPA) and the Rugby Union Players' Association (RUPA). All members of the AAA enjoy the unanimous support of the elite athletes that belong to them, ensuring that the AAA speaks for more than 2,500 of Australia's greatest professional athletes.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSE

2. The AAA commends the Panel on the report, including its endorsement of Australia adopting a broader definition of Australian sporting success. Sport has clear social and cultural benefits that warrant recognition by Australia's policy makers.

The AAA applauds, in particular, the important recommendations of the Panel on key themes identified in the AAA's own submission to the inquiry including:

- the important contributions to be made by elite athletes in retirement;
- the importance of addressing the needs of the time poor;
- the role of schools;
- investment in Australia's sporting infrastructure;
- the focus on the grass roots and encouraging volunteerism; and
- the role of sport in building better community outcomes, especially in health and education.

3. The AAA also commends the Panel for identifying the mental health concerns associated with the career of an elite athlete. However, the AAA believes that the complex education, development and transition issues associated with the athletic career path are much broader in scope and demand informed policy and public attention and action.
4. Many of the Panel's recommendations call for a "whole of sport" response. The AAA and its members are ideally positioned to be a primary partner of government and the private sector in that regard in two key areas:
 - in delivering programs that generate improved community outcomes; and
 - in delivering programs and services that holistically advance the development and welfare of elite athletes.

Indeed, Australia's players' associations can provide many examples of "best practice" programs, services and initiatives in these two fields. Detailed examples of such work of the members of the AAA are provided with this submission, and the AAA would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Minister to explain this work in further detail.

5. The AAA notes that some key areas of the AAA's submission were not squarely addressed by the Panel. These include the role of new technologies in the media and communications sectors, and their potential to assist in the generation of revenue throughout the entire sporting sector with appropriate regulation. We also believe that greater attention needs to be given to the professional sporting sector, and the professional career path. These sectors will continue to drive interest, participation and employment in sport and, in so doing, raise the capacity of sport to contribute to the Australian nation. Moreover, intelligent investment in the professional sporting sector is more likely to yield a sustainable return on any financial outlay by government.
6. The AAA is pleased to see the importance that the Panel places on the good governance of sport, including at the levels of the Australian Sports Commission and the National Sporting Organisation. However, it is of great concern that the AAA, its member players' associations and, most importantly, the more than 2,500 elite athletes represented by the AAA, are not formally recognised within Australia's sporting system. These athletes are the public face of sport in Australia, and carry the nation's hopes and expectations, both on and off the field. Given the impact of the Panel's recommendations on them, and the contribution the very same athletes can make to the successful execution of the Panel's recommendations, it is important that the AAA is accepted as an integral stakeholder in Australia's sporting system.

7. Finally, the AAA is concerned about the Panel's recommendations regarding funding. Given the need to maintain Australia's international competitiveness in increasingly challenging times and the rightful broadening of the definition of Australian sporting success (and, indeed, the role of sport to include its clear social and cultural benefits), there is a strong argument that the government should be open to making a significantly greater investment in sport, especially in those sports which can clearly point to clear community, social and cultural dividends for the nation. As part of this, the AAA encourages government to review Australia's tax system and other laws with a view to encouraging greater participation and investment in Australian sport. That review should address the unique and short-term nature of the athletic career path, and result in a tax and social system that helps advance Australia's sporting success (as broadly defined).

AAA RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

8. The AAA takes this opportunity to respond to some of the specific recommendations made by the Panel. The numbering within the paragraphs that follow follows the numbering of the Panel's recommendations. Where a recommendation is not mentioned, the response of the AAA accords with the summary at paragraphs 2 to 7 above.

9. **Chapter 1.1: Defining Our National Sports Vision**

- 1.2: The AAA believes that Australia's national sport policy framework should address the centrality of the professional sporting sector and the athletic career path. For the reasons well noted by the Panel, Australian sports are now engaged in an intense competitive battle not only for consumers (fans), but also for Australia's elite athletic talent (players). Not only will this competition be most intense within the professional sporting sector, but that sector will also fundamentally deliver the nation's athletic career path. Australia's sport policy framework must establish clear principles and policies for that career path and entrench vital notions such as the need for balance, the protection of minors, the protection of an athlete's right to a full education and the adoption within Australian sport of a culture that looks at athletes as both sportspeople and individuals. It must also treat men and women as equals.

- 1.4: Whilst the AAA supports Australia's fight against doping, as a sporting nation there is a need to reflect on the phrase "best practice" in the Panel's recommendation. This cannot mean the most draconian. It must, instead, be balanced and underpinned by Australia's notion of a "fair go". At the least, this requires individual case management and discretion in sentencing where it can be shown that a violation was not connected to the unfair enhancement

of sporting performance. Australia should not be seen as acting contrary to “best practice” principles if it takes a critical and reasonable view of the standards espoused by WADA, which can go further than are necessary or fail to take into account the specific characteristics of some sports (such as the strict application of athlete whereabouts requirements to professional team sports such as football).

The threats to sport are, of course, not confined to doping. Gambling and illicit drugs are among other pressing threats that call for a strong yet balanced approach from sport. That approach must be motivated by a concern for the health of athletes and the community. It must also emphasise the importance of education – of both the players and the community – and respect the rights of athletes in any regulatory approach. Again, individual case management must be applied. The players – through their associations in sports such as AFL, cricket and rugby league – have a demonstrated commitment to playing a leadership role where required. This leadership potential is best harnessed through the involvement of the players’ associations in the development of a proactive and comprehensive policy for each sport.

10. **Chapter 1.2: Reforming the Australian Sports Commission to Lead the Sports System**

2.2: Whilst noting the leadership role of the Australian Sports Commission, it is essential that each sport takes primary responsibility for its own development, as the seeds of innovation lie within the competition, diversity and depth of the Australian sporting industry.

2.4: In the modern professional era, the AAA sees experience and expertise in the work of players’ associations and the support provided to modern professional athletes as being a key indicia for the skills matrix for the new board of the Australian Sports Commission.

11. **Chapter 1.3: Merging Our Institutes of Sport**

3.1 – 3.4: Each sport must be responsible for leading and managing its elite development programs, and involved in any decision in relation to the role of the institutes of sport. The government should certainly provide the funding. However, each sport should manage, under strict government guidelines, its institute programs to ensure alignment with the sport’s high-performance programs (as recommended by the Panel at recommendation 4.1).

3.5: The AAA fully supports this recommendation, especially in relation to universities, which are developing important relationships with professional sport. The AAA also notes that, in many sports, the optimal location of many

elite programs will be overseas. Further, the services offered at these locations will need to be expanded beyond the traditional focus on high-performance, and extend to addressing the holistic wellbeing of the athlete, including education, personal development, emotional support and counselling as well as assistance for those undergoing transition. Given the need for independence and expertise, these services should be delivered by or in partnership with AAA members wherever possible.

12. **Chapter 1.4: Building the Capacity of Our National Sporting Organisations**

4.1 – 4.4: The AAA fully supports these recommendations of the Panel, and notes the fundamental importance of good governance to the success, on and off the field, of any sport. The Panel’s comments on page 25 about the pressure that was involved to reform the governance structures of the Australian Football League and Football Federation Australia are welcomed, as they provide an example for all administrators in Australian sport. The AAA makes this important observation: an athletic career path is short. It is tragic that an athlete’s time in the game can be compromised by a sport’s failure to embrace best practice governance. Often this failure will take the form of delay and procrastination due to the internal politics involved. Government should make timely governance reform a fundamental condition of funding.

4.5: The AAA presents itself to government as an obvious partner in the delivery of “shared services” and, indeed, a “whole of sport” response, especially in the fields of community outcomes and athlete career services and wellbeing (refer paragraph 4 above).

13. **Chapter 1.5: Putting Sport and Physical Activity Back Into Education**

5.1 – 5.6: The AAA is pleased to endorse these recommendations, although government should be encouraged not to pre-empt the outcome of any review of the Active After-school Communities Program. In relation to the national curriculum, the role of sport need not be confined to the benefits of physical activity. Sport can also be a leader in the teaching of important values, such as respect, teamwork, leadership and fair play.

14. **Chapter 1.6: Building Community Sport with People and Places**

6.1, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6: The AAA endorses the emphasis given by the Panel to building the volunteer capacity and infrastructure of Australian sport. In terms of engagement with the Australian community, the central importance of the professional sporting sector is again emphasised.

6.2: Australian sport is now seeing the retirement of Australia's first generations of full-time professional athletes. It is essential to Australia's future sporting success (as broadly defined by the Panel) that this uniquely valuable talent pool is successfully transitioned into ongoing roles within Australian sport, but not only in a voluntary capacity. The combined demands of community involvement and the need for elite success will require tailored programs that see former athletes (not just scholarship holders) specifically trained for a post-playing career path that needs to be more structured and clearly defined.

15. **Chapter 1.7: Ensuring Australia's Sport System is Open to All**

7.2: Recommendation 7.2 is profound in what it asks of sport, and its recognition of sport's social and cultural significance. The focus on geographical areas is important. Much of the material submitted by the players' associations with this submission highlights the programs being delivered by current and former players to help bring about the community outcomes identified by the Panel. Once again, the AAA presents itself as a partner for the government in delivering a "whole of sport" strategy to ensure the effective implementation of this recommendation.

16. **Chapter 1.8: Sustaining the Funding Base for Sport**

8.1 and 8.2: The AAA is pleased to see the Panel's recommendation to the maintenance of existing funding levels as a minimum. However, we would like to see government open to debate about whether existing levels are adequate in light of the imperative twin outcomes of the Panel's recommendations: (1) that Australia adopt a broader approach to defining sporting success to encompass its clear social, cultural and community impacts; and (2) the importance of constantly working to enhance Australia's international competitiveness as a sporting nation. The AAA, its member players' associations, and the elite athletes they represent are all committed to responsibly and intelligently participating in such a debate.

8.3 – 8.6: As part of this, the AAA encourages government to adopt an innovative approach in reviewing Australia's tax and social system to encourage greater participation and investment in sport and address the short term and precarious nature of the athletic career path. Such a review should aim to build a tax and social system that helps further not only Australia's international competitiveness as a sporting nation, but also deliver improved community outcomes on the ground.

FURTHER INFORMATION

17. The AAA would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Minister to discuss this submission and explore the contribution Australia's elite athletes can make to the successful development and implementation of government policy.

18. For further information:

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Respectfully submitted:



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