

## CHAPTER 1.1

# DEFINING OUR NATIONAL SPORTS VISION

Australia does not have a national sports policy or vision. We have no agreed definition of success and what it is we want to achieve. We lack a national policy framework within which objectives for government funding can be set and evaluated.

The Australian Government and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) have long affirmed the importance of high performance and community sports participation. More recently, the importance of sport's contribution to the national health agenda and social inclusion has been emphasised. However, with no clearly defined ambitions, no measurable targets and no collection of supporting data, implementation has been poor.

The absence of a definition of sporting success has led to a failure to collect meaningful data about the quality of Australia's sport and recreation participation. This has inhibited an evidence-based approach to the development of sports policies and strategies.

At the start of this review, the Panel asked some simple questions about the amount of money being spent by all Australian governments on sport, recreation and physical activity, and its impact. It was surprising to discover there is no current reliable information available to answer those threshold questions.

The only data found was derived from 2000–01 Australian Bureau of Statistics material. It confirmed that approximately \$2 billion was spent on sport at that time across the three tiers of government. Only 10 per cent came from the Australian Government, 40 per cent from state and territory governments, and the remaining 50 per cent from local government. State, territory and local government spending was predominantly directed to facilities and their upkeep.<sup>1</sup>

Olympic medal counts seem to be the one area where success is being defined and measured. No parallel ambition has been expressed for community sporting participation where outcomes are not even measured.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Sport and Recreation Funding by Government, Australia, 2000–01*, cat. no 4147.0.

As well as submissions received by the Panel, attendees at each of the community forums around the country agreed that national success should not be solely assessed in terms of medal tallies. When determining our national sporting statement of success, elite performance in non-Olympic sports and the general health and fitness of Australians need also to be considered. High community participation rates at all ages and capacities; strong national and club based competitions; support for coaches and recognition of the role of volunteers are other factors that should be taken into account.

The Panel endorses a broad definition of Australia's sporting success. In defining 'success' for the Australian sport system, the Australian Government should seek the advice and input of the ASC and engage in a conversation with the states and territories and the departments responsible for sport as well as the Australian community about how we set our national priorities and targets.

The Panel is of the view that, in advising on our national sport policy and vision, the ASC pays strong regard to the following general themes:

- credible performances on the world sporting stage, particularly in sports well-liked by Australians
- high sport and recreation participation rates across the community
- vibrant clubs and local and national competitions
- the quality of the health and fitness of the nation
- pride in traditions of fair play
- the ability of sport to contribute to inclusive and harmonious outcomes in communities
- continuing commitment to the fight against drugs in sport.

Elite sporting success is an important matter and requires continuing focus. But a balance needs to be struck between the amount of money invested by all levels of government and the achievement of outcomes, particularly in the context of Olympic and Commonwealth Games performance.

The Australian Government funding for sport that is distributed through the ASC goes overwhelmingly to Olympic sports. In 2007–08, for example, the ASC distributed nearly \$90 million in grants to national sporting organisations (NSOs).<sup>2</sup> Around 80 per cent of this went to Olympic sports and over 90 per cent of this amount went to 'high performance' programs.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government, Australian Sports Commission, *Australian Sports Commission Annual Report 2007–2008*, 2008, pp. 183.

The Panel supports the setting of ambitious targets for Australia's elite sporting success. However, a re-assessment of funding priorities in light of policy objectives is now timely.

First, the funding imbalance between Olympic and non-Olympic sports should be questioned. More emphasis should be given to sports that are popular with many Australians. There are 19 Australian teams which hold 'Top Three' world rankings and more than half of these are in non-Olympic sports.

The bias towards funding Olympic sports leads to outcomes that make little strategic sense for Australia. For example, more government funds are provided for archery than cricket which has more than 100 times the number of participants according to unpublished ASC data. Water polo receives as much high performance and Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) funding as golf, tennis and lawn bowls combined—even though these sports can rightly claim to be 'whole of lifetime' sports and significant contributors to the Australian Governments preventative health agenda.

Second, the quantum of spending needs to be more rigorously assessed. The Panel was advised that calculating the 'costs of medals' is difficult and any conclusion would be problematic. The Panel understand this but some effort needs to be made because without this information, investment decisions cannot be made on a rational basis.

What we do know is that the sustained level of funding required over four years to win Olympic and Commonwealth games medals is very high. Australia's medal ranking in Beijing was sixth—a very creditable result and our third best performance in 30 years. This resulted in 14 gold medals and 46 medals in total and whichever way the math is done, the result is very expensive. The ASC's funding to Olympic sports for their elite programs runs at over \$60 million per year and this does not include state and territory funding or Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) contributions. Over four year cycles, it is easy to derive figures in the order of \$15 million per gold medal or \$4 million per medal. Higher figures are routinely raised in the national media.

The obvious response is that we underestimate the many intangible benefits. But the same is true of many other sports. Australians are very interested in what happens in cricket, golf, surfing—not to mention the various football codes. On what basis are these sports not equal claimants on the public purse?

Importantly, the Panel can find no evidence that high profile sporting events like the Olympics (or Wimbledon or the Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final) have a material influence on sports participation. So if sports are to be funded in part to encourage wide participation, some priority should be given to those sports played throughout the country and even more so to those that engage their participants through their lifetimes.

It is also vital that Australia's medal targets are realistic. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the scale of elite sporting investment, particularly by countries with significantly higher populations and budgets. In response to this, there are advocates for much greater funding for Olympic elite sports.

The relevant NSOs and AOC and the Australian Paralympic Committee (APC) have put together a case for an additional \$109 million per year on average on the basis that this is required to sustain Australia's position as a 'Top Five' medal count nation.<sup>3</sup>

The Panel is not in a position to argue whether this would be money worth spending because it cannot judge it in light of other priorities. But we doubt that this is where the next \$100 million per annum for sport should be spent. A common view expressed to the Panel—even by many NSOs—was that elite performance ultimately depends on the depth of participation and this area has been badly underfunded.

Furthermore, 'medal count' is a dubious measure. The Panel strongly believes the public needs to be educated to think differently about what constitutes Olympic success. There are currently around 300 events at the Olympics and medal count biases funding towards individual events rather than team sports which the Panel believes ought to have some priority given their importance to our society. For example, there are two gold medals available in each of the team sports like hockey and basketball—but there are 47 in athletics and even diving has eight, while canoe/kayak has 16.

In all, we need to consider what we can afford to invest and how we appropriately balance this investment to support a broader definition of sporting success. This will mean more explicitly defining elite sporting success in the context of prioritising those sports which capture the country's imagination and represent its spirit and culture. These are the sports where our performance on the national and world stage is important to our sense of success as a nation.

There should be debate about which sports carry the national ethos. Swimming, tennis, cricket, cycling, the football codes, netball, golf, hockey, basketball, surfing and surf lifesaving are among the most popular sports in Australia, a part of the national psyche. Many are team sports and are the sports we are introduced to as part of our earliest education and community involvement.

If more money is to be injected into the system then we must give serious consideration to where that money is spent. If we are truly interested in a preventative health agenda through sport, then much of it may be better spent on lifetime participants than almost all on a small group of elite athletes who will perform at that level for just a few years.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Olympic Committee & Australian Paralympic Committee, *National High Performance For Olympic and Paralympic Sports in Australia*, 28 February 2009, pp. 19.

The ASC should provide advice to government on the critical decisions regarding investment priorities. Ambitious yet achievable targets should be set for elite sport allowing decisions on investment for participation sports through to elite sport to be made confidently.

Indicatively, the Panel recommends some general parameters for these targets. We should aspire to and be proud of, say, 'Top Eight' results for some chosen sports at the Olympics and have higher aspirations in others. Separate targets would be developed for Paralympic, Commonwealth Games and World Championship events.

We should aspire for Australia to at least maintain current international rankings in those sports significant to Australians. Where a sport has no elite international competition, maintaining a viable and exciting national elite competition should be the goal.

Underpinning these aspirations and targets must be a plan to broaden all sport's participation base, expand the pools of talent in our preferred participation sports and appropriately invest in elite pathways and athlete support. Measurable targets should be agreed with the states and territories and NSOs for community participation and social inclusion.

For greater success we must also look at better coaching pathways and the training and development of officials and administrators and we should support our immense volunteering community across the sports sector. These areas will be more closely looked at in later chapters of this report.

## Recommendations:

- 1.1 The Australian Government, advised by the Australian Sports Commission and in consultation with state and territory governments, should develop a costed national sports policy framework and submit the framework to the Council of Australian Governments for endorsement.
- 1.2 The national sport policy framework should include the following:
  - a) Measurable national objectives and priorities for public funding including success for high performance and participation, with domestic and/or international significance and capacity to contribute to the Australian Government's objectives for social inclusion and preventative health.
  - b) Financial and non-financial strategies to achieve those objectives including strategies that provide for greater participation.
  - c) The roles and responsibilities of various levels of government and their agencies in delivering those strategies; including the sport and recreation, health, education, Indigenous and youth portfolios.
- 1.3 The national sport policy framework should be supported by availability of robust data:
  - a) To ensure maximum effectiveness and efficiency, the Australian Government, in consultation with state and territory governments, should design and fund collections of statistics and other data to inform policy development generally and to assist ongoing evaluation of national sport policy framework strategies.
  - b) The Australian Sports Commission should develop a system for collection of participation data from national sporting organisations that is reliable, valid, repeatable and comparable across sports.
- 1.4 The Australian Government should ensure that Australia remains at the forefront of the global fight against doping in sport and that Australia's domestic anti-doping regime reflects world best practice in deterrence, detection and enforcement and incorporates the recommendations of the Panel into the structural and governance arrangements of the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority.