

2.1: NATIONAL SPORT POLICY FRAMEWORK

Findings

1. There is no agreed definition of what 'success in sport' means for Australia, either at the elite or participation level and thus no clear objectives or plans.
2. The lack of a national policy framework and defined measures of success for elite sport and mass participation mean that funding is appropriated without clear and agreed objectives.
3. Since previous Australian governments began providing significant support to sport, the clear focus has been winning Olympic, Paralympic and Commonwealth Games medals, while participation or 'grass roots' sport has been comparatively under-funded. This has resulted in neglect of the fundamental basis of sport in Australia—participation by children and adults in recreational-based sport at community levels.
4. The delivery of sport involves all three tiers of government and a variety of agencies in each sector, including sport and recreation, health, education, infrastructure and Indigenous affairs. But there is inadequate co-operation between all these stakeholders, leading to inconsistent and ineffective delivery.
5. The lack of fundamental data on most aspects of the sport sector substantially inhibits an evidence based approach to the development of policies and strategies.
6. There is a clear need for a nationally agreed plan for sport which encompasses all relevant areas of government and engages all tiers of government.

A FRAMEWORK FOR NATIONAL SPORT

With a definition of success and clear goals to aspire to, a framework for achieving those goals is required. The Australian Sport Commission (ASC) and all state and territory departments of sport and recreation have essentially the same objectives: perform well at elite level and increase participation. However, there is no overarching strategy and very little co-ordination.

The delivery of sport is the responsibility of sporting clubs affiliated with state and territory sporting organisations (SSOs). In turn these SSOs are aligned with a national sporting

organisation (NSOs), the peak administrative controlling bodies for each sport. All levels of government currently provide assistance to help this system deliver outcomes in elite and participation fields. What is required is better ways of providing this assistance.

Our interviewees, almost without exception, believe there should be a national strategy or overarching policy framework within which the various stakeholders can chart their own strategies.

The current lack of co-operation and co-ordination of effort among the main stakeholders demands a national plan. The simple elements of such a plan should be to:

- set targets
- define strategies to achieve them
- state who is responsible for delivering them.

Such a plan will be useless if not funded adequately. There must be a commitment from all levels of government to back the plan with real support. To be effective this will need to be agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The COAG brings together the Prime Minister, state Premiers, territory Chief Ministers and local government (through the Australian Local Government Association) to develop responses to issues of concern to all three spheres of government.

Given that sport and recreation requires co-ordination between all three tiers of government, it will be advantageous for the Australian Government, through COAG, to include local government membership in the Sport and Recreation Minister's Council (SRMC) and charge it with the responsibility of managing and reporting back periodically to COAG on the implementation of the national sports policy framework.

Ministerial councils are a means of co-ordinating across jurisdictions, national approaches to issues. It is important that ministerial councils operate as efficiently as possible to achieve this objective. An aim of these broad protocols is to facilitate high-quality consultative decision-making, through a robust framework that is accountable, fiscally prudent and administratively efficient³².

Because of the cross-portfolio and whole-of-government implications that this report is addressing, a COAG ministerial council is the best mechanism to use where resolutions require a commitment, especially financial commitment, from respective governments. Furthermore, key recommendations of this report should be used as the basis for the terms of reference for the council.

³² Australian Government, Council of Australian Governments (COAG), Commonwealth–State Ministerial Councils Compendium, April 2009, pp. 2.

DEFINING 'SUCCESS' IN SPORT

Currently, there are no agreed performance criteria for 'success' for high-performance sport or for social and health outcomes in 'grassroots' sport.

In the absence of nationally agreed criteria, the ASC spending priorities are, by default, the Australian Government's strategy for sporting success. This is focused almost entirely on winning medals at Olympic and Commonwealth Games but takes little account of participation numbers or social criteria. The Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) has, since the announcement in 1993 of the Sydney Olympics, set targets for Australian medals. These targets have gained currency in the public domain and the Australian Government has embraced them and worked to achieve them. The Panel believes that the Australian Government, as the chief source of elite sport funding, should set the medal targets, in consultation with the AOC.

This spending pattern flows to the states and territories. Funding provided by the ASC to NSOs for elite athlete preparation is in turn provided to the state and territory institutes of sport and state and territory academies of sport (SIS/SAS) which allocate additional money to support programs. As a result, state and territory funding patterns mirror those at Australian Government level.

National and state/territory funding is allocated to sporting organisations for other purposes, in addition to elite competition. Although total funding for participation-level sports is low in comparison to elite sports, it is difficult if not impossible, to determine what funding goes where at each level of government. As we cannot tell exactly what is being spent where and on what, we cannot tell how effective or efficient it is.

While it is necessary to ensure that Australia maintains its international competitiveness through continued support for the development of elite athletes, the link between elite performance and participation at the grassroots level must also be recognised. Elite sport and grass roots participation are not mutually exclusive. In fact:

Elite sport provides role models which in turn encourage participation.

- The people who deliver sport—coaches, officials, administrators, volunteers—overwhelmingly come from people who have played the game themselves. This is particularly true of coaches.
- Pathways from grass roots to elite sport provide opportunities and motivation for children to continue playing (noting that pathways for non-elite athletes need also to be in place).
- Elite athletes bring in money to the sport through sponsorship and profile.

A commonly held view is that success in international sport creates increased interest which translates into higher levels of participation at the grassroots. However, while Australia has been very successful at the last four Olympics, there has also been a 'blowout' of adult and child obesity and little change in participation numbers in sport. According to survey data³³ only 50 per cent of Australians participate 'regularly' in sport and physical activity. Nor does hosting major sporting events such as the Olympic or Commonwealth Games guarantee sustained increases in participation.

Apart from the obvious implications for community health, a small participation base poses a major threat to our international performance. Australia converts its small talent pool into Olympic medals at the highest rate in the world among leading nations; around six times better than the United States of America (USA) and 27 times better than China

Australia's relatively small population and economy mean it will be difficult to greatly improve on this. Australia will never surpass China, Russia or the USA in medal tallies in the longer term. The best to aspire to is fourth. Other nations are taking a more serious view of Olympic performance and funding their ambitions accordingly. Countries such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Japan, Spain, India, South Korea and others all have larger populations and are putting greater resources into elite sport. Smaller countries are also taking more medals. The application of large amounts of additional funding may keep Australia in or near the top five for the 2012 Games, but in the longer term this performance is unlikely to be maintained.

We can only maintain our place by increasing the number of people playing sport, by increasing the talent pool from which to choose talented athletes to mould into champions.

SUCCESS FOR ELITE SPORT

Olympics, Paralympics and Commonwealth Games

The ASC has three criteria on which it bases its elite funding decisions:

- **Excellence**—Assessment of the results and performances of NSOs at major benchmark events with a focus on Olympic and Paralympic performances, as well as assessment of the NSO's pathways and the capacity of that sport to be successful.
- **Relevance**—Assessment of the sport's significance to Australians. A component is related to the NSO's status as an Olympic sport. The other relates to its popularity, assessed through participation rates as well as other information on attendances, television ratings and sponsorship.

³³ Australian Government, Australian Sports Commission & Department of Health and Ageing, Participation in Exercise, Physical Activity and Sport, Annual Report 2008, pp. 12.

- **Effectiveness**—Assessment of the NSO’s capacity to deliver grassroots development programs and the sport’s governance, management structures and financial risk.

It is hard for the Panel to reconcile the assessment of ‘relevance’ with funding levels provided to NSOs. For example, the overwhelming dominance of professional sports such as Australian Football League (AFL), cricket and rugby league, in attendance, television ratings, sponsorship and participation numbers would suggest these sports deserve a larger slice of the funding pie than the relatively small allocations they currently receive from the ASC. The measure of ‘effectiveness’ is, in reality, also only peripherally considered. The ASC has a history of continuing to fund the elite programs of NSOs that are very minor sports in terms of participation almost entirely on the basis that they are potential international medal winning sports. Current examples include canoeing and taekwondo.

Clearly, the primary criteria for funding at the Australian Government level is the potential to win medals at Olympic and Paralympic Games, with medals won at Commonwealth Games secondary to this. Success at world championship level and world rankings are important only as pointers to these objectives.

This is reflected in funding levels prioritised to sports involved in these events. Sports with the most potential to win medals in these forums receive the bulk of the funding.

The ASC currently provides funding support to 55 NSOs for high performance sport through direct grants and/or allocations for AIS sport programs³⁴. Sporting organisations are calling for substantially increased funding to ensure success on the international level.

Any action on this issue is dependant on the expectations of Government. For example, if the expectation is that Australia will finish in the top five at the Olympics, then either more money needs to be found or existing funding redistributed to medal-winning sports at the expense of others. If the target is revised downwards, then funding elite programs of a broad range of sports could continue.

Australia has a long history of success in the Olympic Games, finishing in the top five at the last four Olympic Games. The expression ‘punching above our weight’ has been used so often (and with accuracy) that it has become something Australians expect.

That is not to say that Australia cannot continue to be a major medal winner at the Olympics. A place in the top 10 remains realistic. The Panel is of the view that we can do better than that. If the system is optimal, then it is not unrealistic to target a top eight result.

³⁴ Information provided by the Australian Sports Commission to the Independent Sport Panel. This includes funding to the Olympic Winter Institute and the Australian Paralympic Committee. In addition the ASC supports eight NSOs for the disabled with grants.

Australia is a world leader in Paralympic sport. Australia rightly embraces the Paralympics, and not just because it provides opportunities for disabled athletes to compete at the highest level. In the same way as the performance of our Olympians inspires the population and induces a sense of pride in the nation, so to do our Paralympians, and to both the disabled and the entire community. Seeing disabled athletes compete at the highest level also works to break down barriers existing in the community with regard to people with a disability, improving integration into society.

Many countries are yet to embrace the Paralympics as fully as Australia and this lack of competition has been a major factor in Australia's medal tallies. But this is changing. In the short to medium term, it seems likely that Australia will remain a major medal winner at Paralympic Games, but again expectations must be realistic. With other, larger countries more fully embracing Paralympic sport, it is not realistic to expect that Australia will retain its current status. A top five finish may be difficult to achieve.

Australia's success at the Olympics has had an impact on the Australian community's perception of the importance of Commonwealth Games. There is a sense that Australia is above this level of competition. This is not unreasonable considering Australia's medal tallies over the past four Commonwealth Games. Nonetheless, public interest is high when the Games are on and there is an expectation that Australia will continue to be successful. Doubtless to say, there would be a significant media and public backlash if this were not to continue.

Most of the sports on the Commonwealth Games schedule are also Olympic sports, though there are exceptions: the Melbourne 2006 Games included netball, lawn bowls, Rugby 7's³⁵ and squash, and these are also on the program for the Delhi 2010 Games. This argues for ongoing support of the elite programs such as lawn bowls and squash.

Given the medal tally of 2006, it is not unreasonable for Australia to continue to aspire to being the number-one nation in future Commonwealth Games medal tallies. However, it is important to remember that the UK competes in the Commonwealth Games as separate 'home nations'. The UK's recent resurgence in international sport is likely to threaten Australia's position.

Non-Olympic or Commonwealth Games sport

Australia as a nation places great importance on a small number of international competitions involving non-Olympic sports. Perhaps it is no coincidence that these are 'professional' or the 'strong commercial' sports such as cricket, rugby union and league with high levels of professional players. The Panel considers that these sports have the capacity to be self-sufficient in the elite area, with products that attract major sponsorship dollars.

³⁵ Rugby 7's will be part of the Olympic program in 2016.

Soccer is an Olympic sport, but at the under-23 level. There is no doubt that the major event on the international soccer calendar and the one that matters most to Australians is the FIFA World Cup. With the Socceroos qualifying for the 2006 and 2010 World Cup, the re-emergence of the A-League and a large participation base, interest in soccer is high. Tennis is similar, in that the four Grand Slam events are the ones that have meaning for the Australian public, not the Olympics.

The Australian and state/territory governments put significant amounts of funding towards elite programs in soccer and tennis. While the Panel stops short of saying they should not fund these programs, with large participation bases and significant commercial opportunities, governments should consider whether it is appropriate to provide ongoing elite program funding to sports that should be self-sufficient.

The Panel considers that these sports and the events that they are involved in are highly valued by the Australian community and involve large numbers of participants and supporters. However, as major businesses, these organisations should be able to adequately promote and support their own elite programs. Government funding may be appropriate for grassroots programs in these sports because these are as amateur and reliant on volunteers as any other sport but the readiness of the elite level of these sports to make some investment in participation should be taken into account by government when considering such investment.

Netball might be considered to be an 'emerging professional' sport. World championships, limited to a few competitive countries, attract solid media attention and spectator interest. The Australian Government has made a significant investment in the establishment of the ANZ Championships, a re-invention of the previous national league, which includes teams from New Zealand. This investment included support for television coverage. This is an interesting litmus test. The sport has a large participation base and is increasingly attracting commercial interest. The addition of a viable, high-profile international series may help the sport to reach 'professionalism' and become more self-sufficient. It is too early to tell whether this will prove to be the case.

Australians look to the Olympics, Paralympics and Commonwealth Games as benchmarks for success in elite sport. However, this should not be the sole focus of a definition of success in elite sport.

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. There are, for example, 19 Australian teams which hold 'Top Three' world rankings and more than half of these are in non-Olympic sports. 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.

We should not forget the many world championships and other high-level competitions which are important to our notions of sporting success and status. Success in a wide range of individual sports can be just as stimulating as high ranking on medal tables at multi-sport events.

SUCCESS FOR PARTICIPATION SPORT

Defining 'success' for participation sports appears much simpler than for elite sport. The goal is clear: more people of all ages participating.

However there are complications. Setting targets requires robust baseline data. For a sector that is so important to Australia in so many ways, it is remarkable that such data is limited.

Even the definition of participation is problematic. Over the course of a year, people may play in more than one season. There is no standard approach of reporting this: should they be counted as two participation events or one? It is likely that different sports count participants differently.

There is a high degree of variability in the way data is collected by NSOs, which may impact on accuracy. This would be problematic if future funding depends on success in increasing numbers.

Sources on participation rates in sport used by the ASC is data collected from NSOs, combined with data collected through the *Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey (ERASS)*, an annual survey commissioned by the Standing Committee on Recreation and Sport (SCORS) and funded jointly by the ASC and state and territory departments of sport.

ERASS gives a flavour of the interest and participation in each sport. Figures in isolation are not particularly useful, but collectively can form a picture of the impact and interest in various sports. ERASS only surveys people from age 15 and up and so does not include participation trends for younger children. Moreover, it does not distinguish between sport played in competitions affiliated with an SSO and countable by an NSO, and sport played in unaffiliated competitions.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) also collects data on participation, but the definition of 'physical activity' is different to that in ERASS. The *Sweeney Sports Report*³⁶ reports biannually on participation rates, but is not considered sufficiently robust for ASC purposes as it reports on a single participation once in the reporting period.

Statistics are generally not comparable from sport to sport and there are some concerns about reliability. The figures can sometimes be used within a sport to chart growth or decline, however historical sport data is often unreliable. Some NSOs adapt and change membership categories in their collections, resulting in difficulties drawing meaningful comparisons.

There is a need for reliable, valid and repeatable data on sport participation across all age groups. It is essential that this information be collected from NSOs, as a direct measure of their performances. It is also important to collect data on participation outside NSO structures to give an overall picture of sport participation. The general benefits of participation in sport are not just dependent on the affiliations of players.

Both ABS and ERASS collecting essentially the same data seems wasteful. The ABS collects its physical activity (and sport) data as a part of larger surveys which are not conducted annually and are therefore less useful for time span comparisons. The Panel notes the cost of additional ABS data collection is likely to be prohibitive. A more practical solution is to ensure that ERASS is collecting information which provides a realistic and full picture of participation in sport and physical activity in Australia. A realistic picture would exclude collection of data on annual participation which currently gives an over-inflated impression of participation. It would instead focus on determining regular participation levels. Considering the link to preventative health, data

³⁶ Sweeney Research Group, *The Sweeney Sports Report*, released biannually.

which tests the frequency and intensity of participation required to achieve a health benefit (as outlined in the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) *National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians*)³⁷ should be used.

There appears to be substantial current and planned activity in relation to the collection of data and statistical information to inform the development of health policy and programs. For example, the Australian Government through the DoHA is currently planning the development and implementation of an ongoing *National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey Program*. The survey program will collect data on the food intake, physical activity participation and physical measurements of the Australian population through periodic surveys. The first survey is expected to commence in late 2009 and is expected to focus on Australian adults³⁸.

In view of these and possibly the development of other collections, the Australian Government should review all current and planned collection relating to physical activity and its preventative health agenda to explore the opportunity to enhance the collection of sport and physical activity data and statistical information.

Despite current problems with the data, it is clear that sport participation at all levels is far lower than it should be. Given the urgent need to address physical inactivity and obesity levels, sport has a vital role to play.

So far, the Australian Government has not set any targets for participation. There are, perhaps, two reasons. First, is the lack of sufficiently reliable data used to set targets. This should not be insurmountable. Second, and more importantly, it is likely that given the complexity of the issues surrounding participation no-one is confident of success. Certainly there has been little success to date. It is high time this changed.

Substantial increases in participation should be achievable with the right policies and programs. Addressing the issue of participation requires multiple and concurrent initiatives which will contribute to the overall objective.

The Panel notes that while participation in sport needs to increase for the entire community, segments of the population are under-represented in organised sport, notably girls of all ages, women, disabled, Indigenous Australians, recent immigrants from non-Anglo countries and the socially disadvantaged. To a large extent, a well co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to increasing participation will access these target groups as a part of the general community. However, it is recognised that specific efforts will need to be made particularly for disabled and Indigenous people, as well as recent immigrants.

³⁷ www.health.gov.au

³⁸ www.health.gov.au

ANTI-DOPING

Australian anti-doping efforts take place in a global environment. The Australian Government has committed to the global fight against doping in sport by ratifying the UNESCO International Convention Against Doping in Sport, supporting the *World Anti-Doping Code* (including associated international standards relating to prohibited substances and methods, testing, laboratories, therapeutic use exemptions and privacy standards), and Australia's National Anti-Doping Framework as agreed by the SRMC in 2007.

The Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (ASADA) is the key implementation agency for Australia's anti-doping program. The Panel notes that a recent independent review of ASADA was commissioned by the DoHA in the second half of 2008. The review was timely given that ASADA had been in operation for two and half years; and that the most recent changes to the *World Anti-Doping Code* came into effect on 1 January 2009.

The Review recommended a number of changes be made to improve and strengthen ASADA's structural and governance arrangements to ensure that the efficacy of Australia's anti-doping program is maintained. Most of the recommendations will be implemented through legislative changes to the *Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority Act 2006*.