

## **Independent Sports Panel Submission**

### **Executive Summary**

Historically, Universities have tended to sit outside Australia's National sport program. The advent of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in the late 1980's has had a very positive impact upon the advancement of elite athlete and coach development, as well as elevating Australia's international competitiveness. However, the creation of the AIS, particularly early in its history and prior to the refinement of athlete welfare programs, had the adverse effect of further separating athletes and National sport programs from the university sport sector.

It is well documented that today, large numbers of elite athletes are enrolled in both Australian and overseas universities. For example, 201 athletes selected in the Australian Beijing Olympic Team were enrolled, deferred or recently graduated from universities, not to mention numerous coaching and support staff also with university backgrounds.

It is the view of Australian University Sport (AUS) that the university sport sector in Australia has much to offer the National sport program. Universities are well resourced in a number of key areas, including: a large demographic of 18 to 22 year old students; sporting facilities; sports science and medicine staff (as well as lab and testing facilities); cutting edge research capacity; a rich source of volunteers; and both a current and potential capacity to deliver degree courses specialising in coaching and sports management disciplines.

This submission outlines a number of recommended strategic initiatives whereby the university sport sector can complement, provide resources and be better utilised in support of Australia's National sporting program.

In an increasingly competitive international environment, our much revered National sport program, through the leadership of the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), must explore new and innovative ways of adding to the resource base of sport. Unlike many rival countries like, the USA, Canada, Great Britain and many Asian and European nations, Australia is yet to more fully engage the university sector in support of its National sport program. It is the assertion of AUS that we can no longer afford to overlook the university sector as a potential, supporting partner for sport in Australia.

## Addressing the Terms of Reference

### **Reference # 1: Ensure Australia's continued elite sporting success**

#### *"Duplication"*

Most universities provide quality sporting facilities often including state of the art strength and conditioning gyms, swimming pools and a hydro-recovery capacity, sports scientists and researchers. These facilities often duplicate AIS or SIS/SAS facilities. Before the ASC, AIS, State and/or Regional Academy Programs build or add-on to existing facilities, it may be resource effective to investigate university facilities first.

#### *"Relationships between the ASC, AIS, State and Territory Institutes, academies of sport and regional institutes"*

Universities could be potential partners for AIS and/or SIS/SAS programs. At the time of writing this submission, AUS, VIS and Monash University, in collaboration the relevant National and State Sporting Organisation (NSO and SSO) are in the process of negotiating a partnership agreement whereby Monash has offered to sponsor the Victorian Institute of Sport baseball program through the provision of playing facilities and other forms of VIK support. Other universities have expressed an interest in exploring partnership arrangements with SIS/SAS programs. This model could be a way of introducing new resources into programs in need of additional support in order to continue to grow and improve.

#### *"NTID"*

Universities capture over 1,000,000 full-time and part-time students. This is an ideal demographic for an NTID scheme and this program is currently delivered through AUS in collaboration with the ASC. This program should continue and has the ongoing potential to identify:

- Athletes who may have been exposed to elite youth programs, but were not mature or disciplined enough when younger to reach peak performance, but who as university students are now ready to excel.
- Late developers (physically) – It is often said in certain team sports such as football (soccer), basketball and baseball, that Australian 18 year old athletes are not as physically well developed as many of their European or North American competitors. This may be due to factors such as less access to intense, regular competitions, and less emphasis on strength and conditioning programs. Many of these late developers are no doubt attending Australian universities and the continuation of the NTID program will assist in finding them.

### **Reference # 2: Preventative health approach**

University students are a critical target audience for health promotion. In the past 12 months, AUS has eliminated alcohol branding from all of its marketing strategies and collateral. This has cost AUS a loss of over \$100,000 per annum in sponsorship revenue. In spite of these losses, AUS remains committed to the non-promotion of alcohol products to student-athletes.

Considering the delivery capacity of the Regional Funding Program network which creates direct access to over 100,000 regular participants in sport on campuses, as well as the desirability of the student market in terms of health promotion, AUS is optimally positioned to promote anti-binge drinking and other key health and well-being messages to students. It is the aim of AUS to replace lost alcohol sponsorship with health promotion funding. Nationally, we are missing a prime health promotion opportunity to a key demographic.

### **Reference # 3: Gaps in the elite athlete and coach pathway**

A significant and persistent gap in the pathway of most sports occurs in the 18 to 22 year old bracket. In relation to the university sector, several factors contribute to this:

- Elite youth athletes that have been through State, National and SIS/SAS programs, but subsequently fall short of making the next grade, often drop-out of their respective sport at this stage.
- Many elite youths seeking higher education student-athlete scholarship opportunities exit the Australian sport program and take up overseas opportunities. It is estimated that as many as 2,000 Australian born student-athletes are enrolled into the US collegiate system each year, many supported by full sport-scholarship programs in NCAA Division 1 and 2 universities.

These factors create significant negative impacts on both the Australian sport program and the National vocational skills base. Not only is the layer just beneath the top of the elite athlete pyramid being eroded, but Australia is losing many highly skilled young people to overseas universities each year. Steps must be taken to explore and support ways to reverse these trends, such as:

- Exploring the establishment of elite competitions through the Australian university sector must be a priority. This needs to be an all of sport activity, engaging the ASC, AUS, national sporting organisations and university vice chancellors.

- The advent of elite sporting competitions in the university sector would have the effect of both encouraging the retention of elite student-athletes in Australia, as well as providing incentives to vice chancellors to provide more sporting scholarships for those same student-athletes.

Additionally, the development of elite competitions through the university sector would also encourage curriculum development and subsequent career pathways for professional coaches, officials and sports administrators. Although these elements are a “given” in many countries throughout the world, they are virtually non-existent in Australia.

(\*Note: AUS is currently researching the economics of US based NCAA and NAIA inter-collegiate competition structures and will provide a follow-up report to this submission in December 2008. AUS is also currently engaged in discussions with Basketball and Swimming Australia respectively regarding developing inter-university competitions).

#### *“Keeping community clubs alive”*

It is seldom recognised that the university club-sport system is one of the only experiential training bases where young Australians learn how to develop and administer sporting clubs on a voluntary basis. There is no question the potential exists to formalise training of volunteers through the university club-sport system.

Universities are also a rich source of potential volunteers. AUS has no problem recruiting approximately 500 volunteers each year to assist with university games and events. It is also evident that Gen Y appears to be a generation of volunteers. Through collaboration between the ASC, AUS and universities, club human resources can be better developed to the advantage of the National sport program.

(\*Note: AUS is currently developing work-learning programs with targeted universities in various sports management disciplines).

#### **Reference # 4: Cutting edge sports science and research**

University researchers and academics continually strive for relevance and seek out opportunities to create links with most industries. Some Australian universities have made significant contributions to sport science and research in Australia. However, the connection between the National sport program and Australian universities is not as strong as it could be. Clearly opportunities exist and should be developed to ensure better mobilisation of the potential contribution of the university sector to sport.

### **Reference # 5: Increasing the diversity and funding base for sport**

The effective integration of the university sector into the National sport program has the potential to unlock resources in many ways, including:

- The use of existing sporting facilities on campuses reducing pressure on infrastructure investment.
- University and SIS/SAS partnerships can create an additional source of program funding or support (the university).
- Inter-university competitions for elite 18 to 22 year olds could save NSOs valuable resources required to administer national or interstate competitions for this age group. It is interesting to note that the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) now uses the World University Summer Games as its international U23 program.
- Universities can play a major role in the education and training of sport coaches, officials, administrators and volunteers.
- More elite athletes supported through scholarship programs offered by Australian universities will not only encourage the retention of the critical 18 to 22 year old in the National pathway, but it also reduces the pressure of part-time work-loads, thus allowing the student-athlete more quality time to support their sporting and academic aspirations.

This is to name but a few of many possibilities.

#### *"Effectiveness of the Australian Sports Foundation"*

AUS currently administers an ASF registered program aimed at raising funds in support of international university representatives named in winter and summer universiade teams. Although the tax deductibility of ASF programs is attractive, the system is indirect and cumbersome.

Owing to the fact that we do not have a well developed inter-university competition structure in Australia supporting high numbers of scholarship holders, opportunities to raise additional funds from both alumni and corporate Australia are minimal compared with other countries. This is another reason to further explore the development of an elite competition structure through the Australian university system.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the university sector is a vastly under-utilised resource in the current National sporting landscape. Effective integration of the university sector into the National sport program will require much collaboration between AUS, the ASC, NSOs and other key stakeholders.

Furthermore, it is imperative that joint programs and partnerships between universities and the National sport program must complement, not compete or detract from the existing system. This will require planning and a strategic vision as to how the two sectors can create mutually beneficial programs to strengthen an already strong successful National sport program and a solid, well resourced higher education system.

In closing, it is important to highlight the readiness of the university sport sector to participate and contribute to the National sport program. Increasingly, managers of sport programs on campuses, vice chancellors, and academics from the sports management disciplines are striving for involvement. The desire to participate is being further driven by the findings of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR's) Bradley Review. Aspects of these findings indicate Australia is lagging behind other western tertiary systems in terms of the quality of the overall higher education experience and levels of student engagement. Increasing the emphasis on sporting activities and priorities across campuses in Australia is a sure-fire way of gaining back some ground on overseas competitors.

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