

## Great expectations and finite resources

**With the Australian summer in full swing, Andrew Whittaker reports on why high-performance sport is under funding pressure, why local government is pleased by a new focus on participation and why Melbourne's new multi-use stadium is solving problems and setting challenges.**

As you moved into the world of rain and snow, in Australia we faced the threat of drought and bushfires. By early December we had already had a few days over 35 degrees and beach activity had increased. The warm weather is the cue for lifesaving clubs, one of the biggest volunteer organisations in the country, to start their patrols and shifts in to full gear. In the north of the country lifesaving patrols go on throughout the year but in the south they do not really kick in until October, finishing about April each year.

However, the big news in Australia has been the release of the Crawford Report (The Future of Sport) which has finally ignited a proper discussion about the direction of national funding and the value of Olympic sport. The government asked Crawford to investigate and analyse funding of Australian sport and the resulting recommendations do not please the Australian Olympic movement. Non-Olympic sports tend to be starved of funds while the Olympic sports get the dominant share. These Olympic sports were also wanting more to keep up with the British and Europeans. For a country of our size why is it necessary to be in the top five in the medal table? It is very expensive to get there and the money could be better spent on increasing participation in all sorts of sports, many of which would not be Olympic sports.

It has been interesting to see the battle lines being drawn because some of the major, popular sports (eg Australian rules, rugby league, netball) are not Olympic sports and do not support the current practice of Olympics sports getting the biggest share of national funding. Local government, which gets hardly any national funding as they have to work with the state governments, is delighted that their contribution might finally be recognised and they might be able to access national funding for increasing participation in physical activity. The Olympic heavy hitters have strong political connections and the federal government has not indicated its position yet. Fortunately the summer holidays have arrived so the polities can do their in-depth thinking and analysis while strolling the beaches of Australia. The Olympic movement was looking for a significant increase in funding but they could be in for a shock. Their problem is that the bulk of their money goes to national sports, high-performance programmes and elite activity. There is a growing recognition that there is no trickle-down effect leading to increased participation so can the size of their funding be justified?

Melbourne's rectangular stadium (it does not have a sponsor's name yet but that is being negotiated) is taking shape and will be a spectacular and iconic building. The A\$268 million stadium will potentially have five teams operating out of the facility. Two football teams (Melbourne Victory, Melbourne Heart), one rugby league (Melbourne Storm), one rugby union (a new Super 15 franchise) and Australian rules (Melbourne AFL) will be either playing games, training or being administered at the facility. From a business and facility management perspective this is a great outcome as the stadium will be in continuous use; two or three sports will generally be using it at different times over a week. It has been designed to cater for a rapid change over of sponsor signage and corporate usage so that it is appropriately 'dressed' for each game. It comes in to operation in mid-2010.

Talking of stadiums and their use, the Australian bid for the FIFA world cup (either 2018 or 2022) has been strategically undermined by the opposing football codes. AFL and rugby league use the same stadiums that are being considered for the football bid and would be affected by the lack of access during their season. The AFL (Aussie rules) and the NRL (rugby league) have existing agreements with stadiums and they are threatening to stop access because it will affect them financially and they will not be able to conduct their full fixtures.

This is a bit rich considering the bids have not been submitted and Australia has not even won. It may never happen. This shows how much sport is a business and how sensitive each sport is to any potential impact on their operations even if it is 10 to 12 years away. That's plenty of time to talk through the issues.

Enjoy your winter.



Andrew Whittaker: face to face with funding realities

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**Andrew Whittaker has recently retired as chief executive of Aquatics and Recreation Victoria and is still active in the Australian sport and leisure sector.**

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