

Get fit for 2032 – Now is the time to review sporting body governance frameworks and undergo difficult transitions



Director of IcebergSRC, Dr Rachel Baird looks at the challenges and opportunities for Australian sporting bodies in the lead up to Brisbane 2032.

The enduring legacy of the XXXII Olympiad is the athletes. Who will forget the unrestrained joy of Italy's Gianmarco Tamberi and Qatar's Mutaz Barshim sharing the high jump gold medal? Or the sportsmanship of Cedric Dubler urging Ashley Maloney to run faster, to dig deeper, and claim the bronze medal in the decathlon? Without crowds or any other goings on, during the games, the cameras stayed fixed on the athletes.

In these glimpses into the athlete's world, it's easy to forget that we are witnessing the pointy end of execution. Every athlete, podium finisher or not, has risen from grassroots to elite sport over years of committed training. Australian athletes are supported along the way by their particular national sporting organisation (NSO) be it the new AusCycling body, Basketball Australia or Australian Weightlifting.

It's a simple numbers game. The huge base of grass roots sports needs solid foundational support from sporting clubs and associations to produce these athletes.

However, the emotion in sport which we see bubbling to the surface during competition, can sometimes inhibit the effective governance of sport in ways that other not-for-profit organisations do not experience. You see, it's not just the athletes who get emotional. Paradoxically, the passion that draws volunteers and administrators to give their time to sport, can be the very thing that undermines the sustainability of a sporting code.

Accountability for funding and sponsorship dollars is increasing as is athlete expectation of coherent pathways and better collaboration between national and state bodies. All sporting organisations, not just NSOs, must function more effectively. In 2013, one of the six mega-trends predicted to shape sport in the forthcoming decade was improved and more

formalised governance systems.¹ In 2021 we still have much to do to achieve these across the board. Whilst we still need passion and technical knowledge embedded in each individual sporting code, we also need to lean on experts in corporate governance.

AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMMISSION STRATEGIC PILLAR

A THRIVING ORGANISED SPORTS SECTOR

Objectives:

-  **A more cohesive, innovative and effective sector**
-  **Support organisations running sports to improve their effectiveness**
-  **Grow the capability of individuals in the Australian sport workforce**

Over \$145 million was invested in high performance sports in 2019-2020 by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) illustrating that sports administration is no longer an amateur affair. One of the two missions stated in the ASC 2021-2025 Corporate Plan is 'Making Australia stronger through sport.' This mission is underpinned by two strategic pillars – more Australians involved in organised sport and a thriving, organised sports sector. Both pillars are underpinned by strong governance of the bodies that play in the sporting space.

Those at the coal face of sports administration, whether in a paid or volunteer capacity, deserve support to discharge their responsibilities in the best interests of the sport. For the most part they welcome that support, but it needs to be a respectful journey.

The journey towards more sustainable governance frameworks involves far more than arguing for better processes or producing best practice corporate documents. It involves winning the hearts and minds of people who have invested countless hours of love and labour into their sport.

Often they have played the sport, coached, staffed the canteen or umpired. The key is to harness that emotion and drive and to engage all stakeholders in a conversation about achieving the best outcomes for the sport.

Sharing resources, achieving alignment across club, state, and national associations, and attracting a skills-based board will set a sport up for success. The sporting organisations that can see past emotion and the current state of play, to a more effective operating environment will better serve their athletes in the years towards Brisbane2032. We ask our athletes to leave emotions on the sideline and so must our administrators.

¹ Hajkowicz S, Cook H, Wilhelmseder L and Boughen N, CSIRO Consultancy Report for the Australian Sports Commission, April 2013.

The ASC's nine sports governance principles acknowledge the unique environment of sports administration by aligning corporate governance principles to sporting vernacular. For example, Principle 4 talks about the players. Just as you could not field a successful footy team with 13 Jonathan Thurstons, a board should not be limited to former footy players. Diversity in approach, background, culture and skills has a direct positive impact on organisational performance. Principle 9 talks to the scorecard. Just as all athletes review their performance to identify areas to monitor and adjust for improvement, sporting bodies must conduct internal reviews to grade their performance. Complacency leads to a slow decline in performance.

The recent merger of 18 boards made up of 130 directors representing Cycling Australia, BMX Australia and Mountain Bike Australia, to form a single NSO called AusCycling was dependent upon a leadership mindset that put the sport first. Whilst individual positions were on the line, it was in the best interests of the sport to merge the three NSOs. As Shane Coppin, the outgoing CEO of Mountain Bike Australia said, "it takes courage, passion and conviction to push for change, especially in a world such as sport, which is built on history, passion and individuals."²

Football Australia (FA) has also faced its challenges most recently stemming from Chair Frank Lowy's decision to hand over control to his son in 2015³ (and the backlash that resulted) followed by serious dysfunction which triggered FIFA's intervention in the code's governance. Whilst the crisis of a FIFA led dissolution of the Football Federation of Australia (as it then was) was averted, the Board is now looking to the future. The current federated model with associations in every state and territory has duplications and inconsistencies. The 'XI Principles for the Future of Australian Football' (July 2020) include a commitment to a national football identity (Principle I), modern, efficient and effective governance (Principle VII) and a new model for the FFA and professional leagues (Principle VIII).

Many Australian sporting organisations are based upon a federated model with potential for improved efficiencies and governance systems. All athletes, wherever they are along the pathway from grass roots sport to elite competitions, are happier when the administering body supports their endeavors rather than creating obstacles. Taking the time now to review corporate governance and address difficult conversations and transitions will ensure your sporting body is in the best shape for 2032.

² Reinventing the wheel, *Company Director*, Australian Institute of Company Directors, May 2021, 37(3), 43.

³ Robins, M 'Frank Lowy's jet setting continues' *Australian Financial Review*, May 2017
<https://www.afr.com/rear-window/frank-lowys-jetsetting-continues-20171214-h04jkc>