

Is Australia really *the* sporting nation?

By Tara Steel

In a country that epitomises itself as a sporting nation – *the* sporting nation, why is it that many of Australia's elite athletes are struggling to survive financially?

While some are able to boast their professional status with porches, and luxurious beach front homes, there are countless athletes across the country who are still having to work either full or part-time. Many still do not receive sponsorship and pay from their own pocket to train for and play the sport they love.

This is reality for many female athletes, and has also occurred for a number of men in less profile sports. As a nation we are lagging far behind trans-Tasman rivals New Zealand, and many European and Asian countries, not to mention the United States.

Some male athletes are paid phenomenal wages to play sport, both in Australia and abroad. Leading sports such as rugby league, rugby union and AFL attract millions of dollars from television rights and sponsorship, while leading female sports such as netball and basketball have only in recent years stopped paying for their sports to be broadcast, a practice that hockey still endures.

This raises questions such as why is it the case and does it have to be this way?

Answers are being sought not only by the public and those in the sporting industry, but also by the government, reflected in the recent Senate enquiry into *Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia*

The underlying reason for the difference appears to be media coverage and the culture of sport in Australia. That is the top sports in the country receive an abundance of media coverage, from newspapers and magazines to television and radio. That in turn then generates sponsorship and fans and overall money for the sports, which is filtered to the athletes.

Canberra Capitals coach Carrie Graf also believes this is the reason, but unlike others, has witnessed progress which makes her confident things can change.

"The Canberra media have been really supportive of the Canberra Capitals and I think that is a statement about this city – it sees things differently, and is intelligent in its thinking about 'well someone needs to do it'," Graf said.

"Because why? Because its right, and a lot of little girls do play sport, and that female athletes can be role models for little boys too.

"I think that will help shift and change the culture and impact on women's sports' ability to gain sponsorship, media, they all go together."

Graf at just 39 has 18 years of coaching experience, and has been a head coach since 1993. Her achievements include four WNBL championships, being the first Australian to coach in the WNBA and of course, guiding basketball sensation Lauren Jackson.

Comparing the NBL to the WNBL Graf believes the women get a raw deal. While the men's league is fully professional with a team salary cap of \$776,000, Graf regards the WNBL as 'barely semi-professional', and while superstars like Jackson and other Opals veterans may be earning \$30,000 - \$40,000, many are barely paid enough to cover playing expenses.

"I believe last year I think in the Perth team not one of the players got paid," she said.

As a result, many of Australia's stars are travelling offshore, in the search of lucrative contracts to countries such as the US, Germany, Korea and Russia. In the States a player of Jackson's calibre can earn a maximum \$US 91,000, (\$A121,000) which compared to the money in Australia is fantastic, but compared to the equivalent in the NBA where the player average is \$5.215 million is minuscule.

"In Russia, I'm guessing from hearing from some of the players, hundreds of thousands the girls can make, similarly in Korea."

An example of the lack of media support is shown in the broadcasting of the WNBL. Basketball Australia Marketing Manager Nicole Pensko said until recently the WNBL paid the ABC to broadcast the league.

"Previously the WNBL had paid a very small amount to the ABC to cover production costs," she said.

"For the last three years there has been no amount paid and the ABC now covers the production and broadcast of matches as part of the contract."

So if there's money in women's sport across the globe, why are we failing to the sporting market here in the 'great sporting nation'?

Soccer is in a similar state to basketball in that it is a unisex sport where men are the primary focus. While cultures are changing for both sports it still proves to be a continuous struggle.

Capital Football Chief Executive Officer Heather Reid broke new ground when she became the first female CEO of a state football (soccer) federation in 2004. She also recently contributed to the Senate enquiry and believes making women in sport more equal is imperative.

“I think the biggest challenge is changing the culture and changing the perception about the value of women in sport, and the value that sport can gain from women’s participation in sport, not just as athletes....but in leadership, as decision makers, as CEO’s,” Reid said.

While there also exists great financial differences for women and men in the sport of soccer, Reid believes it isn’t simply a gender issue, but a professional versus amateur one.

“While we have sports like rugby league, rugby union, Aussie rules and cricket played by men at a professional level that have a substantial amount of media interest supporting them, then they will always be paid significant amounts of money.”

According to Reid soccer has seen a significant shift in the past 15 years following the governing body FIFA’s recognition of the value of not only the women’s game, but women themselves, and issued a challenge to other sports.

“It wasn’t that long ago that FIFA president Joseph Blatter said ‘the future of football is feminine’,” Reid said.

“Soccer is the only football code that I believe is a safe code of football for women to play, it’s not a brut strength kind of game. Women play the game with finesse and technical skill and flair better than men in many respects, they just don’t kick the ball as hard.”

At the national level women players receive a payment of \$170 daily allowance when on tour, which is equal to the men. The women’s national league however is still in its planning phase and a number of players are forced to play overseas, or work full time if they are to remain in Australia.

For men, A League teams have a \$1.2 million salary cap (excluding a marquee player) so players earn from \$50,000 to approximately \$200,000. In addition if they are good enough there is also the chance of playing overseas in competitions such as the English Premier League, where there are no financial restrictions and players such as David Beckham earn an astounding \$30 million per year in international leagues.

Reid believes those sports which are financially successful such as rugby union, league, AFL and cricket are a result of media ownership, and while she would like to see more money develop in the women’s game in Australia, believes too much can also prove harmful.

“Sports I believe can actually be ruined by the amount of money that’s involved in them,” she said.

“I mean you look at the corruption in the football league in Italy and the amount of money that’s there and the corruption, the match fixing the betting that goes on with games.”

Even at a state level in the Capital Premier League competition many players are paid, and a number of clubs buy, train, and then sell players to make profit from the contracts they sign, which can also prove damaging for the sport.

“It’s pretty common to have the brown paper bag payment under the table. I’ve heard a rumour of one particular player who earns \$1000 a week and he works full time in another job.”

“In the men’s game the players are very much commodities that can be bought and sold. We had a recent case with young Kaz Patafta, an 18-year-old who signed up with Benfica in Portugal earlier this year.”

Under current regulations clubs are entitled to a training compensation fee, meaning that in this circumstance every club Patafta played for from the time he was 12 until his first signing is entitled to their share.

“Now it might only be 5 per cent, but I think one of the clubs was entitled to \$20-25,000. So clubs make players to sell.”

“It’s damaging to the point that you see 11 and 12 year olds being pushed and pushed by their parents and by others because they think they’ve got the goods to go on and to be a (Mark) Viduka or Lucas Neill and that’s where it becomes depressing.”

Like Reid, Australian Netball Captain Liz Ellis also made a submission to the Senate enquiry, and also believes the reasons for a lack in financial reward for women results from poor media coverage.

“Male sports like football tend to generate a lot more revenue via sponsorship, gate takings and most importantly broadcast rights,” Ellis said.

“This revenue then trickles down to the players. Women’s sports simply do not generate that sort of revenue.”

Ellis is at the top of her sporting field, yet individually has to foot the cost for playing the sport she loves, and the payment received from playing netball, ranging from \$1000 to \$10,000, barely covers the basics.

“Generally we have to cover massages, any physio required away from matches or trainings, all expenses associated with injury - surgeons, hospital fees, anaesthesia etc.”

“We also incur expenses by way of loss of wages, as we have to take time of work to play and train.”

In the National League team sponsors do provide players with uniforms, footwear, strapping tape, accommodation and meals and interstate travel.

Recognising the need for improved conditions the Australian Netball Players Association, founded in 2003 by then captain Kathryn Harby-Williams, aligned

with the Australian Workers Union, to seek advice and strategy to pursue claims for better wages and conditions for netballers.

Clubs have also recently aligned themselves with AFL clubs to try to increase profile, with the Perth Orioles, Melbourne Phoenix and Kestrels teaming with the West Coast Eagles, Melbourne Demons, and Collingwood Magpies respectively.

This trend also includes a move which will see the Netball Australia office move from its current Sydney location to the Telstra Dome in Melbourne, alongside the AFL House in January 2007.

While many may say there is no money in netball this is simply not the case, with the New Zealand league attracting players from Fiji, South Africa and Australia through lucrative contracts. The league has a minimum contract of \$12,000 and a number of players earning more than \$45,000, and speculation that netball icon Irene Van Dyke earns in excess of \$600,000.

Much of the money again comes from television rights where major networks bid in excess of \$1 million to secure rights. The teams in New Zealand are also franchised.

One sport which reflects the influence of media coverage irrespective of sex is hockey. Hockey in Australia predominately receives funding from the Australian Sports Commission, which covers the basics such as employment of support staff, competitions and training environments.

Hockey ACT CEO Chris Hume says hockey is still really considered an amateur sport.

“Not much goes towards paying allowances to players. Hockey Australia, from within its budget, provides for a daily allowance so when the Kookaburras and Hockeyroos are away at competitions they would receive a small allowance.”

This is confirmed by Hockeyroo Peta Gallagher, who says that while sponsorship provides for a number of resources, hockey players probably end up out of pocket at the end of the day.

“The Hockeyroos currently don’t have a major sponsor, neither do the Kookaburras,” Gallagher said.

“A lot of funding comes from government grants, on tour we get \$70 a day allowance and travel expenses are covered while we are away.”

Gallagher admits there is more money in the sport overseas, but compared to other sports it isn’t that much.

“There’s still not a great attraction overseas. For men Holland provides the most money, Australian men have earned probably \$15,000 a year, but for

women there's no major money that I'm aware of, but they look after you in terms of jobs, accommodation etc, so you do get some benefits out of it."

Gallagher said while as an amateur sport hockey probably 'does ok', lack of finances do make it difficult to sustain a career as an elite player.

"It would be great to see it change, it makes it tough. Especially as you get older and have to make decisions about careers and family."

Hockey also are in a situation where they are having to pay broadcasters to show their international events – paying \$250,000 to broadcast the Champions Trophy from Canberra last year.

Hume believes unless a "media mogul" grabs hold of the sport, the status of hockey will not change.

"The problem is, and I don't like saying it, but hockey is a tier two sport in a media perspective," Hume said.

"You've got a small group of sports that over time have become part of a media empire – soccer, AFL, rugby union, rugby league, cricket, are all part of media empires so they are on free-to-air and pay television."

"It then trickles down to effect newspapers, radio, magazines, so there's cross promotion, and basically that means they get big tv deals and then sponsorship deals."

What does the future hold for women's sport?

According to Hume it's going to take a lot of hard work.

"Until you have more women in positions of influence, whether that be parliament or in sports etc and the media see having a sport like hockey or women's sport are going to sell papers or pay television subscriptions, not much is going to change."

On the contrary Carrie Graf is confident things can change, and is determined to make it happen, for the Capitals at the least.

"Why can't it be done?"

"It can be done. In Canberra there are local football teams that have a budget twice our size."

"I'm saying well we're a great cause because we are making a statement and saying it can be done for women's sport...I think we've see growth in Canberra with our media coverage and even in how we pay our players. We've worked towards getting that up but other people have got to believe."

While believing is half the battle won, women will continue to be second-rate to their male sporting counterparts unless people take the next step and make a change and only then will Australia uphold its sporting nation title.