



Sharelle McMahon - four-time winner of Australian netball's MVP Award.

# About Time

**Janice Crosswhite** believes women's sports are finally getting recognised as valuable commercial brands

In the last year major conferences in the USA and the UK have explored various aspects of women's sport as a growth business. Summing up these opportunities, the UK's Sport Business publication recently reported that "profitable aspects of women's sport are poised to expand dramatically in the coming years. Opportunities are now within reach with increased media and brand interest translating into cash for female athletes and women's sport. The progression in the women's sport market shows that sport administrators, brand marketers and broadcasters can't afford to leave this stone unturned."

I believe this statement also has relevance for Australia, particularly if our major sports organisations and media interests can join together with sponsors to professionalise

existing leagues and competitions, or to create new ones - as happened this year with the launch of the ANZ Championship (the trans-Tasman netball league).

In the case of netball, the performance level of the former Commonwealth Bank Trophy competition was recognised as the best in the world for a national netball league. However, while the viewing on free to air Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) provided national coverage, the ABC only covered production costs for the telecast and did not pay Netball Australia (NA) so that players could be paid. Now, with the funds from pay television (SkyTV and Foxsport) and sponsorship from the ANZ Bank (you wonder if there is any connection between the ANZ bank dropping one of their AFL 'naughty team' sponsorships and picking up netball?) Netball Australia and NZ Netball have joined together to create a new competition of ten teams - five teams from each country. It is noteworthy that one bank has been replaced by another bank as the naming rights sponsor.

Each Trans Tasman netball team has \$260,000 to spend on wages for 12 players, with the minimum player wage of \$10,000 for a 30-week contract. (By contrast NBL basketball teams had a salary cap of \$810,000 and A-League teams a cap of \$1.85 million in their 2007/2008 seasons).

This is a real first for female team sport athletes in Australia and New Zealand. With the reduction in Australian teams down to five it also means that there is more competition for spots on teams, so interstate movements and the bringing in of overseas players (from countries such as England, Jamaica and Fiji) will further start to impact on the competition and assist with promotion and brand positioning.

While the top Australian teams (5 x 12 netballers = 60 players) have gained from the professionalism of the league, time will tell if this is the best move for Netball Australia, particularly in regard to winning World Championships and Commonwealth Games gold medals, where the team to beat has been New Zealand. Further, if like 80% of Australia's population you do not subscribe to pay TV, you will not see netball on a regular basis on your screen from now on. These are some of the trade-offs to professionalise women's sport.

The Women's National Basketball League (WNBL) has been running longer (since 1986) operating with ABC free to air coverage, similar to netball. Like the former Commonwealth Bank Trophy, the WNBL has been instrumental in the development of Australian female players to world standard. The national women's team, the Opals, won the last World Championship and before that were Olympic silver medalists (twice) to the USA. Basketball Australia (BA) and its respective



Reaching out on a suburban billboard - the ANZ Championship.

The Australian Defence Force Opals take on the the New Zealand Tall Ferns during April's 'Good Luck Beijing 2008' tournament in China. Image courtesy of Basketball Australia.



national leagues have recently undergone a review, in consultation with the Australian Sports Commission, so it can be expected there will be some changes to their leagues.

The WNBL came under BA direction three years ago and is part of their high performance pathway with proper funding guaranteed. There is also a close relationship with its Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) program so that women coming out of the AIS are usually able to fit into a WNBL team without looking to play elsewhere.

Expansion teams, the Bendigo Braves and Christchurch Sirens were added this past season and Logan City (from the south of Brisbane) comes in next season while the WNBL plans further expansion with another Melbourne club wanting to join. However, some teams struggle financially to stay in the competition and BA can ill afford to let the league decline, at a time when top players are being tempted by European basketball leagues, where the money is better. Maybe it will copy the netball format and look for a new media partner while maintaining its existing Defense Forces Australia sponsorship?

There are also opportunities to expand the WNBL into Asia to create a potential Oceania-Asia league in which eight to 12 club teams play each other over a two to three month period. This could bring in China, Korea, Japan and New Zealand in a zone competition similar to international basketball zone competitions in other parts of the world.

The national women's football team, the Matildas, have been hugely successful on the international front, considering our women footballers do not have a national league. However, they should not have to wait too many more years as the Rudd Government has promised a televised women's league, as part of their pre-election sports platform. So here is

a business-sport opportunity that Frank Lowy will no doubt pursue on behalf of Football Federation Australia (FFA) following its creation of a National Youth League. It will be interesting to see which way the FFA moves with this and what media partner joins in? Here, I imagine that a women's national football league would be an ideal property for SBS.

Hockey, softball, cricket and water polo have national leagues or similar competitions. Our national teams in these sports, along with netball and basketball, have been World Champions or Olympic Gold medalists (or both), so the quality of women's team sports product is high. There can be no criticism that the standard of team performance is not worth watching, yet over the years the promotion and marketing of women's sport has had few successes and the media coverage has been dismal.

The Australian Women's Open and the Australian Ladies Masters Golf events were very successful earlier this year, with a high standard of play and good television coverage. Cricket had a first when the Southern Stars (our Australian women's team) played a Twenty/20 curtain raiser before the men's Australia versus India match at the MCG. The Southern Stars defeated the English women's team in a high standard game described by some observers as being much better and more interesting than the men's! Another first was the production of a highlights package from this game, produced for commercial television.

While this match was watched by 27,000 fans, who no doubt came mainly to see the following men's match, it was disappointing that the following week, also at the MCG, less than a hundred spectators turned up to watch a one day match between the same two women's teams. However, that is about the same attendance for some Pura Cup (interstate men's cricket) games! In the Pura Cup while the stands are empty, ABC radio still covers the games while highlight packages are shown on TV.

The hard question is how do we better engage media interests to cover women's sport in this country? The 1996 study *An Illusory Image* found that coverage of women's sport in Australia was just 2% of total sport broadcasting on television, yet more women than men watch television. In radio, coverage amounts to 1.4%, magazines 6.8% and in newspapers reportage was higher at 10.7%. One of the recent Senate Report recommendations is to replicate this study to find out where things stand today although anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been little change.



Sarah Walsh and Dianne Alagich celebrate a Matildas goal.



The Matilda's Cheryl Salisbury playing against Ghana and (right), Australian netball captain and rising media star Liz Ellis.

Indeed, the Australian Womensport and Recreation Association's (AWRA) national survey in 2007 revealed that 75% of respondents believed that media coverage of women's sport is poor or terrible. Further, 57% of respondents had specific strategies to gain greater media coverage of females in their sport and went on to list these.

If the Rudd Government chose to implement just one of the recommendations from the 2006 Senate Report About Time! Women in sport and Recreation in Australia, the opportunities for developing the business of women's sport would increase. Another Senate Report recommendation states "that the Australian Government provide financial support, to be administered by the Australian Sports Commission, for initiatives that provide specific opportunities

for greater ongoing coverage of women's sport. The Senate Committee believes this program should administer funding of up to \$3 million per annum, and be reviewed after approximately three years."

This recommendation is to encourage partnerships between sports organisations, sponsors and media interests which could enable women's events and competitions to stand alone and hopefully receive coverage from the mainstream media.

AWRA has been lobbying the Federal Government to implement the recommendations from the Senate Report and will continue to do so. The Association circulated a 2007 Federal Election Policy, responding to the government's call for pre-budget community submissions and in January I met with new Minister for Youth and Sport, Kate Ellis.

A commitment by the Australian Government, plus some new initiatives are needed, to make further breakthroughs so that increased media and sponsor support translates into financial viability for female athletes and women's sport. This year has seen some major success stories so hopefully Australia can catch up to the USA, the UK, and many other countries, and women's sport will be seen as a growth business. **Janice Crosswhite OAM is President of the Australian Womensport and Recreation Association.**



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