

The great Australian sporting club under threat

Peter Gregory

Despite our sporting culture, international success, temperate climate and abundance of space, community sport infrastructure in Australia is sub-standard and expensive because of ill-conceived government intervention. To get the full benefits of a healthy, high-quality and cheap community sports system, governments at all levels must hand over much or all of the unconditional authority they currently wield to the private sector.

Though it is pleasant to simply bask in the reflected glory of the Australian cricket team as they terrorise yet another hapless opponent, we must ask ourselves why our international sporting success is not translating into a healthier population and a higher standard of amateur sporting infrastructure. As numerous suburban football and soccer clubs approached this winter season wondering whether their grounds would be playable, many politicians were content to enjoy the electoral boon of shaking hands with (or have their heads kissed by) the latest set of champions.

Sporting clubs of many descriptions occupy a prominent place in Australian life. In 2003, 31.4 per cent of Australians aged eighteen and over participated in organised sport. The fact that these organisations provide a vehicle for interaction, physical well-being, a sense of community (particularly in rural areas) and, of course, the odd world champion vindicates this state of affairs.

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The Insurance Debacle

If governments are to have any role in sport, at the very least they could help remove the impediments which prevent people from reaping the benefits of becoming active. Nevertheless, this is unfortunately not the case, as shires and councils regularly require local sporting organisations to adhere to all manner of cumbersome health and safety rules and regulations. Seemingly fearful of litigious consequences, local governments forget that local clubs are generally not-for-profit bodies which are administered by volunteers. As a result, councils' strictures make sporting clubs unnecessarily complicated and costly to run.

This is best exemplified by insurance laws. A requirement of all participants in local sport, public liability insurance is always amongst the highest costs of local sporting clubs. By forcing clubs to take up these insurance policies through law, governments are making the decision to shackle them to the insurance market. In recent years, that market has seen a dramatic rise in prices—a development that has had a devastating effect on many clubs.

The sports hardest hit by the insurance crisis were invariably adventure sports such as skydiving and skiing. For example, the Greenhill Adventure Park in South Australia found that its insurance costs increased by 520 per cent between 2000 and 2002, from \$13,950 a year to \$72,600. Many sporting organisations have been forced to increase their fees as a way to cover the cost of rising premiums. For instance, South Australian Skydiving had to raise its prices from \$240 to \$315 a jump in the early part of the century just to cover the increase in insurance. As a study published in *The Journal of the Geography, Environment, Oekumene Soci-*

ety found, the end result of this increase was a predictable drop in membership of Greenhill's Adventure Park, SA Skydiving, and SA Skiers Association. Moreover, these cost increases weren't experienced just by so-called 'adventure' sports, but also by more traditional sports such as football, cricket and soccer.

There are many plausible options with regards to insurance. Clubs can choose not to have insurance. They can choose to leave insurance matters to the discretion of individual participants. Or they can enter into any number of different policies or packages that would provide better tailored, cheaper insurance outcomes for their members than the current 'one-size-fits-all' system.

Regardless, local governments should not presume to be able manage and minimise the risks involved in participating in local sport better than the local clubs and associations themselves. Having already been shown to be incapable of fulfilling this function, governments should return control of insurance matters to club and association officials—in other words, to the people who are knowledgeable and passionate about local sport.

Docklands Vs Wastelands

Athletes who play in the nation's parks and reserves are being short-changed in favour of those who play at state of the art major stadiums. In Melbourne, as the first foundations of the new stand at the MCG were being laid, calls for recycled water tanks to be erected next to local ovals went unheeded. As a result, countless suburban competitions hover on the precipice of suspension because of the debilitating effects of the current drought. This is particularly debilitating for rural areas, where football and netball clubs often represent the 'hub' of the community.

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Community sports officials readily relate anecdotes of council ineptitude and mismanagement with regard to sporting facilities. When this pitiful standard of service delivery is juxtaposed against the ever-expanding public purse for elite sport, the outcome is even more galling for Australia's amateur athletes. In the past decade, state governments around Australia have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on major stadia including Telstra Dome, Suncorp Stadium, Subiaco Oval, and Telstra Stadium. This is not to mention the public money afforded to organisations such as the Australian Sports Commission and the Australian Institute of Sport. It is clear that Australian governments have become so transfixed by the nation's sporting elites that they are unable to manage community sport properly. Thus, to emancipate local sport from the warped priorities of governments at all levels, and its resultant malaise, management of facilities must be privatised. As with many government services, when subjected to market forces, a better and cheaper community sport infrastructure would undoubtedly ensue.

In addition to a track record of mismanagement, there is also a culture of nepotism prevalent among local councils when it comes to the allocation of sporting facilities. Sporting clubs or organisations who have members of council on their boards are often the beneficiaries of a higher standard of service than those that don't. The same can be said of clubs that

bear the name of the municipality within which they exist. Testament to this culture was the insistence of a president of a small suburban cricket club in Melbourne's east that neither he nor his club be named in this article lest his criticism result in adverse outcomes for the club.

Another manifestation of this nepotism, identified by numerous community sports officials, is the tendency for councils to commit disproportionate resources to minor sports such as lacrosse and baseball. Thus, such councils can claim to be cognizant of 'diversity' and 'minority interests'—even though this is at the expense of the majority of amateur athletes.

Perhaps the most alarming of local government's dealings with community sport in recent years, however, has been the drastic increase in the cost of ground and facility rental. In 2005, the Stonnington Council raised the ground rental for Prahran Cricket Club from \$22,000 to \$55,000 in a single 150 per cent increase. At the time, it appeared that the club would be forced to move from its Toorak Park home, a ground that it had inhabited for 115 years. The only alternative would have been to raise members' subscriptions from \$330 to \$800—an increase that would have priced many players out of the game. Fortunately, this rise in price was subsequently reduced. However, when it is viewed in the wider context of the pitiful delivery of ground maintenance services, this dramatic proposal is difficult

to fathom. The same price spiral has been repeated throughout Australia. The public sector's inability to prevent nepotism together with exorbitant price instability has meant that the very existence of many small, community-based sporting organisations has been threatened. For many clubs facing ever-greater costs and restrictions, it is now a question of survival, regardless of how well the club's membership is holding up. In the face of widespread community sport decrepitude, it is obvious that community sporting facilities could be maintained better and cheaper by the private sector.

Geographical and climactic luxuries mean that Australia has enormous potential for a vibrant community sporting culture. The benefits of this are many and far-reaching. We risk forgoing those benefits if this potential continues to be frittered away by mismanagement and malpractice on the part of those in power. That potential would be better realised and extended by drawing upon the knowledge, experience and passion of those who are actually involved in community sport.

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