



**Senate Enquiry into Sport News & Digital Media
Softball Australia Submission, April 2009**

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1. Aim of this Submission

This submission aims to present Softball Australia's view on aspects of sports reporting and digital media. The submission does not attempt to respond to all the terms of reference, as many address issues that are outside the expertise and experience of Softball Australia.

As a significant contributor to grass roots and elite sport in Australia, and as a true family team sport for all ages and abilities, we believe Softball's experience is representative of many non-professional sports.

2. Australian Softball – A Snapshot

The Australian Softball Federation (ASF) was formed in 1947, by Softball Associations in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales. The Australian Softball Federation, today known as Softball Australia, aims to provide opportunities for people to participate at all levels and in all forms of Softball, by developing, promoting and managing the game of Softball in Australia.

Softball Australia's purpose is to:

- be the dynamic & innovative leader of softball in Australia
- engage, support & inform all softball stakeholders
- raise the profile & standing of & participation in softball
- support & deliver quality competitive & recreational softball opportunities locally, nationally & internationally

Softball is played in every state and territory in Australia by women, men, boys and girls of all ages from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. *Attachment 1* provides a profile of Softball participants in Australia.

Softball provides both social/recreational and competitive opportunities to individuals at school, club, state, national and international levels through the two main forms of the game – fastpitch and slowpitch. The former is primarily played competitively, while the latter is primarily promoted as a recreational game in Australia.

Annual Championships are held at local, state and national levels for Open Women and Men, Under 19 Women and Men, Under 16 Girls and Boys, and Masters.

In schools, Softball is a popular sport and features as part of the National Primary School Exchange and a National Secondary Schoolgirls Championship. A National University Softball Team is also selected to compete in International University Games.

At an international level, Softball is played in over 120 countries around the world. Australia has a strong claim to be the **world's number one softball nation** as we are the only country to have four national teams ranked in the top three in the world. Australia's Open Women's team (Aussie Spirit), the Open Men's team (Aussie Steelers) and the Under 19 Women's team (Aussie Pride) are ranked third in the world, while the Under 19 Men's team (Aussie Colts) is ranked number one.

These high world rankings are a reflection of the quality of Softball at the local and elite levels, our talent identification program, the elite development pathway, the high standard of coaching and the rigorous education and accreditation of coaches and officials.

A significant strength of Softball in Australia is the sport's ability to attract and harness the expertise and commitment of a large number of volunteers who willingly give their time to support the delivery and development of the sport.

3. Commercial Interests

The commercial interests and imperatives and the financial realities of non-professional sports like Softball are very different to those of the large professional sports.

As a membership organization Softball Australia exists to serve the interests of our members. This means that while many of our activities have a high value, they may be delivered to members at no cost or on a cost-recovery basis as a benefit of membership. Very few activities are priced to make a profit. While we recognise the need to move towards a more financially sustainable model, any proposed changes must carefully consider the potential negative impact on our members and membership numbers.

Most of our revenue is derived from and/or directed to specific activities.

- Approximately 75% of our revenue comprises government grants, primarily directed to the delivery of our elite women's and, to a lesser extent, our elite men's programs.
- About 10% of our revenue comes from player levies (for tours) and team participation fees (for events). These levies and fees only cover a small proportion of the total cost of tours and events.
- Membership fees currently comprise about 8% of revenue.
- Only about 5% of our revenue is derived from commercial activities, such as sponsorship, ticket sales and merchandise.

Opportunities to increase revenue from levies, player and membership fees, merchandise and ticket sales to pay, for example, for mainstream media coverage or better marketing communication resources are very limited. Any substantive increase might make membership or participation unaffordable.

Given our purpose and our current financial model, there is little scope for Softball Australia to pay commercial rates for mainstream media coverage. Further, because the wealthier sports are able to pay for that media coverage the market is distorted, making it even more difficult for smaller sports to get coverage.

4. Softball in the Mainstream Media

Like many non-professional, smaller or niche sports, Softball struggles to get mainstream print and electronic media coverage. There are a number of reasons for this including:

- The entrenched position and strength of the major professional sports, which dominate media coverage and allow few media opportunities for non-professional, smaller or niche sports.
- The perception that Softball is a female-only sport and therefore likely to be of little interest to a broad audience. This perception is not reality.
 - There are an increasing number of men playing Softball at all levels (refer to *Attachment 1*), including at the highest international level, where the Open Men's team (Aussie Steelers) is ranked third and the Under 19 Men's team (Aussie Colts) is ranked number one.
 - The audience response to the telecast of Australia-Japan Softball game at the Beijing Olympics, which highlights the broad appeal of Softball at the elite level as a televised sport. Softball Australia believes that many of our national and international events are suitable for mainstream media coverage. Refer to *Attachment 2*.
- A lack of financial resources to:
 - Employ or contract appropriately skilled marketing communications personnel
 - Produce content and place/buy space in the mainstream media

The current sport reporting model, with its narrow focus on a minority of sports, means that the larger, wealthier sports get most of the media coverage, while the majority of sports struggle to get any exposure at all. The majority of sports therefore have a limited opportunity to reach a wider audience and a limited potential for growth and to reach a size that might attract mainstream media interest – a classic Catch 22.

5. The Internet and eCommunications: an Opportunity

While the mainstream media is currently out of reach for Softball (with the possible exception of reporting on major international events) and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future, the Internet and eCommunications offer Softball a real opportunity to reach our various target audiences, which are widely dispersed across Australia and around the world.

A website and accompanying eCommunications capabilities that use the latest technology will allow us to proactively communicate with our members, potential members and the Australian public, as well as deliver a range of products and services.

Softball Australia currently has a web presence. See www.softball.org.au. However, our current website is unsophisticated and runs on out-dated technology, which limits our ability to introduce

new features and functionality, such as video-streaming and pod-casting, and to cost-effectively manage our content.

Softball Australia's size and limited financial resources mean that it is very difficult for us to make a significant investment in developing and maintaining a compelling web presence. We currently cannot afford to employ the appropriately qualified and experienced IT and eMarketing personnel, or outsource web development and management to a digital agency.

6. Inequity of Reporting in Sports Media

In Softball Australia's submission to the *Independent Sport Panel* in October 2008, we addressed the issue of the inequity of sport reporting in the media. Following is an update on our original submission.

Too often stereotypes such as the sexy female, the winning male and the rich professional athlete are reflected in the media. This distorts the public's perception of sport because it focuses on a narrow elite. It also potentially has a negative impact on the public's interest in being 'actively' engaged in sport for health and lifestyle reasons, and undermines Australians' traditional views and ideals of the role sport plays in our community. These stereotypes are not ones that most Australians' feel they can achieve through participating in sport at community level. This, combined with the issue of widely publicised poor behaviour by some sport stars, is detrimental to the public's view of the constructive community building role sport plays in this country.

Despite many years of media monitoring that shows sport reporting is heavily skewed to professional male sports, government has not acted to address this inequitable practice. In no other section of our society are such practices allowed to undermine equality and social cohesion and inclusion.

7. Recommendations

1. That the Government provides funding and appropriate non-financial support to assist non-professional, smaller and/or niche sports such as Softball:
 - a. Develop a sophisticated Internet and eCommunications presence, which exploits the latest digital technology and which will enable the development of Softball *communities of interest* and the delivery of quality information and resources to those communities.
 - b. Employ or contract appropriately skilled and experienced IT, eMarketing and media relations personnel.
 - c. Package Softball to make it media-ready.
 - d. With media training for key personnel.

- e. Develop appropriate tools and resources, such as media kits, that can be used both nationally, and at State and club level.
- 2. That the Government provides a sports news and digital media framework, including appropriate legislative and regulatory measures, that:
 - a. Provides support for those sports that don't have the resources or potential audience to exploit the mainstream broadcast media.
 - b. Ensures the current gender imbalance is addressed when reporting on sport and sports issues.
 - c. Rewards the reporting of sport and physical activity that reflects the diversity of Australian life and levels of participation.

Attachment 1: Profile of Softball Participants in Australia

The following tables provide a snapshot of Softball Australia's player and non-player membership statistics. These numbers are boosted by about 80,000 non-members who participate in Softball activities in different ways and at different levels across Australia.

Table 1. 2007-08 membership statistics (players)

PLAYERS											
State Association	T-Ball		Junior		Senior		SlowPitch/Masters		Total		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M/F
ACT	314	630	267	420	320	456	75	75	976	1,581	2,557
New South Wales	730	1,044	853	1,757	892	2,536	667	2,582	3,142	7,919	11,061
Northern Territory	43	26	9	47	9	191	65	45	126	309	435
Queensland	430	597	798	1,297	1,005	2,244	9	22	2,242	4,160	6,402
South Australia	78	172	128	662	166	1,251	29	30	401	2,115	2,516
Tasmania	36	77	8	45	35	314	0	0	79	436	515
Victoria	230	333	239	467	371	1,171	113	188	953	2,159	3,112
Western Australia	283	198	248	155	1,276	1,615	45	44	1,852	2,012	3,864
TOTAL PLAYERS	2,144	3,077	2,550	4,850	4,074	9,778	1,003	2,986	9,771	20,691	30,462

Table 2. 2007-08 membership statistics (non-players)

OFFICIALS/ADMINISTRATORS										
State Association	Coaches		Umpires		Other		Total			
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M/F	
ACT	107	121	7	14	56	142	170	277	447	
New South Wales	228	100	153	141	93	232	474	473	947	
Northern Territory	7	5	4	2	1	14	12	21	33	
Queensland	108	61	53	15	52	159	213	235	448	
South Australia	59	49	21	7	22	111	102	167	269	
Tasmania	10	16	8	3	0	14	18	33	51	
Victoria	67	44	33	21	29	77	129	142	271	
Western Australia	6	0	15	2	3	2	24	4	28	
TOTAL OFFICIALS/ADMINISTRATORS	592	396	294	205	256	751	1,142	1,352	2,494	

In 2007 Softball Australia commissioned independent research into the profile of **adult** members. The following table provides a summary of the profile of an adult Australian Softball participant in Australia.

Table 3. Profile of the adult Australian Softball participant

Age	Average age 34yrs
Gender	Much more likely to be female...79% female, 21% male
Personal income	Average income of \$47K
Marital status	More likely to be in a relationship (39% married, 21% partnership/ de facto)
Work status	More likely to be working full-time (63%)
Household structure	More likely to be middle or mature family households. Middle family mainly school age children (21%). Mature family mainly teenage children (23%)
Household size	On average more than 3 people per household
Number of children	On average 1 child per household
Home ownership	Most likely to be buying their own home and have a mortgage (38%). Less likely than non players to own (23%) and more likely to be renting (22%)
Household income	Average household income of \$98K reported
Time involved in Softball	On average approximately 15yrs
Is Softball their main sport?	For 9 in 10 (90%) Softball is their main sport
When are they involved?	Split between playing both summer and winter (46%) and summer only (41%)
How often do they play	On average play twice per week
Competitive involvement	More likely to play in a state affiliated competition (85%)
Involvement in T-ball	Just under half (46%) played T-ball and on average started playing at around 9 years.
Age started playing Softball	On average started playing at 14yrs (If played T-ball started at approximately 11yrs and at 17 yrs if did not play T-ball)
Continuity of play	Just over half (54%) have taken a break from playing Softball
Age taken break	On average a break is taken at 24yrs
Time out of sport	Average time out of sport is approximately 5½ years