

Adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force veterans

Adaptive sports are sports for people with disabilities, but how far do DVA and indeed other government departments recognize both physical and mental disability? How readily do they assist veterans with connecting with such sports OR with such physical/ sport style training programs in gyms etc?

The first problem is often one of DVA being too slow by far to accept claims and yet the longer that it takes for an injured veteran to initiate treatment the harder it becomes for them to achieve early remedial success. Until DVA can fast track applications for assistance or at least consider allowing some remedial athletics, sports or gymnasium training then many veterans will continue to suffer unduly.

The second issue is often one of how little medical practitioners themselves understand and appreciate the benefits of such programs for veterans. Yet unless medical doctors refer their patients to such programs they will not be approved by private health care businesses (if such companies themselves care at all) or they will be ignored by DVA who will claim that they do not fit "agreed" criteria, whatever the heck they are.

The third issue here can be the veterans themselves and the need for them to acknowledge their hurt, to understand their physical and mental issues, and to then appreciate how adaptive sports programs can be of at least some assistance. NO they are not a 'cure all' but they can assist.

As a weightlifting coach I have worked with persons with mental and physical disabilities and while the former can be a particular challenge, the latter can often be shown that there is much that they can still achieve with no legs or with one arm or such.

Yes it is difficult for them but I have seen wheel chair bound men accomplish feats of strength in power lifting that would qualify for world championships. I have seen youth with mental issues lift weights that they never dreamed were possible and to then jump up and down in boundless happiness because they achieved a 'personal best'.

As to assisting veterans transitioning and with possible suicidal tendencies, that is a hard discussion but one where I sincerely believe that – in my case – weight training AND some competitions will provide a challenge that they had never considered and yet where they could well succeed. Certainly what we do in my sport is to promote the 'personal best' – the concept that one's key competitive target is in the mirror. The person whom they see every time that they wash, brush their teeth, shave, do their hair...

RSL Victoria has initiated a fantastic program called RSL Active and, there are different versions in different states. For example, and I admit some envy, South Australia and New South Wales have some yachting for such veterans with disabilities. But in Victoria we have offered horse riding – and the attachment to such lovely animals is another plus in the rehabilitation of disabled veterans, jogging, yoga and many many other activities.

Such programs require effort and funding for equipment or to book venues/ programs... Indeed, without funding such programs may be impossible – and I understand the budgetary issues involved and the political head aches that seeking monetary grants can create.

Clearly, there is a place for such adaptive sports and training programs in helping veterans with mental and or physical disabilities to overcome some degree of their suffering. But to succeed the ideal would be to have a central body to coordinate such activities.

If this cannot be accommodated in some manner through DVA by enabling a new and specialized unit, then I would offer (admittedly with my bias confessed) the RSL as THE Ex Service Organisation best known and most able across the entire nation to offer consistency, transparency and appropriate recording, auditing...

But the above ignores one item within the Terms of Reference, namely the Australian Sports Medal.

When this award was originally established, it would have been far easier to nominate many persons for its conferral but the version re established by the Morrison government ignores all veterans and their 'support staff' who have been involved prior to the limitations below:-

- [Invictus Games](#) (from 2018)
- [International Sports Federation for Persons with Intellectual Disability](#) (INAS) Global Games (from 2019)
- [Special Olympics](#) World Summer Games (from 2019)
- [Special Olympics](#) World Winter Games (from 2021)
- [Summer Olympic Games](#) (from 2020)
- [Winter Olympic Games](#) (from 2022)
- [Summer Paralympic Games](#) (from 2020)
- [Winter Paralympic Games](#) (from 2022)
- [Commonwealth Games](#) (from 2022)

The criteria also ignore the volunteers who coach, train, promote, administer... across the broad variety of sports – adaptive and otherwise – across Australia. Whether it be adaptive or 'regular' sports, without such persons countless programs and events would never transpire to the particular detriment of all participants.

The extreme limitations set on the revived Australian Sports Medal constitute an effective insult to those who would have qualified under the original terms but who now would find that their sometimes decades of service are irrelevant for such recognition.

I wonder what former Chair of the Australian Commonwealth games Commission and well known Weightlifting Guru Mr Sam Coffa AO would say about so many of his sports volunteers being ignored because their service has been in the decades prior to the years listed in the above.

Actually, knowing Sam for some decades myself I need not guess at all.

It is my opinion, based upon my years of training and having been trained, my coaching experience with both youth and adults, males and females, and my involvement with both disabled veterans and disabled 'civilians' that adaptive sports programs offer a modicum of rehabilitation as well as, in a way, mental and emotional salvation for those in need.

It is further my personal opinion that the Australian Sports Medal should be re initialized/ re constructed so that eligibility is not limited to future events and thus cannot be awarded for years to come but, rather, an acknowledgement of all that an appropriate individual – generally a volunteer – has already committed. That is based on that great Australian ideal of *fairness*.

By Mr Ange Kenos

Member, RSL Victoria State Executive

Olympic Certified Weightlifting Coach

Level 2 International Weightlifting Referee