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**Submission No. 73**

(Youth Violence)

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Standing Committee on Family, Community Housing & Youth  
House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
**CANBERRA ACT 2601**

## **Submission to Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians**

### **Re; Skool Project**

**Background to my involvement in this area:** I am a former professional cricketer, now working with elite athletes around the world, focusing on issues around life balance, behaviour management, crisis management, media skills etc.

I currently run a unique program called "After The Full-Time Siren – Lifeskills for elite athletes" which targets young athletes from most of the major sporting teams in South-East Queensland. It is aimed at trying to educate them about the responsibilities they have as role-models to the community across issues as diverse as alcohol, drugs, violence, respect for women, drink-driving and a host of other 'life skills' that the sports industry deems necessary for their athletes who have to cope with a life lived in the media spotlight. This program has been supported by the Queensland Government. A short documentary film can be viewed at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/sport/life-skills-for-athletes>

I also run workshops for the Australian Rugby Union and some of the Super 14 franchises, working on similar 'behaviour and lifestyle' issues. Other clients include high schools, primary schools, university residential colleges and Academies of Sport, all of it focussed on lifeskills that centre on the high-risk factors that confront youth and those who look to elite athletes as role-models in the community.

I am a regular panellist on a weekly radio program on 612ABC called "The Philosophy of Sport" and regularly discuss these sort of topical issues in a talkback format. I am also a regular contributor to ABC Drum website and other media outlets, commenting on elite athlete problems and controversies. I have a blog column for Wisden Cricinfo, the world's biggest cricket website, addressing issues connected to athlete welfare.

## What role does Elite Sport play with regards to Youth Violence issues?

- 'Elite sport' needs to accept status as a powerful role-model
- Too often, that responsibility is abrogated when it involves negative publicity/behaviour
- Need to accept that their athletes have significant impact on youth
- Need to accept responsibility when it comes to promotion and glorifying on-field violence, especially when referring to it in emotive language about 'manhood, competitiveness, mateship, patriotism' etc
- Significant problem with media promoting "bring back the biff" mentality
- All sporting codes need to accept the responsibilities they have to the community across all aspects of athlete role-modelling, including alcohol, drugs and respect for women which contribute indirectly to a culture of youth violence.
- The ARU in particular, are leaders in embracing this responsibility and attempting to address this from a long-term perspective with their youth development programs

In this submission, I wish to draw attention to **Skool Project**: a unique program that was piloted at Griffith University in 2008. It has gained popularity with students, parents and teachers and has led to the prospect of it being run on a more widespread basis around Australia. Interest has also come from countries like Japan and South Africa who are facing similar youth-related issues and recognise the role that young leaders (especially in sport) can play in shaping the values of their generation.

Please consult the attached document for more information on Skool Project and the rationale behind the overall concept.

## Why is Skool Project unique?

- Focuses on using youth leaders to drive generational change amongst their peers
- Emphasis on overall life balance as a way to address youth issues across high-risk areas
- Provides choices instead of an abstinence message
- Uses 'self-interest' as a motive to drive positive behaviours
- Understands that current youth generation are heavily influenced by peer leaders and heavily influenced by actions, rather than rhetoric
- Attempts to create an atmosphere of tolerance and diversity at an early age by including sport and performing arts in the same forum (unique world-first concept)
- Attempts to address issues across areas of considerable government and community investment/cost (police, health, drugs, alcohol, violence, education, road toll, bullying, sexual health etc)
- In essence, it aims to use a select group of young leaders to actually live decent, positive lifestyles across a 'whole of life' spectrum and hopefully act as powerful peer influencers through actions, not words
- Seeks to address issues like youth violence, binge-drinking, sexual assault etc by looking deeper into the reasons **why** youth may be disenfranchised and how we can build a healthy community that finds valid reasons to avoid problems, rather than merely repairing damage

## What role can 'education' play to help address youth violence and other associated issues?

- Educators need to understand that youth violence issues are mainstream society issues and cannot be viewed in isolation
- Alcohol/drug abuse can be significant contributing factors but should not be seen as the sole factors that need to be addressed by policy makers
- Young people indicate an appreciation of educational messages that do not speak down to them or moralise without providing pragmatic solutions. They need to be given a reason to believe in lifestyle choices rather than sterile messages which do not resonate in their world
- Education needs to be backed up with policies and laws that reflect society's stance on violence. This young generation is quick to spot hypocrisy and loopholes in the enforcement or examples set by their so-called leaders and role-models
- Lowest Common Denominator principle applies; hence, the community needs to set benchmark at a high enough level to motivate change or youth will show propensity to exploit what their 'heroes' get away with
- Exploit youth's inherently optimistic nature by running programs that encourage and motivate them to be part of a better world. My experience suggests that if given enough reason for optimism and strong, consistent community values that are universally enforced, youth show great ownership in creating their own high standards
- Programs like Skool Project, which focus on creating long-term solutions, rather than fixing problems, may end up being a more effective and cost-efficient use of community resources
- If governments could channel a small percentage of the funds currently being used to mop up the effects of youth behaviour into creating a new paradigm, it might be a more effective way to create a society that can heal itself
- The impacts of a dysfunctional society, especially in relation to youth violence, affects the entire community, all levels of government and the corporate sector
- The entire Australian community is a stakeholder in finding a long-term solution across attitudes and behaviours, not just in remedial , retrospective action

## Summary

My experiences in working with elite sport largely mirror the broader community, hence my commitment to pragmatic educational programs that speak to young people on their level, in their jargon.

The issue that the sports industry (teams, athletes, sponsors, government, media and fans) faces in trying to address issues like youth violence is the major inconsistency in the way they deal with high-profile sportspeople. They trade on the powerful influence that sport has on the community when it comes to seeking sponsorship, advertising and government funding. However, in instances where sport is in the public spotlight for all the wrong reasons, the industry is quick to wash it's hands of any responsibility towards being seen as ambassadors or role-models or heroes worthy of youth admiration.

When it comes to the examples that sport sets and the behaviours they tolerate (or even encourage), there needs to be a consistency that mirrors mainstream society. With issues like violence in particular, it is difficult to reconcile any positive messages about these behaviours when there are all-too-many examples of sporting role-models behaving in ways that would not be tolerated in normal life. For example, the "One Punch Can Kill" campaign cannot be expected to sink in unless it is also accepted as normal sporting culture, on and off the field.

Ultimately, it comes down to sport's willingness to accept (or deny) their powerful ambassadorial role in the broader community. My work is dedicated towards creating a sustainable and realistic environment so that elite sport has a platform to continue to play a powerful role in Australian society as a medium that represents a decent value set and example for young people.

Youth violence cannot be viewed in isolation. We need to be looking at the holistic reasons why violence may be the last link in a long chain of lifestyle events. A healthy community with strong self-image and positive leadership may go some way to preventing the costs associated with violence. In Australia, sport still has a powerful role to play. If it can breed the right type of leadership....

Thank you for considering my submission.

Yours faithfully

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