

# COALITION OF MAJOR PROFESSIONAL SPORTS



## SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ALCOHOL TOLL REDUCTION BILL, 2007

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### BACKGROUND

The aim of the Coalition of Major Professional Sports (COMPS) is to provide Australian professional sporting organisations with an aligned voice and position to collaboratively respond to nationally significant issues impacting the effective delivery of sport.

The sporting organisations represented in the COMPS submission to the Senate inquiry into the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007 comprises:

- National Rugby League
- Australian Football League
- Cricket Australia
- Tennis Australia
- PGA Tour of Australasia
- Australian Rugby Union
- Football Federation Australia

For the purposes of this submission, V8 Supercars Australia and the Victoria Racing Club have partnered with COMPS in formulating a broader industry response from the professional sports sector.

These organisations oversee the provision of organised and recreational sporting competitions to more than 3.75 million active participants nationally. The activities of COMPS and amateur sporting bodies are further supported through a community volunteer network of 1.5 million Australians contributing a total of 147.7 million hours per annum - representing 23% of total volunteer involvement throughout Australia.

According to the Sweeney Sports Report (2006/07), the sports represented by COMPS dominate Australians' interest across the key sporting categories of attendance (8 of the top 10), television viewing (8 of the top 10), radio listening (9 of the top 10) and newspaper reading (8 of the top 10). The sports represented by COMPS form an integral part of Australian culture and contribute significantly to a broad range of aspects of Australian society, both financially and non-financially.

The common purposes and revenue models supporting the delivery of sport provide the impetus for COMPS to make a joint submission to the Senate inquiry aimed at the creation of a culture of responsible drinking in Australia. In making this submission, COMPS question whether the proposed mechanisms of the Bill provide the most effective way forward to address binge drinking among young people.

However, COMPS is highly supportive of the proposed approach of the Australian Government's recently announced National Strategy on Binge Drinking and the willingness for government to engage sport as a partner in tackling this issue. The strategy and the proposed role of sport are discussed later in this submission.

## **INTRODUCTION**

COMPS acknowledge the escalation of public concern and media interest relating to the impact of the broader societal issues associated with excessive alcohol consumption. As prominent and active participants in Australian corporate social responsibility, these whole of community concerns are shared by COMPS.

Binge drinking is a legitimate and topical subject. However, the issue itself is not new. What appears to have evolved more recently is the sentiment of the general public that the prevailing culture of excessive drinking within the broader community needs to change.

Sport has at times been unfairly targeted and linked to a culture of irresponsible drinking. The representation of sport's constituents and customers throughout Australian communities is substantial and, for this reason, it is important that sport play a role in promoting responsible behaviour within its own stakeholders and where possible to the community as a whole. While it is a willing partner, sport is only part of the solution in promoting responsible alcohol consumption messages and building a responsible drinking culture in our society.

Investment in evidence-based research is required to better assist Australian society and sport to identify what are the key drivers for the causation of binge drinking in Australia. Much of the media attention on the subject of excessive drinking by younger people appears to be focused on the symptomatic outcomes. Once causation is evidenced, the government, industry and community partners should be engaged to determine and jointly respond with a broad and sustainable strategy, which will, over a period of time deliver an enduring change to society's attitudes and behaviour and provide strong movement towards the desired culture of responsible drinking.

The Prime Minister recently supported the important role sport has to play in addressing the challenges of binge drinking stating that *"...sport is not the cause of binge drinking but we all believe that sport can be a part of the solution for this problem which affects families right across Australia."* This is a role and challenge that COMPS fully support and embrace.

## **GENERAL COMMENTS**

COMPS universally support the objective of the Bill to create a culture of responsible drinking within Australian society and to curb the toll on individuals, families and communities resulting from excess alcohol consumption. However, while COMPS is supportive of this overarching premise, it is unclear whether the proposed mechanisms of the Bill will be effective.

## **COMMENTS ON THE TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **1. Require health information labels on all alcohol products.**

The benefits or otherwise of health information labelling on all alcohol products is most appropriately addressed by the relevant medical authorities and the National Health and Medical Research Council. If there is evidence to support that the labelling of alcohol products has a demonstrable impact in raising awareness of the risks associated with binge drinking then COMPS would be generally supportive of this mechanism.

**2. Restrict TV and radio alcohol advertising to after 9pm and before 5am, to stop alcohol being marketed to young people.**

There are two issues to be considered in relation to this proposed mechanism.

First, restricting TV and radio alcohol advertising will not restrict the marketing of alcohol to young people, as they receive information from a variety of sources (e.g. online, experiential, social networking) some of which are anecdotally more persuasive and credible than 'traditional' media such as radio and television in any case.

Second, this measure would have a significant impact on some of the sports represented by COMPS.

Some sporting organisations are more reliant on sponsorship income from alcohol producers than others with estimates of between 5-23% of direct sponsorship investment being derived from these sources.

The hours of the proposed restriction on alcohol advertising have a strong overlap with the television and radio broadcasting coverage of all of the major professional sports – as much as 100% overlap of airtime in some instances. The professional sports business model in Australia is heavily underpinned by investment in the media rights of sports by free-to-air and pay television broadcasters. The business model of free-to-air broadcasters is almost exclusively reliant on advertising and restrictions such as those proposed in this Bill have the potential to significantly reduce advertising income derived from alcohol producers. This has the potential to lead to a reduction in the rights fees payable by broadcasters to some sporting organisations, thus there is a possibility of compromising the primary commercial driver in modern professional sporting business models.

Unintentional Consequences of the Bill

Unfortunately, any reduction to consolidated revenues directly impacts the ability of sporting organisations to directly invest in a range of programs – particularly in the areas of sport participation and broader community initiatives.

The contribution of sporting programs and competitions to Australian communities is significant and it is evidenced that sport plays an important part in reducing health risks, improving academic success, reducing crime, providing opportunities for Indigenous Australians and access to programs for people with disabilities. Sport is also a powerful 'social leveller' and facilitates opportunities for people who are new to Australia to engage in community activities.

The potential impact of restricted television and radio advertising on the bottom line of those sports and broadcasters who are heavily reliant on alcohol producer's sponsorship and advertising investment may ultimately contribute to an increase in the direct financial or societal cost being passed on to consumers and local communities.

**3. Require all alcohol ads to be pre-approved by a government body comprising an expert from the medical profession, alcohol and drug support sector, accident trauma support sector and the alcohol industry.**

In addition to the resource implications for government, this proposal would appear to duplicate existing regulatory mechanisms.

The existing mechanisms monitor the appropriateness of taste, decency and responsibility in alcohol advertising provided through the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) under the framework of the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Ethics.

In addition, there is a quasi-regulatory system for alcohol advertising with guidelines developed in negotiation with government, which falls under the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) Scheme. The ABAC Scheme is administered by a management committee consisting of representatives of the alcohol producer industry, advertising and government. Part of the ABAC Scheme also offers a user-pays service to pre-vet and assess proposed alcohol advertising campaigns against ABAC in their early stages of development.

#### **4. Ban alcohol ads which are aimed at children or which link drinking to personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success.**

COMPS fully supports the ban of any alcohol advertisements aimed at children.

### **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

#### The Impact of Extended Trading Hours

The Bill does not address the impact of extended trading hours of licensed premises on drinking patterns and binge drinking culture. Numerous time-series analysis employing linear regression has been used in academic studies throughout Australia since the early 1990s which have determined that later trading hours for licensed premises leads to increased levels of alcohol consumption, violence and anti-social behaviour.

### **THE ROLE OF SPORT**

#### Existing Initiatives

The respective organisations of COMPS have extensive policies, guidelines and mandatory education programs in place for elite and emerging athletes that are aimed at promoting responsible drinking and behaviour. The mechanisms for professional athletes include Codes of Conduct, Member Protection Policies, holistic lifestyle induction programs and regular educational refresher courses for senior athletes. Education is also provided to athlete managers as part of the formal accreditation process and players' associations conduct regular surveys to assess attitudes and behaviours associated with alcohol and drugs.

While the focus of initiatives by the major professional sporting organisations is primarily with their contracted professional athletes, there are also many examples of local grass roots initiatives such as the Good Sports program, which have gained traction in sporting clubs in recent years. It is however difficult with the available resources for national sporting bodies to have a 'hands-on' approach with community level clubs and participants, although there are numerous examples of leadership aimed at providing guidance on desirable standards and expectations from those involved as participants or volunteers within sporting clubs.

COMPS acknowledge that national leadership, resources and tangible assistance to encourage local sporting clubs to create a responsible drinking culture is part of its responsibility to members and that this requires an approach which is committed to continuous improvement. There is an opportunity for sport to be more effective at this level through partnerships and financial assistance with government and corporate entities.

Additional initiatives aimed at promoting the responsible consumption of alcohol in the community also extends to policies and guidelines at professional sporting venues and major events. These measures include the responsible serving of alcohol, designated 'dry' family areas, the offering of lower alcohol content beverages and public service announcements containing messages on alcohol consumption guidelines and violation consequences through the big screen (scoreboard) and PA system.

## Athlete Role Models

Sport can and does promote responsible drinking and positive behaviours through a variety of local and national athlete role model and ambassadorial programs delivered through schools, sporting clubs and the general community. The utilisation of athletes as positive role models via structured and consistently delivered programs is a highly effective vehicle to communicate key messages to younger people.

The increased media scrutiny and culture of celebrity over the past decade has led to significantly increased attention on the off-field behaviour of elite professional athletes and this is a contributing factor in sport being targeted in the binge drinking debate. COMPS understands that it needs to be seen to be addressing their own behavioural issues effectively and this means taking a firm but measured approach to address violations of their respective Codes of Conduct. Education and support services such as counselling are key mechanisms which are provided to athletes.

## Australian Government's National Strategy on Binge Drinking

COMPS endorse the Australian Government's March 2008 announcement to launch a national strategy to address binge drinking in partnership with Australia's major sporting bodies. Sport has agreed to play a major role with government in four key initiatives which represent the first steps of this partnership.

The recently announced initiatives focus on the use of 'Club Champions' to foster responsible drinking at the elite athlete level; an expansion of the Good Sports program of the Australian Drug Foundation to support local sporting clubs to build a culture of responsible drinking; the establishment of a nationally consistent code of conduct on alcohol for use by sport at all levels; and the provision of high profile sporting personalities to assist the Government's national advertising campaign to warn young people of the dangers of binge drinking.

The partnership between the Australian Government and the major sporting codes will further complement the current initiatives already being delivered by sporting organisations to promote the responsible consumption of alcohol. The Australian Government's decision to involve sport with its strategy is a positive step and recognition that sport is a substantial part of the solution to encourage healthy lifestyles and behaviours among younger people and indeed all Australians.

## **CONCLUSION**

COMPS have a vested interest in actively promoting and fostering positive attitudes towards the respective brands and images of their sports. Incidents which involve inappropriate behaviour within professional sports are highly damaging to the brand of sport and have the potential to weaken the commercial position of sport businesses and place sports in an invidious position with the community.

The substantial professional and community sport partner network throughout Australia provides a highly effective mechanism to deliver key messages aimed at responsible drinking. Sport provides positive experiences for young people including leadership and team work, development of skills, improved self-esteem and a reduced likelihood of making health compromising choices such as substance abuse, social isolation and eating disorders.

We reiterate our concerns on the ability to affect change in the culture of binge drinking through the mechanisms proposed in the Bill. However, COMPS and other national sporting organisations have made it clear that they are prepared to play a leadership role in partnership with government and communities to address the broader societal issue of binge drinking.

## SUBMISSION DETAILS

Chris Muldoon  
Consultant, Coalition of Major Professional Sports  
Level 2, 141 Capel Street  
NORTH MELBOURNE VIC 3051

Telephone: 03 9321 2000  
Mobile: 0425 738 680

## COMPS CONTACT DETAILS

Name	Organisation	E-Mail
Sarah Barrett	National Rugby League	<a href="mailto:sarahb@nrl.com.au">sarahb@nrl.com.au</a>
Matt Carroll	Australian Rugby Union	<a href="mailto:Matt.carroll@rugby.com.au">Matt.carroll@rugby.com.au</a>
Andrew Dillon	Australian Football League	<a href="mailto:Andrew.dillon@afl.com.au">Andrew.dillon@afl.com.au</a>
Michael Christo	Cricket Australia	<a href="mailto:Michael.christo@cricket.com.au">Michael.christo@cricket.com.au</a>
Lucas Robertson	Victorian Racing Club	<a href="mailto:l.robertson@vrc.net.au">l.robertson@vrc.net.au</a>
Glenn Turnor	V8 Supercars Australia	<a href="mailto:gt@v8supercars.com.au">gt@v8supercars.com.au</a>
Jo Setright	Football Federation Australia	<a href="mailto:Jo.setright@footballeustralia.com.au">Jo.setright@footballeustralia.com.au</a>
Ben Sellenger	PGA Tour	<a href="mailto:bsellenger@pgatour.com.au">bsellenger@pgatour.com.au</a>
Selina Ross	Tennis Australia	<a href="mailto:sross@tennis.com.au">sross@tennis.com.au</a>