

Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia - A Look at The University of Western Australia Sport & Recreation Association

Background

There is a strong argument made in many areas that opportunities in Australia for women in sport and recreation are limited, that resources are not always put towards ensuring gender equity and that when it comes to publicity, women are portrayed in a lesser light to their male counterparts.

This paper will examine the situation at The University of Western Australia Sport & Recreation Association (UWA Sports), focussing on these key areas:

1. Participation at a grassroots level
2. Opportunities for elite athletes
3. Leadership in sport

UWA Sports is a not-for-profit organisation based at The University of Western Australia. It's mission is to provide high quality sport and recreation opportunities for the university community (and surrounding areas), through membership and participation. UWA Sports operates a Fitness Centre, runs 7 Recreate programs a year – short 5-7 week courses introducing participants to various activities ranging from yoga, to rock climbing; paddling to weight training – conducts Social Sports competitions and helps support the University's 28 affiliated sports clubs through fundraising, the awarding of scholarships and grants.

UWA Sports operates off two related mantras "Pathways to Excellence, Participation for All" and "Building the Traditions, Creating the Future".

"Pathways to Excellence, Participation for All", is poignant in discussion an issue such as women in sport and recreation. The twin objectives are simple – in providing opportunities for (in this case) students to achieve excellence in sport, it is an equally high priority to ensure the sustainability of programs for the average person to be able to participate in.

With particular regard to women in sport and recreation, this paper will demonstrate that this simple philosophy allows UWA Sports to be a leader in the provision of health and recreation activities that transcend and indeed favour the participation of women in sport and recreation.

Participation at a Grassroots Level – Participation for All

Current trends in the Health & Fitness industry see the emergence of "Women's Only" fitness centres where women can exercise without the hassles of the opposite sex, where crèche facilities are provided and locations generally based close to dense housing areas. The question to ask is whether these are driven by a genuine demand or a desire to cash in on imposed social pressures to generate revenue.

UWA Sports ran a Women's Only Fitness Centre ten years ago with the express desire to increase participation in physical activity. Once classes hit specified levels,

the classes became open to males, with the result being that women involved in those classes continued to enjoy their sessions – the sex barrier had been broken down.

The current membership profile of UWA Sports supports the theory that if managed correctly, barriers to women participating in health and fitness can be broken down.

UWA FITNESS CENTRE

Of the 7,747 active members of the UWA Fitness Centre, 44.4% are women (3,442). Of these, 43.7% are women who have renewed their membership of the Fitness Centre in the past 12 months. A retention rate that compares favourably with their male counterparts.

UWA Fitness Centre Membership Profile	Population	Retention
Male	4,305	51.20%
Female	3,442	43.70%
Total	7,747	47.45%

As can be seen, both in terms of memberships and retention levels, the female population compares favourably to their male counterparts. The question to be asked is, why?

Taking the Fitness Centre as an example, UWA Sports has put in place active strategies to counter the traditional belief that ‘gyms’ are the domain of the testosterone charged male.

The UWA Fitness Centre portrays itself as a centre for EVERYbody – and images of muscle bound men are not used in any promotional material. Equipment is strategically located to ensure that a person, regardless of sex, wishing to get active, need not have Mr Muscle in his face making him or her feel uncomfortable.

UWA Sports does have a ‘Heavy Weights Room’, but this is located at the rear of the Centre, away from the average person looking to have a go on the treadmills and a light workout on some weight machines.

Staff focus is on delivering excellent service to those who might need it more – and much of this is on ensuring that new members are not intimidated by machines that to the untrained eye look like something out of NASA.

What this produces is an atmosphere where members feel comfortable in their own skin, where the slightly overweight female lecturer can quite happily go about her health routine alongside the elite triathlete and not feel intimidated or out of place. In a sense, it’s the creation of ownership among members – “it’s my place and I’m happy being myself here”.

UWA SPORTS CLUBS

That same ownership carries over to the UWA Sports Clubs, where the feeling of inclusiveness is engendered. A broad overview of UWA Sports Clubs membership profile shows similar rates of retention across gender and favourable participation numbers, despite the perceived lack of opportunities for women in sport.

A look at five of the larger Sports Clubs affiliated to the organisation illustrate this (rugby and cricket have been excluded on the grounds of being predominantly male sports).

UWA Sports Club Membership Profile	Population - Male	Retention	Population - Female	Retention
UWA Boat Club	112	17.50%	94	20.30%
UWA Fencing Club	281	21.20%	162	14.60%
UWA Hockey Club	344	28.90%	320	23.10%
UWA Tennis Club	256	13.20%	139	13.10%
UWA Underwater Club	311	12.40%	163	12.30%
Total	1,304	18.64%	878	16.68%

Opportunities for Elite Athletes – Pathways to Excellence

The pursuit of excellence in sport is not a new one and it could be argued that with increased competition, better training methodology and facilities, it is in fact harder for athletes to attain this goal.

UWA Sports has always been committed to supporting student athletes attain their dual objectives of athletic excellence and academic success. This is done through a number of means – the awarding of University Blues (Colours Awards), Sports Scholarships and the naming of the annual UWA Sports Star of the Year.

SPORTS SCHOLARSHIPS

Since 2002, UWA Sports has awarded Sports Scholarships to enrolled students to help them achieve the balance required to pursue their sporting goals, while maintaining academic excellence. To date, 94 Sports Scholarships have been awarded. The breakdown is as follows:

UWA Sports Scholarship Recipients		
Year	Male	Female
2002	10	4
2003	13	6
2004	9	11
2005	8	14
2006	8	11
Total	48	46

As evidenced, not only does UWA Sports aim to provide some semblance of equity in the awarding of its scholarships, the past three years have in fact seen more scholarships awarded to females – as strong an indication as any that UWA Sports is committed to providing opportunities for women to achieve sporting excellence.

This is further evidenced by the fact that at the 2003 and 2005 World University Games, held respectively in Korea and Turkey, UWA had a total of 5 athletes representing Australia. The breakdown by sex: 3 female and 2 males.

UNIVERSITY BLUES

A Blues award is seen as the highest honour that can be bestowed upon a UWA Club member (and concurrent student at UWA). Blues are awarded for service to the Club by an individual representing the Club at the highest level.

Over the years, more than 1,000 UWA students have been awarded Blues. Since 2000, Blues have been awarded to 18 females and 52 males, a figure that may not seem to favour the argument of gender equity, until it is shown that 13 of these have been awarded since 2003 – a further indication of the deliberate strategy to raise the profile of elite women in sport at UWA.

UWA SPORTS STAR OF THE YEAR

The University of Western Australia has recognised the outstanding achievements of its student athletes by the naming of the annual Sports Star of the Year. Based on sporting achievements rather than community contributions, this coveted award has been presented since 1957.

Of the 49 past winners, 17 are female. Since 1990, 9 of the 15 winners has been female, including the only three time winner – Stephanie Neesham (Water Polo),

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

In 2005, UWA Sports introduced The Indian Rim Asian University Games to the university sporting calendar. For individual universities from the Indian Ocean Rim and Asian regions, the event was designed to create a sustainable international sporting opportunities for university students.

The University of Western Australia took this as an opportunity to further push the claims for equity in women's sport, by providing \$16,000 for overseas universities to fund women's teams to the Games. Three universities took advantage of this, helping promote women's sport, not only in Western Australia, but also in the region.

Leadership in Sport

UWA Sports is committed to the development of female leaders in sport, not only on the playing fields, but also in the administration of sport. As such, it is committed to providing opportunities for development and training to ensure that staff are granted opportunities to move up within the sport and recreation industry. A look at the corporate structure of the organisation lends weight to this:

Of the 6 managerial positions currently occupied at UWA Sports, three are filled by women. When the organisation is looked at from a permanent staff perspective, of the 18 permanent staff employed by UWA Sports, 10 are female. Of these 10, 5 have moved upwards in the organisation in the last 12 months.

Conclusion

The results show that UWA Sports and The University of Western Australia, through strategic planning and foresight, have managed to ensure that women are given equal if not greater opportunities to excel in the organisation than their male counterparts.

Through the twin philosophies of “Pathways to Excellence, Participation for All”, UWA Sports has managed to create a sustainable culture of promoting women’s interests in sport and recreation, not a short term fad solution.

The future will no doubt see other challenges emerge to challenge the strong role women play in sport and recreation at UWA Sports, but we are confident that with an active strategy of encouraging and indeed, promoting women’s interest in this area, we will stay ahead of the game.