



Submission to the Senate Enquiry into Women in Sport and recreation in Australia

SOFTBALL AUSTRALIA

There are not only physical benefits for women participating in sport, but also mental benefits.

Women who participate in sport not only improve fitness, enhancing their body, but also increase muscle endurance and decrease the likelihood of developing diabetes or heart disease. Participation in competitive exercise can also increase one's ability to successfully cope with stressful situations and aid the development of healthy self concept.

Softball has a unique place in Australian sporting history and was until the mid 1970's essentially a women's sport. It is a high-tempo, low scoring bat and ball sport, played between two teams.

The sport provides a 'family' environment, is suitable for all shapes and sizes and all ages and abilities.

There are two versions of the sport - fastpitch and slowpitch softball – and the game can be modified to suit any age group (eg, tee-ball for juniors or slowpitch for Masters etc).

The benefits include learning to operate within a rule driven environment; striving to reach a common outcome; learning to react to two different situations – winning and losing; a source of exercise/physical activity; leaning skills and making errors, whether physical or mental, and learning from those.

Arthur Noren (1947) was quoted as saying "It is a health contributing and invigorating game; one that presents numerous educational possibilities, and one that offers untold recreational and social advantages (and) has no outstanding hazards. It is a scientific game demanding the use of mental alertness as well as a physical skill; it allows individual skill and yet instills cooperation; calls for judgment and quick thinking; it develops coordination; and it permits action for all players at almost all times..."¹

¹ The Complete Book of Softball, by Robert G. Meyer, Ph.D (page 11). The quote was originally taken from a promotional bulletin put out by a staff of the Intramural Sports Department of the University of Michigan during the 1940's.

Research undertaken by the Australian Sports Commission and other associations has generally found that women who participate in physical activity at a community, social or sub-elite level have a more positive perception of their body image than those who don't exercise.²

The Australian Sports Commission is the Australian Government agency responsible for the funding and development of sport at a national level, whilst 130 National Sporting Organisations, such as Softball Australia, manage and coordinate their targeted sports in Australia.

Softball Australia manages the participation and development of softball in the community through various programs such as Junior Pathways and Clubs and Associations.

Softball offers participation at different levels with the creation of athlete pathways, from grass roots to elite level sport, and spans across every state/territory in Australia.

Even though the sport offers two distinctive formats of softball, slowpitch and fastpitch, targeted programs have been developed to make softball an inclusive sport.

Programs such as Project CONNECT and the Indigenous Sports Program are partly funded through the Australian Sports Commission to help softball reach the wider community.

Project CONNECT is a joint partnership between the Australian Sports Commission and the Australian Paralympic Committee, designed to create greater opportunities for individuals with a disability, whilst the Indigenous Sports Program, is run in joint partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC). This program aims to increase softball participation across all age and gender groups, provide access to facilities and equipment and to increase the numbers of officials participating in the sport. In 2004/2005 over 1277 people played with over 1,185 women.

Fastpitch softball is widely played in Australia at competition level, whilst slowpitch softball more of a recreational sport in Australia.

Fastpitch championships are held at both state and national level on an annual basis for age groups of Open Women and Men, Under 23 Women and Men, Under 19 Women and Men and Under 16 Girls and Boys and Masters (over 35's).

² Australian Sports Commission website.

Through these championships, Softball Australia identifies talented players for development and selection into national squads.

Female athletes selected, have the opportunity to receive Australian Institute of Sport scholarships and are encouraged and supported to work or study, as well as to train and compete in softball. Scholarships are only available to female softball athletes and usually offered for a one year period.

Softball relies heavily on funding, however mainly receives in-kind support as opposed to cash.

Funding at the national level of the sport is very reliant on government grants, membership and the support of loyal sponsors. At grass roots level, clubs and associations rely heavily on membership and fundraising to ensure that their costs are met.

During 1995/1996 softball participation peaked in Australia (the sport's first Olympic Games participation), but since has declined in membership by approximately 10%.

In 2004/2005, the estimated numbers of registered participants of the sport were 38,347 with 25,586 (66.7%) of those women. An estimated 150,000 people are non-affiliated members (eg, primary school, secondary school, Universities etc) with approximately 119,462 (79.7%) women participants.

Softball is a user pays sport and the cost to play is dependent on what level you participate. This can limit participation from people of a low socio-economic background.

Sports can be intimidating to some people and some may lack the accessibility of grounds.

According to the Australian Sport Commission, Australian sporting culture has traditionally failed to provide women with the same opportunities to take on leadership roles as it has for men.

In softball, there are some barriers that reflect the number of participants at all levels of the sport. Softball Australia is developing and implementing strategies to provide equal opportunities and equality to not only women involved in the sport, but men, people with disabilities, and alike.

One of the major challenges for the sport has been the focus between the elite and the 'grass roots' element.

A further challenge has been the decision by the International Olympic Committee to remove softball from the 2012 Olympic program.

Softball Australia is carefully planning for the implications of this decision, not only the funding implications, but strategies to reintroduce the National Club Championships to keep the interest in the sport.

The sport is also identifying other strategies which include, ensuring women are encouraged and have more opportunities to undertake leadership roles within softball (eg, coaching, officiating and committee membership); consulting diverse groups to establishing what they want from the sport and physical activity (eg, Project CONNECT, Junior Pathway programs etc); committing an equitable amount of funding for men and women at both the elite and participation levels and facilitating marketing and promotion opportunities targeting female athletes and teams.

The Australian Sport Commission (ASC) is the leading advocating agency, enduring values of fair play and inclusive practices in sport, promoting equality and respect for women and girls in all aspects of sport with the aim of creating in sport settings that a more inclusive and supportive of participation of women and girls.

The ASC also provides consultancy advice and support to Government, National Sporting Organisations, and national agencies; leadership and a coordinated approach to women and sport issues to key networks; policy advice; resource development; identification and conduct and research and funding through the “Sports Leadership Grants for Women” program.

The benefits of attracting women to clubs and associations through participating in softball is to retain and increase membership and participation base; a larger talent pool of volunteers (including coaches, officials, referees); an increased diversity; and a more enjoyable environment with a greater number and variety of members.

Part of attracting people to the sport is to obtain consistent and positive media coverage.

How sport or an athlete is portrayed by the media can impact on the credibility of the sport and either bring people to the game or detract them.

The lack of media coverage for women’s sports in Australia limits people’s opportunities to find out more about the sport and its sporting prowess, achievements and role models.

Some women’s sports are not seen as marketable as male sports which has an impact on receiving sponsorship to be able to develop the sport further.

During the Olympics, the coverage of softball (and women's events) was more highly rated than that of men's sports.

Softball is classed as a second tiered sport in Australia and is played during the summer and has major sports to compete with for media coverage.

Softball receives limited media coverage and has a limited budget (if in fact none) for advertising which male sports tend to dominate.

Softball Australia employs a full-time National Communication Coordinator who is responsible for maximizing exposure of the sport through the media, community, players, volunteers, State and Territory Associations and affiliations.

Research by the Australian Sports Commission into mass media coverage of women's sport was started 18 years ago, and has been carried out every four years to gauge any improvements in media coverage.

Softball Australia currently has 59.2% of women in coaching, administrative and officiating roles.

The trends and issues associated with this figure rely on the opportunities that exist for women in sport, with family life a key factor as to why women do not remain in sport and leadership roles.

Over the last 3-4 years, scholarships and grants, utilising government funding, have been offered to encourage women to take up leadership roles within softball.

The Australian Government's Sports Leadership Grants encourage more women to make their mark on Australia sport and to step into leadership and decision-making roles.

Clear pathways and not enough funds available to women playing softball are significant contributors to women not taking or remaining in such roles - careers and families taking a priority over sport.

Softball Australia has a communication network on what is available through their website and various newsletters and encourages people within the sport to take on leadership roles through national conferences and national training camps.

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