

## **Hand out for Indigenous Sports Webinar 2**

**Sport:** Surfing

**Organisation:** Surfing Victoria

**Region:** Victoria

**Program:** Victorian Indigenous Surf title

### **1. Gathering the evidence**

The program's beginnings date back more than a decade when Max Wells, the Executive Director of Surfing Victoria, approached Sport and Recreation Victoria to fund surf instructor training for a young Aboriginal man. The department provided the funds and proposed the creation of an annual state- wide Indigenous surfing carnival.

Determined to get the Aboriginal community involved from the beginning, Mr Wells pursued funding for an Aboriginal Aquatics Officer to assist with running the carnival, a role eventually taken up by carpenter and surfer Steve Parker.

### **2. What program was delivered**

Whilst the skill level was low, spirits were high when Gunditjmara hosted the first Indigenous carnival in Warrnambool 12 years ago, 'it was held in the most atrocious conditions possible and we still had 40 people show up and it was quite successful,' Mr Wells says.

But with the theory 'you can't have a carnival without programs around it', Mr Wells and Mr Parker set about developing strong relationships with Aboriginal communities and sought funding and support to run surfing lessons and water safety training for youth both in communities and on the coast. They approached Sport and Recreation Victoria, VicHealth, the Victorian Government water safety initiative Play it Safe by the Water, surfing businesses such as Rip Curl, Quiksilver, Billabong and many others within the Surfing Victoria network which today provide support in the form of equipment and prizes for the carnival and greater programs.

For the past two years, the carnival has attracted more than 200 participant registrations and similar numbers of family and community supporters for the two-day Indigenous carnival, with participants ranging in age from two to 60.

People come from as far afield as Portland and Lakes Entrance, Philip Island, Robinvale and Swan Hill and, importantly, the event is now owned by Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative, with Surfing Victoria acting as the facilitator.

'There's only one division that is run as a formal surfing contest, the open men, with the rest being more about participation and fun. It's not about surfing,' Mr Wells says, 'Surfing is a vehicle for us to try and engage particularly kids and surfing is cool. We run how to surf classes - it's a carnival about bringing families and groups together and the back door thing is that we actually teach them water safety.'

### **3. How has the program tracked**

From humble beginnings of trying to get one Indigenous lad qualified as a surf coach and then into work has evolved a program that Sport and Recreation Victoria rates second only behind AFL in its outcomes and contribution to Victorian Indigenous communities.

There has been almost 1500 Indigenous youth engaged in programs as a result of the program. Surf Victoria now boasts up to 10 Aboriginal surf instructors, including four women. The program was determined that body image issues would not prevent girls from taking part. 'We have broken down the barriers for girls to participate with numbers growing significantly as they year's move forward,' Mr Wells says.

The Rip Curl Pro's connection with the Aboriginal community has grown with the senior appointment of Mr Parker as its site manager and the paid employment of Aboriginal staff with other community members also becoming volunteers on the event. The competition is opened by a Welcome to Country ceremony held by the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative and the winners are presented with their trophies by local community Aboriginal dancers. The winner of the open men's division at the Indigenous carnival also has the honour of representing Aboriginal Australians at the Surfing Victoria trials program competing for a wild card entry into the Rip Curl Pro.

### **4. What were some challenges or some real wins**

The key to the program is and always has been to make it both self-sustainable and community driven. From the onset Surfing Victoria has always aimed to engage indigenous leaders to drive the programs, co ordinate the groups and to engage the communities state-wide. Surfing Victoria has then provided the technical expertise, support services, equipment and the reporting and accountancy systems associated with the running of the programs and events.

When Kelly Slater dedicated his Rip Curl Pro trophy, surfing's equivalent to the Wimbledon trophy, to the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative, it was proof of how far a surfing participation program has come in building relationships and respect within Aboriginal communities.

Today's program is about both physical engagement and the provision of employment pathways. With currently two fulltime staff at Surfing Victoria, a trainee fulltime within the surfing industry, another within Swimming Victoria and a third scheduled to come on board within the coastal environmental sector.

Mr Wells says whilst he hopes some of the kids who participate in the surf program and carnival will continue with the sport, he is prouder of the way it has enabled Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria to reconnect, the employment opportunities that it has created for people, some of whom had drug, alcohol and issues within the justice system, and the way it has improved the self-esteem and pride of those who have taken part, including the respect shown by Slater's dedication.

'Everything is about creating opportunity for the kids. Surfing is just the vehicle to allow them to feel good about themselves and participate in other broader community opportunities'