



Prepared for
Australian Sports Commission

Subject
**Review of Junior Sport Framework
Draft Briefing Paper: Historical,
Cultural and Social Perspectives**

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17 September 2012
UniQuest Project No: 00715

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS	2
2.	ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN JUNIOR SPORT: SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS.....	5
2.1	What we know	5
2.2	What works	6
2.3	What does not work	10
2.4	What we don't know.....	11
3.	ADVICE TO THE ASC.....	12
4.	REFERENCES	13

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Junior Sport Framework (JSF) Project

Historical, Cultural and Social Perspectives of Junior Sport

Murray Phillips and Doune Macdonald

1. HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS

What may be surprising to contemporary sport participants and supporters is that sport for youth is a relatively new phenomenon. Organized sport for young people did not exist in the late 1800s except for a few boys, and even fewer girls, who were being educated at the elite, private schools in colonial Australia (Cumes, 1979).

Youth sport increasingly emerged in the first half of the 20th century, both inside and outside of the schooling system, as Australia's community-based sporting system was established (Kirk, 1998). Following World War 2, there was a massive boom in youth sports as schools, church groups and community clubs took on the role of organizing, financing and proselytizing sporting opportunities. These opportunities were shaped by the British cultural legacy with the popularization of cricket, netball, rugby league, rugby union and soccer as well as by sports unique to the nation such as Australian Rules football and surf lifesaving (Booth & Tatz, 2000). However, the development of sport for Australian youth was uneven as sporting opportunities were shaped by ability, ethnicity, gender, location, racial identity and socio-economic status. Junior sport has been, and continues to be, most available for able-bodied, Anglo-Saxon, white, middle class young men who live in Australia's large urban cities.

Despite the unevenness of sporting opportunities, the boom in junior sport following World War 2 has been associated with several key issues:

- Contemporary concepts of the nuclear family, which accommodates two working parents, created a need for supervised sporting opportunities after school.

- Perceptions of good parenting became associated with providing structured situations, such as sport, to enrich children's' lives outside of school.
- Organised sport was perceived as providing safe and adult-controlled opportunities that prevented youth from being involved in activities associated with social disorder.
- High performance sport, from the Olympics and Paralympics through to national sporting competitions in many sports, encouraged young people to join organized sport.
- The concept of individuals and families responsibly managing their health and leisure was supported by physical activity policies and programs (Coakley, Hallinan & McDonald, 2011; Wright & Macdonald, 2010).

These factors combined to create an expectation that junior sport is available for Australian children and that these sporting opportunities are culturally valued activities by children, their parents and broader society.

In the new millennium, there are two major forms of junior sport: informal, player-controlled sport and formal, adult-controlled. Informal sport or active recreation is organized by the participants themselves and its principle characteristic is that the physical activity is the priority; formal sport is characterised by adult organization with an emphasis on participating within a specific structure defined by rules. While informal sport has many attractive features which will inform subsequent discussions, formal sport will be the focal point of this summary as it remains the contemporary dominant model of sporting participation for young people (Coakley, 2009). Formal, organized junior sport is an increasingly multifaceted phenomenon that is comprised of a complex web of coaching, competitions, facilities, management, officials, opportunities and organisations. Amidst this complexity, there are several defining features of contemporary junior sport:

- *Organised junior sport has a financial component.* The financial cost of junior sport is borne by individuals, families and communities. At an individual level, families are required to pay for clothing, equipment, fees, insurance, registration and travel. Additionally, competitive opportunities range from local club competitions through to state, national and international opportunities. In many of these competitions, financing

representational opportunities are overwhelmingly the responsibility of the families of talented athletes.

- *Parental involvement is a necessity.* Not only do parents carry the financial responsibility of junior sport, but their commitment extends to the provision of travel to training and games, volunteer work as managers, officials and coaches, and emotional investments as they follow their sporting children (Thompson, 1999). In many ways, the complexity of the provision of junior sport would not be possible without the volunteer work from family members.
- *Elite training institutions have been established.* Since the creation of the Australian Institute of Sport in 1981, there has been a proliferation of elite training institutions that cater for junior competitors. These institutions include specialized clubs, selective high schools and private schools, as well as regional, state and national sporting academies, centres and institutes. The focus of these institutions is on producing high performance athletes and teams with the objective of achieving local, national and international sporting success.
- *Participation has increased in non-traditional activities.* There has been a diversification and growth in participant controlled sports including, for example, skateboarding, skating, snowboarding and BMX riding. Many of the decisions about the structure, rules and functions of these activities are created by participants in accordance with their expectations about outcomes from the experiences (Booth & Tatz, 2000).
- *Identification with sport spans the global to local.* With the explosion of the World Wide Web and social networking, young people's sporting interests and affiliations may simultaneously lie with the local and the global. The international promotion of sporting teams, sporting trends and events, sponsorships, personalities, clothing and equipment transgresses national boundaries and impacts Australia's junior sport participants. At the same time, there is a renewal in informal and local networks and affiliations from which sporting groups can gain leverage.

2. ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN JUNIOR SPORT: SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

While each sport in Australia has a particular and unique historical trajectory, there are specific identifiable issues that relate to contemporary participation across sports. These issues around “ways of doing things” are often socially constructed - not inherent, not natural and not mandatory - and therefore can be assessed, promoted, modified or rejected as deemed fit (Green, 2010). In this sense, administrators, coaches, officials, parents and spectators have the ability to shape junior sport experiences.

2.1 What we know

- *Enjoyment is crucial to engaging children in junior sport.* The majority of young people engage in sport because it provides enjoyment through socialization, cooperation, competition, engagement and skill development. As a consequence, children are more committed to sport when they enjoy it and they gain benefits from participation that may not be found in other activities.
- *There is a growing emphasis on the performance ethic.* The performance ethic places value on the development of technical skills, levels of achievement and competitive success rather than the intrinsic rewards related to enjoyment, satisfaction and participation. This approach certainly appeals to some children who attempt to emulate sporting champions and have a specifically competitive focus dedicating time, energy and ability to achieving excellence. Sporting participation, however, that has a sole objective on performance only accommodates a limited number of participants.
- *The centrality of social and cultural perceptions of the bodies of young peoples to junior sport.* Most obviously, sport is an activity in which participants’ bodies provide the means through which physical activity is made possible. Equally importantly, the social and cultural perception of young people’s bodies influences the sports they chose to be involved in and the experiences they take away from participation. Sporting participation, including the sports chosen and the associated experiences, is closely linked to how young people perceive their bodies.
- *A range of social and cultural factors shape the opportunities and experiences in junior sport.* Access to sport and experiences in sport are related to key social dynamics

including whether: participants are able bodied or have a disability; are male or female; are living in large cities or rural areas; whether they are of Anglo-Saxon, Indigenous or another heritage; and whether they have adequate financial resources. Perhaps not surprisingly, able-bodied, Anglo-Saxon, white, middle class males who live in Australia's large urban cities have had the greatest access to junior sport. Family affiliation with particular sports can have a powerful impact on children's and youth people's trajectory of participation and enthusiasm for that sport as either a participant or spectator.

- *Participation in junior sport shapes the values associated with lifelong learning.* Sport can provide many experiences that reinforce positive lifelong skills including cooperation, initiative, tolerance, patience, persistence and determination. Alternatively, junior sport can be a site where inappropriate values can be reinforced such as aggressive, overly competitive, and unsafe behaviour, as well as cheating, vilification, violence, physical intimidation and discrimination. Administrators, coaches, officials, parents, participants and spectators involved in junior sport are crucial to creating appropriate environments in which positive lifelong learning can occur.
- *Online technologies are significant for communication.* With the majority of Australian children and young people having ready access to computers and smart phones, sporting organisations should consider what online presence they have, how it is managed and maintained, and if it is sufficiently interactive to capture the interest of their target participants.

2.2 What works

Successful approaches, strategies and practices that serve to attract and retain young people in sport include:

- *Adult sports modified to promote enjoyment for young participants.* When children organize their own games, as in the case of informal sports, they create experiences that prioritize action, that promote scoring, enhance close competitions, increase personal involvement and expression, and provide opportunities to reaffirm friendships (Coakley, 2009). Many of Australia's popular adult sports have recognized these important elements of sporting participation and have made modifications to enhance the enjoyment of junior participants. Sports such as Kanga Cricket, HoopTime, Ozkick and Netta are modifications of cricket, basketball, Australian football and netball respectively

that are designed to match the development age of young participants and provide enjoyable sporting experiences.

- *Sporting opportunities that facilitate participation.* These approaches acknowledge the growing emphasis on the performance principle in junior sport, but recognize that increasing levels of participation are generated by providing opportunities for young sportspeople to meaningfully contribute to sport, by facilitating positive reinforcement by peers, coaches and parents, and by creating physical activities that deemphasize competition and winning. Many sports structure their competitions in ways that prioritize participation over winning, and provide guidelines for all stakeholders in junior sport about creating positive participation environments.
- *Strategies that enable sport participants to be comfortable with their bodies.* Appropriate and comfortable uniforms are increasingly significant to junior sport participants. As young Australians interact with messages and images about ideal bodies, girls and boys are conscious of their 'imperfect' body shape and often wish to wear clothing in which they feel comfortable. Further, in some cultural groups (Indigenous, Torres Strait Islander, Islamic), girls value the opportunity to negotiate sports clothing and uniforms to accommodate their sense of modesty. Other strategies that can alleviate a sense of embarrassment and promote enjoyment include attention to safe and pleasant change and shower rooms, and team management that gives participants, regardless of their body shape, the opportunity to undertake a range of positions and roles (safety allowing) (Wellard 2007).
- *Junior sports that accommodate athletes with disabilities.* These accommodations can take numerous forms. Firstly, in the open sport model, organizers remove components of sports that prevent participation of junior athletes with a disability in the same competition as able bodied athletes. Secondly, in the modified model difference is recognized and athletes are included in sporting opportunities that accommodate their disability. Thirdly, the parallel model groups all athletes around ability levels within the same game context. Fourthly, separate sporting competitions for disabled athletes may be provided (Stevenson, 2009). Under the banner of 'Sports Ability', the Australian Sports Commission has developed equipment kits for a range of sports – including boccia, goalball, sitting volleyball, polybat, table cricket, tee ball, hockey, bag games and traditional Indigenous games – which can be used developmentally or as pathways to Paralympic opportunities.

- *Acknowledgement of the importance of gender to junior sport.* Uninformed assumptions and behaviours can result in many girls and boys feeling unwelcome in particular sporting contexts. An initial position in Australian society (and frequently in law) is that boys and girls, men and women have equal rights to participate in a sport and equal opportunities to succeed and be recognised. From this premise, notions of “boy’s sports” and “girl’s sports” are challenged, with all young people being supported to participate in any sport of their choice, particularly for children under 12 years of age (see Box 1).

Box 1: Can you offer single-sex sport?

Under the Commonwealth’s Sex Discrimination Act (1984, s.42.1), it is not unlawful to, ‘exclude persons of one sex from participation in any competitive sporting activity in which the strength, stamina or physique of competitors is relevant’. Importantly however, this legislation does not extend to the ‘sporting activities by children who have not yet attained the age of 12 years’ (s.42.1), meaning single-sex sport in schools or sporting clubs is not necessarily prohibited by the Act, except for young people under the age of 12.

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Differential expectations, language, resources, or coaching are not acceptable in Australian junior sport. For children and young people who transgress traditional gender expectations, participation can be more difficult and these juniors may require additional encouragement and support.

- *Programs that target increasing participation and diversity of experiences for Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.* In a multicultural society such as Australia, different ethnic groups’ values, beliefs, languages, sporting traditions, and leisure preferences, are best addressed through a variety of approaches. These approaches may range from providing development officers as occurs with Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities,

or making everyone welcome in “mainstream” sporting programs, through to having “targeted” programs such as that offered by Cricket (see Box 2). The Sport for Development and Community Building briefing paper offers more examples for how sport can embrace cultural diversity. Common across approaches that work is:

- looking for the participants’ individual and cultural strengths and building on these;
- avoiding generalizing about a “minority” group, all individuals are different;
- having high expectations for participation and enjoyment; and
- using inclusive and respectful language and practices.

Box 2. HOWZAT Multicultural Cricket Project

In 2003, Queensland Cricket partnered with the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland to establish the *HOWZAT Multicultural Cricket Project*. The aim of the project was to use cricket as a medium to encourage culturally and linguistically diverse youth to increase their participation and access to a popular Australian sport and as a way to introduce both leadership skills and healthy living choices. Further to this, the Multicultural Cricket Project sought to help break down barriers of prejudice, cultural ignorance and racism.

The Multicultural Project established *in2CRICKET Centres* in areas with a high population of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Children (aged 7-10 years) and parents who had little experience with the game were encouraged to sign-up. The Centres were predominantly based in schools throughout Queensland and were promoted to students through the school principal and teachers.

Approximately 240 children participated in the five-week program each year, with all children receiving a cricket bat, ball, shirt and hat and other give-away items. Parents were also encouraged to join the local cricket club and attend coach education courses.

- *Codes of conduct.* Several sports have recognized that as much as there are many positive lifelong skills that can be acquired by participants, this process is not assumed, nor is it automatic, nor does it apply to all youths. In reality, there are numerous circumstances in which negative lifelong skills or inappropriate behaviour can be demonstrated by participants, parents, spectators and coaches. In order to promote positive lifelong skills and curb inappropriate behaviour, many sports have developed codes of conduct to promote suitable behaviour for participants, spectators, parents and coaching at junior sport. These codes of conduct include acceptable forms of spectating,

approaching officials, communicating with coaches, and interacting with junior participants.

2.3 What does not work

There is a considerable dropout rate in junior sport, particularly evident as children move through the teenage years. In many cases, there are sport specific factors. Sports like athletics and surf lifesaving, for example, lose many participants in the transition from Little Athletics and Nippers respectively to adult sport. Beyond factors specific to certain sports, there are several key generic issues that promote dropout rates in junior sport. These factors are:

- An overemphasis on competition and winning at the expense of broader sporting experiences;
- A failure to recognize that many participants desire engagement, enjoyment and action as well as the chance to create or enhance friendships;
- Limited opportunities to meaningfully contribute to sporting experiences;
- Overly long/onerous seasons or extended commitments that conflict with educational, religious or family commitments;
- Prohibitive costs or the failure to evaluate sporting experiences with the financial capacity of participants and their families;
- Difficult accessibility – in relation to transport or inappropriate training and competition times;
- Not recognizing, appreciating and accommodating cultural, racial and ethnic differences;
- Creating environments that are not welcoming associated with language, expectations and inclusion;
- Practices that make participants self-conscious or uncomfortable about their developing bodies; and
- Unfavourable evaluation by peers, coaches and parents.

2.4 What we don't know

While there is a strong research culture in socio-cultural aspects of sport in Australia, it has often been directed at understanding a specific sport or innovation within that sport. What we know less about, particularly for children and young people, is how the ever-changing, broader socio-cultural context interfaces with sport. For example, we don't know very much about:

- how to retain young people in sport across key life transitions (e.g. primary to secondary school; junior to adult sport; school – post-school)?
- the longitudinal impact of sporting participation on personal, social and community health and wellbeing?
- how young people piece together a range of formal and informal, traditional and non-traditional sport experiences in their lives?
- how communication technologies can be used optimally to attract, retain and enhance the experience of junior sport participants in much the same way that health organisations are drawing on those technologies to promote health?

3. ADVICE TO THE ASC

Sport plays a significant role in Australia's history and the cultural fabric of contemporary Australia. In order to adjust to the ever-changing, socio-cultural landscapes in which sports are located, it is suggested that:

1. All stakeholders have access to resources that can promote their understanding of how changes in migration, families, work patterns, technologies, etc. can affect the provision and potential of sport.
2. Sporting organisations learn about their communities' needs, interests, abilities, and financial and time constraints to tailor sporting provision accordingly.
3. Sporting organisations work with schools to better understand their potential participants and to coordinate skill development, resources, and competition with relevant schools.
4. The ASC, universities and sporting organisations work together to evaluate alternative patterns of provision such as targeted programs, seasons of different lengths, strong school – community sport links, or investment in online technologies for communication and affiliation.
5. Examples of “best practice” are made readily available to sporting organisations throughout Australia.

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