



SRI

The Expansion of Women's Sport in Australia

Leaders in Sport
Breakfast Series

Background

Recently SRI hosted breakfasts in Sydney and Melbourne to discuss the challenges and opportunities emerging from the expansion of women's sport in Australia. It is an exciting time in the evolution of professional sport for females, with new initiatives launching and more exposure than ever before. The discussions at both events highlighted common themes among codes, be they frustrations or successes, and how through a mix of dedicated community development and commercial savvy, women's sport is set for further expansion.



Building the Brand

First and foremost, it was widely acknowledged that a credible, competitive product on the pitch is required to stand any chance of successfully navigating what is a saturated sporting landscape in Australia.

Importantly, away from the competition itself it is about establishing the brand and local presence to ensure strong engagement in the community. Once you have buy-in and a sense of ownership and pride from the local community, then it becomes far easier conversation to have with potential sponsors.

Sponsorship dollars are, of course, the goal for women's sport if it is to continue to expand but new clubs, teams and leagues shouldn't be discouraged. Across Australia AFL, Netball and Rugby have all reported significant increases in sponsorship dollars. Conversations with potential sponsors have become easier as they build their brand and raise the profile of female athletes.

Significantly these new properties have not only extended existing partnerships, but have also secured new sponsors to sports that have previously been lost to the industry, such as the recent partnership between Bing Lee & Netball NSW.

Women's sport in Australia has a wealth of fantastic attributes that can be combined to make an incredible compelling proposition to potential sponsors – no more so than the athletes themselves.

We live in an age where there are very real reputational risks sponsors must consider when choosing to align themselves and their brand with athletes, teams and codes.

The discussions at our breakfasts returned time and again to how fantastic the athletes in women's sport are at present. In particular, the off field behaviour of athletes is vital for sponsors to consider, but the risk of a PR scandal is greatly reduced with women's sport. Perhaps even more importantly, these role models are inspiring young girls across the country to participate in sport. Role models across Netball, Cricket and Football are attracting new and different audiences to their sports and there are a multitude of new sponsors that could be brought along with them.

Produce compelling content



It has never been easier to go directly to an intended audience with content. No longer must women's sport plead for major broadcasting opportunities, and the opportunity to create and distribute customised content is huge. Cricket has taken the bold step to self-fund the broadcast of their matches and make the women's game accessible online especially through key community and social platforms. This activity gives additional exposure and value to sponsors, but also helps to build the brand and create heroes that younger girls can relate to.

“Australia has a great history of innovation in sport and we must continue on this path.”

Shared services

One of the key points raised in both breakfasts was the need to ensure deep links with existing structures in sport to ensure a credible, high performance professional product on the pitch. Netball has seen incredible growth and the sharing of resources with other professional teams, even in different codes, has seen many make significant gains in terms of high performance support, training, culture, and stadia. Venues in particular are critical and it was discussed the need to be realistic when scheduling competitions. Cricket, for example, has made sure to stage events in smaller venues that will create a full of house atmosphere rather than playing in 70,000 + seat stadiums.



Innovate or be left behind



It's no secret that some sports have seen enormous success in product innovation in recent years. Aussies have a great history of being at the forefront of innovation in sport, and women's sport must continue on this path. New formats like Nitro Athletics featuring mixed relays are shaking up a sport largely untouched by change in generations. Second tier sports in particular should be looking hard at their existing formats to see if changes can be made to make them more exciting and attention grabbing. Will girls in 2027 be attracted to swimming multiple lengths along a black line, or will something more exciting that hasn't even launched bring young athletes into squash, volleyball or hockey?

"Women's sport in Australia is in great health and we should celebrate our successes."

The challenge of securing high performance athletes

Our breakfasts had representation from all the major codes; AFL, Netball, Football, Rugby Union, Rugby League, Athletics, Cycling and Tennis, all recognised that the next 5-10 years will see a huge battle to attract and retain elite athletes.

There is no doubt that in the past 20 years the sporting and financial opportunities for a 15 year-old girl has changed. It was evident from our discussions that all sports need to address their pathways and talent identification and retention strategies.

Traditional Olympic sports such as Hockey or community sports such as Touch Football, must address their engagement and participation strategies to avoid losing touch at a grassroots level. However, all agreed this is a fantastic problem to have and this is a much better scenario than 20 years ago when opportunities were limited.



Celebrating success and preparing for the future

We have seen some incredible milestones in women's sport in the past year that should be celebrated; salaries getting close to the men, a surge of new sponsors, new products coming to market with league and teams being established with big broadcasting deals, gender neutral sports equipment such as cricket bats, equal pay committed to by the ARU, Rebel Sports pursuing women only ranges and so on.

No one can predict what the future will bring for women's sport in Australia, but through SRI's twenty years in the global sports industry (six in Australia) we can proudly say that there are so many areas Aussie's are ahead of other regions, particularly in fields like high performance, marketing and membership.

Women's sport in Australia is in great health. This is not an overnight revolution, but something that the industry worked hard to achieve over many years. Australia can be proud of how it is leading the world in innovation and opportunity.

SRI

Based in Melbourne and Sydney, Josie Lahey and Jonathan Harris are partners of SRI, a leading international executive search company specialising in sports, digital, sporting goods & fashion, and media & content. To find out more about SRI visit sportsrecruitment.com.

To have a confidential discussion, please contact:

JOSIE LAHEY

jlahey@sriexecutive.com

JONATHAN HARRIS

jharris@sriexecutive.com

