

## VicSport Update

### **Women's Sport is Finally Cracking the Men's Sport Media Stronghold**

The promotion of women's sport has never been easy. Making the break into the mainstream media, attracting larger crowds or just being taken seriously, is inexplicably difficult. All sorts of solutions to the problem, such as quotas for media coverage or combining with existing men's leagues, have been broached in the past, largely to no avail. However, it seems 2008 might just be the year when we quite simply let the quality and professionalism of women's sport speak for itself.

Already in 2008 three significant women's sporting events – the Australian Women's Open and Australian Ladies Masters Golf events, and the Australian Women's International Cricket series against England, have shown women's sporting events are pure quality and are more than worthy of greater promotion and respect.

The year tee'd off nicely with two outstanding women's golf events - the Australian Women's Golf Open and the Australian Ladies Masters. Both events were televised live, and the exceptional quality of play was beyond question. The finale of the Open held at Melbourne's Kingston Heath Golf Course could not have been better scripted if it was written for the final episode of a US television drama. In a dramatic final day's play Karrie Webb overcame a two shot deficit with three holes to play to force tournament leader Ji Yai Shin into a play-off, which Webb finally won. ABC television, who covered the Open live, were initially concerned about covering the golf with one producer indicating golf of any sort is 'boring to watch'. Interestingly by Sunday, this same executive could not give enough praise to the quality of play out at Kingston Heath. Amazing what a bit of exposure can do to an attitude.

Moving on to cricket, in what was a double first for Women's cricket in Australia, the Southern Stars played a curtain riser Twenty20 match against the touring English women's team at the MCG, the highlights of which were also televised in a one hour package for the first time ever. Women's cricket fought long and hard to be granted the opportunity to play at the MCG in the lead up to the men's international and to have a commercial television station agree to a highlights package, but the fight was well worth the effort in the end. Whilst the highlights package was a significant step forward, the real value to the women's game actually came in the exposure of the game to the 27,000 or so cricket fans who had arrived at the MCG in time to see the Australian women put on an exceptional bowling and fielding display to win the match. There is no doubt the vast majority of those fans had simply arrived early to prepare for the following men's match. There is also no doubt the crowd were both fully engaged in the match and I am sure were surprised at the quality of play of the women's match. For women's cricket, the value of 27,000 cricket fans being exposed to an exceptional level of play is priceless.

Not to be thwarted by the inexplicable decision made by the ABC not to televise live Australia's World Championship final against archrivals New Zealand, in 2008 netball will make a significant move from amateur to a genuine professional status when the Trans-Tasman trophy takes off in April. For the first time the world's best netballers have been headhunted by teams, and although contracts don't quite reach the lofty heights of the \$1 million plus figures recently thrown around in the IPL cricket competition, by general sporting standards they are good contracts.

Moving to a professional status signals a significant shift not just for players but also for team management who will have to accept that, with the lure of more money, players will think beyond their club roots when making decisions on where they will play. Couple this with lucrative contracts being offered to attract international stars such as Jamaican shooting sensation Romelda Aiken and we have a whole new ball game. Although in the initial stages it may be considered disloyal to move from your home state to take up a position with a team who were formally the 'opposition', or to 'buy' in overseas talent, these approaches are hallmarks of professional sport and are ones which the sticklers for tradition will quite simply have to get used to.

From a promotional and positioning perspective however, the expansion of the competition and the inclusion of international stars has also allowed the league to negotiate television coverage rights with Fox Sports in Australia. The move to pay TV is a significant shift away from the traditional ABC television coverage and the audience it usually attracts. Time will tell how successful this move is, but if New Zealand is any guide, where netball matches are shown on air live and the Silver Ferns are as well known and respected as the All Blacks, then netball in Australia is taking steps in the right direction.

For all their similarities, golf, women's cricket and netball, whether by design or simply by chance, have all taken very different paths to increase the levels exposure their sports receive. Looking back at these strategies it will be interesting to see how the newest kid on the block – women's football (aka soccer to those who still believe football can only be played with an oval-shaped ball) approaches the path to professionalism. As part of a \$32 million dollar commitment by the Rudd Labour Government for the development of football in Australia, a televised women's national league must be established. Still in its early developmental stages it will be interesting to see how this sport tackles the problem so many women's sports before have faced of just how you go about successfully breaking into a very tightly controlled media market.

Luckily for football, they have the opportunity to learn from those who have made inroads before them. Having said that however, the path is by no means paved with gold and finding Oz won't be as easy as clicking together your ruby red shoes a few times. But by simply doing what they do best – playing high quality professional level sport, our golfing, cricketing and netballing women have shown the path however is at least open for access, and for women's sport, that is a major step forward.

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