

May 2001 - Funding in the future

One of the many enjoyable tasks I have undertaken since 1996 has been a position with the Australian Olympic Committee's Athletes Commission. As well as having a hands-on role into such matters as varied as team selection and opening ceremony uniforms, it gives you an insight into how important success on the medal dais equates to funding, or lack of funding, for your sport.

There is no doubt that going into the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, shooting, as a sport, was on the ropes as far as future funding was concerned. Not only did the sport have to suffer the political repercussions and backlash from the Port Arthur mass-shooting, but as an Olympic sport, it had an appalling record. Pistol shooter, Patti Dench, in 1984 at Los Angeles, was our only medallist since Donald MacIntosh had won at the turn of the century when live pigeons were used instead of clay targets. It was hardly spoken about at the time, but when the Australian Sports Commission announced that funding for our sport for the next four years would be determined by the sport's performance at the 1996 Olympics, we knew we were not just competing for ourselves any longer.

With the success of three medals at Atlanta, two of them gold, the shooting sports received an enormous boost in funding. Since 1996, competitors in all disciplines of Olympic shooting were better exposed worldwide to all levels of events. Also for the first time ever, our teams were afforded the luxury of having the chance to use some of the most up-to-date sports science techniques. We had the opportunity to use psychologists, physiologists and dietitians, but, speaking from our team's point of view, it was the humble masseur that provided the best and most practical use of the new government funds available. I am not suggesting that any of the former experts didn't contribute, but, value for money, to help break more clay targets there is nothing like someone stretching your muscles to help influence the smooth handling of a shotgun.

Future funding for the shooting sports, however, will involve the continued success of the team at world level. This of course means that for those administrators handling the money, it is imperative that the very best competitors available are sent overseas to represent Australia. That then gets back to the biggest problem any sport faces - the selection policy.

There are no selection criteria in any sport that is going to suit everyone. Anyone who is not named in the team is naturally going to feel as though they have been hard done by. The 2000 Olympic team, which was named four months before the Games, had to withstand three appeals against the nominated athletes. All appeals were unsuccessful, but it left an uneasy tension within the team and the pressure to perform at the Games became greater. I have no doubt that this added pressure distracted some of our shooters from the task at hand and as a result some unusually poor performances were seen at Sydney. However, there is no solution to this problem as we do thankfully live in a democratic society and the right to appeal must be maintained.

As the 2004 Olympics in Athens get closer, the Australian Sports Commission has deemed that each of the four disciplines in Olympic shooting will be responsible for the maintenance, finance and continued development of their sport. No longer does the government provide funding for a high performance manager to oversee all shooting sports. This has both advantages and disadvantages. The obvious advantage is that each individual sport should know what is best for its members and teams. The disadvantage is that the finances could be controlled by people who have no real understanding of what is required to get a team to a medal winning standard. Only time will tell if the segregation of the sport's financial assistance will be to everyone's advantage.

A great example of how inequitable the distribution of some of our funding can be directed came about last year with a government grant that was entitled a 'special needs' grant. This money was basically allocated to anyone in the Olympic shadow team who could show that they needed assistance in anyway that would help them prepare for the Games.

The criteria were that the assistance must be for a special purpose that was not provided for in the team's everyday funding that the sport had been allocated. Some team members asked for assistance in installing clay target throwing machines on their private ranges; some, like myself, asked for financial assistance in gaining more overseas competitions before the Olympics. Both of these examples were granted and cost anywhere from \$3000 to \$8000.

Michael Diamond decided he did not need any more overseas competitions or any other major preparations in his bid to defend his gold medal and asked simply for a \$500 gym membership to keep his fitness level up. A reasonable and inexpensive request you would imagine. His need was not considered special enough and was rejected. This obviously caused an enormous embarrassment from within the team, as some members had received assistance up to eight times more than Michael had asked for. Hopefully now that this type of funding is handled internally these inequities can be overcome.

For the Australian shooting team to survive on the world stage we need the financial assistance from the government. To maintain that assistance we need to, as a sport, show the government world our Olympic medals. Nothing less. To get these medals we need the money administered in a way that ensures that our best team members at the time are able to make best use of those finances.

Sounds easy. Time will tell.