



Australian Government

Defence

**Senate Standing Committee on
Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade
References Committee**

**Inquiry into Adaptive Sport Programs for
Australian Defence Force Veterans**

**Department of Defence
Submission**

February 2023

Defence conducts programs for conventional and adaptive sports to enhance veteran wellbeing; connecting Australian Defence Force (ADF) veterans of all ranks and services through sport while sustaining Defence's capability requirements, and also supporting Defence's international engagement objectives.

Responsibility for the coordination and promotion of sport in the ADF is led by the ADF Sports Cell, with coordination through the ADF Sports Advisory Council. The ADF Sports Advisory Council is chaired by the Director General of ADF Sports business unit and is made up of Single Service Sports Council representatives.

The ADF Sports Cell includes three pillars to 'enhance, connect and sustain' ADF sports opportunities, in order to improve capability. These pillars are directly connected to the ADF values:

- Enhance - Sport enhances the physical and mental wellbeing of veterans through four sports programs. Training and playing sports helps to overcome physical and mental barriers, and creates an ability to work together in often dynamic and stressful situations. Sport also creates leadership and organisational opportunities at all levels, including participation, coaching and sports administration;
- Connect - ADF Sports participants are made up of all ranks, ages, genders and backgrounds representing the diversity of the ADF. Few other avenues within the ADF promote friendships, networks and the exchange of ideas in an environment like sports, that is neither rank nor service specific, and culminates in many inter-service level competitions; and
- Sustain - Veterans often work at a high operational tempo, often deployed for long periods on operations or training exercises. Sport offers opportunities for veterans to regroup, refresh and face new challenges of each veterans' choosing and reaffirming interaction with others through sport. In some cases the healing and mental health aspects of sport can be a motivator for participation and aids morale.

The ADF Adaptive Sports Program (ADFASP) focuses on preparing current and former serving wounded, injured and ill veterans for major domestic and international adaptive sporting events such as the Invictus Games, United States Warrior Games, Canadian Winter Trials and the Sydney City to Surf.

The ADFASP, in conjunction with ex-serving organisations (ESOs) such as the Returned and Service League of Australia (RSL) and Invictus Australia (formally Veterans Sports Australia), manages the schedule of activities for current and former serving veterans selected to represent Australia at international adaptive sports events. The ADFASP funds and administers participation of current serving veterans, with ESOs funding and administering participation by former serving veterans.

Defence Response

Through inquiries and reviews, such as the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and the Productivity Commission's 2019 inquiry '*A Better Way to Support Veterans*', the Australian community is becoming more aware of the physical and mental trauma for some veterans as a result of service in the ADF. The ADF is well aware of its responsibility to care for its current and former serving veterans through various support initiatives such as sporting programs. The ADFASP was established in 2016 to ensure the ADF's efforts to assist veterans' recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration into the workforce continues.

The ADF manages an extensive list of adaptive sports for veterans who are wounded, injured, or ill, in partnership with the ESO community. ESOs remain responsible for the former serving participants in the ADFASP.

(a) current evidence on the benefits adaptive sport can provide to those with physical and/or mental health impairments, particularly those who have also served or trained in national defence

Sport provides physical and mental health benefits. Physical activity has been associated with recovery through social and mental health benefits in a variety of settings, including team sport, the outdoors, and artistic based endeavours such as dance¹. The ADF recently confirmed sport as a '*capability enabler*' as recognition of the benefits of sport to its total workforce.

Consistent with the developing area of interest in sport, studies to date are limited, do not involve randomised control trials and rely heavily on qualitative research. Literature and systematic reviews are beginning to synthesise a growing body of scientific research outlining the benefits of sport and physical activity in recovery from injury. Moreover, the ADFASP has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of South Australia focussed on the provision of allied health, exercise and sports science, and high performance testing for participants preparing for the Invictus and Warrior Games.

Physical activity (in the form of sport) has been a relatively new emphasis across the United Kingdom, United States and other Allies to aid in the rehabilitation and recovery of wounded, injured or ill veterans. The benefits of sport has been shown in a number of reviews that have highlighted the growing body of evidence supporting the positive effects of exercise and sport on the veterans' mental health, including for improving post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, social wellbeing, sleep quality and improvement in the quality of life². More research is needed on the use of sport and exercise to promote mental health in the veteran cohort, and there is growing evidence supporting its value, and to this end, grant funding provided to Invictus Australian includes financial support to conduct research to develop the evidence-base around the benefits of adaptive sports and community interaction for improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes within the veteran community.

In 2018, the Invictus Games Foundation commissioned a four-year study titled "*Beyond the Finish Line*" to assess whether the competitors' wellbeing improves significantly compared to non-competitors, and measure the duration of the difference. Preliminary analysis indicates that participation at the games is associated with increased socialisation and reduced trauma symptoms.

Beyond research commissioned by the Invictus Games Foundation, small scale international peer reviewed articles are emerging.

¹ Greer, M., & Vin-Raviv, N. (2019). Outdoor-based therapeutic recreation programs among military veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder: Assessing the evidence. *Military Behavioral Health*, 7(3), 286–218. doi:10.1080/21635781.2018.1543063

² Caddick, N., & Smith, B. (2018). Exercise is medicine for mental health in military veterans: a qualitative commentary. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 10(4), 429-440, and (2014). The impact of sport and physical activity on the wellbeing of combat veterans: A systematic review. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 15(1), 9–18. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2013.09.011

An initial pilot study in Vancouver, British Columbia, the '*Purpose After Service through Sport*' (PASS) Program, was designed to foster social connectivity and wellbeing among veterans. The PASS Program involves participants playing ball hockey, followed by the opportunity to access other support services such as counselling and career transition information. The broad goal of this project is to extend the PASS Program across Canada and examine, through high quality science (using a randomized controlled trial design), its effectiveness in supporting veterans' psychological and physical health.

Australia has recently contributed to this body of evidence with a retrospective study into performance and wellbeing of veterans who attempted selection for the 2018 Sydney Invictus Games Team. Conducted by an ADF medical officer, preliminary peer reviewed evidence indicates benefits from participation may continue after the games, and interestingly, that the games themselves may be a stressor in addition to the 'post-games blues.' Furthermore, the research indicates sport and physical activity has been an effective rehabilitation tool for those who competed. Competitors also identified goal setting and a team mentality, often critical components of both sport and military training, were associated with personal identity development.

Numerous individual case studies on positive outcomes through participation in the ADFASP are available should they be required, but for reasons of privacy will not be cited here. They include veterans who have moved on to be successful champions for the veteran community and those who have enjoyed success in the broader international sporting arena.

(b) the role of sport in supporting individuals' transition from the ADF into civilian life, especially how sport may assist veterans who meet criteria identifying them as being most at risk of suicide

There is no current formal mechanism or pathway to involve sport as part of the transition plan.

Being involved in physical activities for fun, fitness or competitions present opportunities for positive social connections and networking that goes beyond sport. Pursuing regular exercise or a training program can also re-introduce purpose and structure and keep the mind active, which in turn, may build/improve veterans' skills for self-management of their health conditions and assist with their transition to civilian life. DVA continues to invest in research projects that are expanding the evidence base. The aim of these research projects are to discover ways DVA can help veterans transition and live well through physical activity, promote the benefits of physical activity and social connection within their local community (i.e. 'Stepped-down' Intervention Programs to promote self-managed physical activity in veterans and their dependants research project).

(c) the ADF's use of adaptive sport

Sport in general is conducted at all levels across the ADF and is an essential part of the team building and wellbeing for all three Services. Commanders at all levels promote physical fitness and team work for all ranks as being essential elements of the operational efficiency of the ADF. Increasingly, veterans who are wounded or injured, or become ill while serving, have been able to continue with their sporting ambitions by remaining involved in ADF Sport through participation in adaptive sporting activities both domestically and overseas.

While the Invictus Games is a key event in the ADFASP, it is not the only activity. Other annual events included in the ADFASP schedule of events are the United States Department of Defense Warrior Games; Canadian Allied Winter Sports Camp; and Australia's City 2 Surf activity. These events are conducted in

partnership with the ESO community who administer and fund former serving veterans applying to the ADFASP.

(d) whether there are any gaps in services and demand for adaptive sport by the veteran community, and, if so, how these gaps can be addressed

The ADFASP is currently well administered and funded to prepare and facilitate attendance by serving veterans at domestic and international adaptive sporting events. This has proven to be a successful program, although since 2019 there has been a decline in volunteers from the serving community. The bulk of participants in the program are from the former serving community. These veterans are funded by Invictus Australia (with financial support provided by DVA from 2022-23 to 2025-26). Individuals can also approach other ESOs for funding of activities, but this is not coordinated nationally in a consistent manner.

The intent of the DVA Rehabilitation Program is to support veterans to adapt to, and wherever possible, recover from an injury or illness related to their ADF service. DVA rehabilitation encompasses supporting veterans' participation in sport and recreation activities to enable social connections and re-establish a sense of belonging, which can be a significant challenge for transitioning veterans. Based on evidence of clinical appropriateness and specific need, adaptive recreational sports aids and/or equipment may be funded to facilitate participation in the community, or as an addition to their health treatment or a rehabilitation plan.

(e) the equitability of current funding for adaptive sport, and how the accessibility of adaptive sport can be improved for veterans who are not a part of Invictus programs

The funding for sport in the ADF is allocated through existing Service budget allocations. Along with the Conventional Sport and the Pacific Sports Programs, the ADFASP has been funded adequately since its inception in 2016. There are no known instances of any serving veteran not being funded for any sport program to which they aspire. No serving veteran has been disadvantaged as a result of lack of funds. For current serving veterans, participation is Service and base-specific, and will be dependent on the local rehabilitation system of ADF Garrison Health and support to wounded, injured, or ill veterans through Service and/or base rehabilitation centres.

Since Australia's involvement in the inaugural Invictus Games in 2014, the requirements of the former serving veterans participating have been underwritten by the RSL, and after 2019 by Invictus Australia. The RSL provided funding for specialist equipment, travel, and uniforms. This arrangement continued until the ADF entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Invictus Australia and approval of the funding grant applications through DVA, particularly the 2022-23 Budget measure for \$9 million (\$8.09 million in grant funding) over three years from 2022-23. In addition to their successful grant application, funding pressures are further reduced as a result of Defence providing service air transport where possible at no cost to the veterans or Invictus Australia and insurance coverage for the entire Australian Invictus contingent. This includes family support travelling with the veteran, coaching, medical, media and logistical staff.

Options other than the Invictus Games are available to participants in the ADFASP. Two other significant adaptive programs offered annually are the United States Department of Defense Warrior Games, and Canadian Armed Forces Winter Trials. Domestically the Adaptive Sports Program offers veterans the opportunity to participate in the City 2 Surf event in Sydney. There are opportunities within the Conventional Sports Program to take part in the early development stages of their 'discipline specific' adaptive activity, to date AFL has proved quite successful.

Awareness and exposure to adaptive sports is increasing through media coverage of events such as the Invictus Games. However, it is recognised that not everyone who participates in adaptive sports have the skills and conditioning or the desire to win medals or represent Australia. The cost to compete at representative level can be quite expensive and participation at a local/community level is often a more cost effective and accessible way to be involved.

DVA's Veteran Wellbeing Grants program provides funding to community and ESOs that provide local veterans and families with projects to sustain and enhance health and wellbeing, which may include but are not limited to sporting activities. Eligible organisations may apply for grants of up to \$50,000 for local, community-based projects, and grants of up to \$150,000 are available for projects that deliver wellbeing support projects and activities of broad-scale benefit to veterans and families in the community. Sport and recreation activities may also be funded for eligible veterans through their personalised DVA rehabilitation plan, where the activities can assist the veteran to overcome barriers to achieving their rehabilitation goals, and contribute to positive psychosocial outcomes, without necessarily having a competition focus.

(f) the potential for a centralised authority to play a role in coordination or resourcing to provide access and where appropriate, enable consistency, in the use of adaptive sport to support rehabilitation, transition or reintegration for serving members and veterans around the nation and across support services and organisations

The centralised authority for adaptive sport in the serving community is already established, through the ADFASP. Further, as the Joint Transition Authority matures, the ADFASP can assist with links into the adaptive community. This is currently achieved in a more informal manner as participants in the ADFASP meet and interact with the partnering ESOs at many local-level events. This engagement can continue through the transition process, should the veteran so desire.

DVA has recently approved a grant to fund Invictus Australia in supporting former serving veterans who are part of the wounded, injured and ill community, and the veteran community more broadly, through sport. A centralised authority therefore exists in the sense that the ADF has entered into agreements with both the University of South Australia and Invictus Australia to ensure the best outcomes for current and former serving veterans competing in adaptive sport. To progress further than this, such an authority would need to come from either DVA, an entity within the Health and Aged Care Portfolio, or a larger Invictus Australia-type organisation that has additional clinical and research arms. Should it be deemed a singular authority is required, potentially within DVA to coordinate the former serving veteran community's recovery and rehabilitation through sport, it may be better considered at the completion of the current period of the grant program to Invictus Australia in 2025-26. Other ESOs continue to provide extensive community level sporting opportunities for serving and former serving veterans, such as RSL Active, Mates 4 Mates, and Saltwater Veterans. These are mostly self-funded activities, with some organisations receiving grant funding from DVA, run mostly by volunteers who work with the ADF Sports Cell.

(g) whether eligibility for the Australian Sports Medal, or similar recognition, should be extended to teams that participated in the Invictus Games prior to 2018 and other veterans' teams representing Australia in international events

The Australian Sports Medal is administered by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, in association with Government House and the Governor-General.

Defence is unable to offer a position on the eligibility criteria of programs such as the Australian Sports Medal.

(h) any other related matters

There are fewer serving members applying for the ADFASP. This is based on a variety of reasons including there being less combat related injuries, directly related to less active operations. Additionally, the ADF's management of mental health related injuries is maturing and sport is but one of a number of options presented to veterans, such as the ADF Arts for Recovery, Resilience, Teamwork and Skills program.

The ADF Sports Cell is maturing and, as part of this process, is developing adaptive elements within its Conventional Sports Program, in addition to the ADFASP. It is noted, that while the ADF support of the ADFASP veterans was initially benchmarked against similar initiatives in place by our Allies, it is evident from the establishment of a dedicated Sports Cell, an enhanced Pacific Outreach and Adventurous Training Program (both of which are planned to encompass an adaptive element), that the ADF initiatives are now surpassing that of our Allies.

While this submission is focussed on adaptive sport and benefits to veterans, specifically those in the wounded, injured, and ill community, the fundamentals of *team* and its part in contributing to a veteran's overall wellbeing remains key. The ADF Sports Cell and Invictus Australia are charged with the provision of sporting opportunities for all veterans, current and former serving, wounded, injured, or ill, or able-bodied so that all have equal opportunity to access the benefits derived from connecting / re-connecting through sport.