



Athletics Australia's Submission to the Senate Standing
Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport.

Inquiry into Australia's preparedness to host Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games

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1. INTRODUCTION

Athletics Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a Submission to the Inquiry being conducted by the Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport into Australia's preparedness to host Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Athletics Australia is the national governing body for the sport of athletics in Australia and is recognised as such by the World Athletics, Australian Olympic Committee, Australian Paralympic Committee, Commonwealth Games Australia and the Australian Sports Commission. Together with our State and Territory-based Member Associations, we are charged with ensuring the encouragement and promotion of athletics in Australia and acting in the best interests of the sport of athletics from grassroots participation and athlete pathways through to high performance.

Athletics Australia is also charged with ensuring adequate representation of Australia and driving successful outcomes in athletics at the Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games, the Paralympic Games and other international meetings. Based at Athletics House in the Melbourne suburb of Albert Park, Athletics Australia is a not-for-profit organisation.

More than 3.7 million Australians participate in Athletics, while 1.2 million Australians indicated that athletics is the sport with which they have the strongest affinity. Across our participant base and competition we have a commitment to gender equality and provide opportunities for athletes from all walks of life to become involved in our sport. Our Athletics for the Outback and Raise the Bar Programs focus on delivering athletics clinics and events in remote and regional communities for young Indigenous Australians while Raise the Bar uses athletics as the vehicle to expose Indigenous students in years 10, 11 and 12 from across Australia to the various tertiary education and career opportunities available to them.

At a high performance level, Australian athletics is thriving. Standout performances at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games saw Nicola Olyslagers take home silver in the High Jump, Kelsey-Lee Barber bronze in the Javelin, Ash Moloney bronze in Decathlon, along with incredible Olympic final performances from the likes of Jessica Hull and Stewart McSweyn. Two weeks later during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games we saw Madison de Rozario (T53 800m and T54 Marathon), James Turner (T36 400m) and Vanessa Low (T61 Long Jump) collect gold medals.

At the 2022 World Athletics Championships we crowned two World Champions in Eleanor Patterson (High Jump) and Kelsey-Lee Barber (Javelin). Western Australia's Nina Kennedy soared to bronze in the pole vault. Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games saw Australian athlete's win 24 medals, including ten gold.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Athletics Australia will provide a multi-faceted contribution to both the Victoria 2026 Commonwealth Games (VIC2026) and Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Brisbane 2032). The most significant and public role is the preparation and leadership of the High Performance program which will deliver the athletes who compete in VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032. However, there are significant underpinning programs which deliver those athletes to the startline such as talent identification and pathways, coaching, competition preparation and world-leading specific high performance preparations. These programs are long-term initiatives that exist year round; they cannot be turned on in the final six months before a major Games. All facets of these programs need to be constantly refined, developed and delivered throughout to achieve success.

VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032 are highly reliant on all National Sporting Organisations, in particular Athletics Australia, to deliver the technical knowledge required for the building of the venues, the adherence to World Athletics specifications and the experience to deliver the competition expected by the IOC, IPC, CGF, media partners, and the general public. This extends to the recruitment, provision and preparation of the 130+ volunteer Technical Officials, testing of the competition environment and the building and support for interest in the sport.

The legacy opportunities from major events such as VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032 are significant. This is evident through the investment that Governments undertake. However the legacies need to include those who put on the show, those being the Olympic, Paralympic and Commonwealth sports, and not primarily the professional football codes.

The past two iterations of the Commonwealth Games have provided no infrastructure legacy to Athletics. In fact since then there has been a loss of the warm-up track for Melbourne 2006 (originally a legacy of the 1956 Olympic Games), the traditional home of Athletics in Victoria, Olympic Park, which was demolished so AFL players didn't have to walk too far to train.

Athletics fares poorly regarding Games infrastructure legacy with Games athletics tracks being temporary and the long term facilities benefit being to sports such as AFL and cricket. Existing infrastructure does not allow the sport to flourish, or be prioritised, with venues either not suitable for competition delivery, or managed as multi-sport venues limiting access to athletes to train through other stakeholder priority access. Funding for the sport of athletics should reflect the status of the sport in contributing to Games' success and we should be able to work with the Government to maximise legacy for the whole of sport.

Like many other NSOs, Athletics Australia is restricted by the global framework we operate within, and the federated sports model at a local level. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) commercial models impose significant restrictions to member sports, contributing to the current state of play with many operating in survival mode.

This submission provides key recommendations and context for the legacy of the Games to be fit-for-purpose for the sport of athletics, to allow it to thrive, flourish and inspire the nation.

3. INFRASTRUCTURE LEGACY

RECOMMENDATION # 1

Fit-for-purpose infrastructure legacy from VIC2026 and Brisbane 2023 must be provided for the sport of Athletics.

Athletics fares poorly regarding Games infrastructure legacy. While athletics is a centrepiece of the Games schedule and venue facilities, the athletics track is built as a temporary track, dropped into a major football or cricket stadium. This has been and is the case in 2000 (Accor Stadium), 2006 (MCG), 2018 (Carrara Stadium), 2026 (Eureka Stadium) and 2032 (The Gabba). At the completion of the respective Games the athletics track is ripped up and removed from the venues.

Athletics personnel invest significant time and energy into planning the Games, undertaking multiple site visits, providing input and expertise to help ensure a successful venue upgrade, all of which benefits professional codes such as football and cricket after the Games. When Games legacy is discussed, it is legacy benefits for professional football or cricket codes, not for Athletics.

In a positive example of forward thinking legacy the Sydney 2000 Athletics infrastructure legacy benefit was strong with a warm-up track that remained beyond the period of the Games, even though the main stadium was converted into a football stadium. This should be the model for future events including the 2026 and 2032 Games. Athletics should receive the legacy benefit of a suitable competition venue accompanied by an adjacent warm up venue as a result of all major Games hosted in Australia.

Unfortunately this approach is rarely established with a view to the development and legacy of a long term competition venue to host any significant events beyond club or regional meets. If a warm-up track remains after the Games, it inevitably lacks the necessary infrastructure (grandstands, competition rooms, photo finish room and tower, etc) to really help grow the sport in that region.

As specific examples of poor infrastructure legacy for athletics, the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games warm-up facility was taken from athletics and turned into a training oval because AFL footballers from the Collingwood Football Club didn't want to walk 300m to the adjacent oval. For the 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast neither the main competition track nor the warm-up track were retained, again because the legacy priority favoured AFL, in this instance the Gold Coast Football Club. All the 2026 plans are focussed on legacy for AFL. 2032 is still under discussion but a legacy athletics track associated with the Gabba precinct is highly unlikely.

4. EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE ACCESS

RECOMMENDATION #2

Access to existing infrastructure should be available for Athletics and include prioritisation for High Performance athletes to prepare for VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032.

There are significant infrastructure issues across Australia that considerably impede on the opportunity to grow the sport of Athletics, particularly with a view to attracting national and international level competitions.

There are only two venues that have a competition venue with a full adjacent warm-up track. These are Sydney Olympic Park, Homebush (NSW) and Queensland Sport and Athletics Centre, Brisbane (QLD). Whilst this is a requirement for World Athletics or World Para Athletics level championships, it is also increasingly valuable for holding large scale events such as the Australian All School Championships and Australian Track and Field Championships due to the number of competitors and logistical requirements. While Sydney Olympic Park (SOP) is an excellent, contemporary facility, Queensland Sport and Athletics Centre (QSAC) is old and outdated and has multiple issues.

4.1 Infrastructure Access Challenge Examples

Specific examples of the venue challenges that Athletics has in key states is outlined below:

- Queensland (Brisbane) - The QSAC venue is outdated, difficult to get around, and the competition rooms are built for football (at the midpoint of the front straight, not on the finish line) which makes competition management difficult and costly. As an example, athletics commentators call from a makeshift set up out in the open, adjacent to the finish line which impacts the audio quality that goes to air. The elevated grandstand means that there is an enormous distance between the fans and the on-track competition, which makes it hard to generate any atmosphere in the venue and limits fan and athlete interaction. The athletics vision filmed in this stadium does nothing to showcase the sport in a way that would attract commercial sponsors, as compared to other fit-for-purpose stadiums. Using the warm-up track for major competitions instead is cost prohibitive, as too much support infrastructure needs to be brought in at considerable cost. Time is of the essence for future planned venue upgrades in Brisbane, as it is very hard to contemplate major Athletics events at the current QSAC venue in the lead up to 2032.
- Victoria (Melbourne) - Lakeside Stadium in Albert Park (VIC) has a small warm-up area and front access grandstands with emergency vehicle access between the track and grandstands. This means there is a huge gap from the track to the grandstands, and during major events when people stand in the walkway to get close to the action, it means that the view of the track for the lower half of the grandstand is impacted. The two options are:
 1. keep the walkway clear and limit fan/athlete interaction which comes at significant cost for security personnel, and impacts the experience and the atmosphere (as per QSAC issue); or,

2. allow people access to the walkway which means most spectators are standing for the duration of the meet and we are unable to sell premium reserved grandstand tickets due to impeded view.

Lakeside Stadium was developed as the 'home of athletics', yet is one of the worst in regard to access. Allocated training times do not work for athletes needing to train after school/university/work. The sport is locked out for the Formula One Grand Prix every year without any compensation, and other major events are prioritised over athletics. This includes the upcoming months-long FIFA Women's World Cup training period. There is limited shareability during these periods for the multi-sport venue, instead the Athletics venue locks out our sport and our athletes.

- South Australia (Adelaide) - SA Athletics Stadium in Mile End (SA) has a similarly small warm-up track and area which is about to be further compromised by the decision to reduce this area with SASI expansion plans, including the addition of the National Aerodynamics Centre and four beach volleyball courts in the middle of the athletics warm-up zone. At no point was Athletics Australia consulted in this process (prior to the decision being taken) and it is a significant backward step for the sport of athletics in South Australia.

The lack of access to these existing athletics facilities for the sport of athletics, and especially our elite athletes, is a growing issue. The sport remains locked out of the nation's Athletics venues for significant periods of time – quite literally. They are closed venues, without open access to the sport and our stars, even when not booked for something else.

Athletics venues are often operated as multi-sport venues with almost every other private or commercial booking taking precedence over athletics, often for months at a time. Similarly, equipment sheds are often under lock and key so accessing basic items such as starting blocks and hurdles for athlete training sessions is difficult, if not impossible at many of our major venues.

The priority for many of the country's athletics tracks is commercial (even those built with legacy specified in their charter) and so are often bulk booked by schools for full days (7am - 5pm) not allowing any high performance or state level training when they are only used between 10am - 3pm. In 2023 at Sydney Olympic Park Athletics track, a legacy from the Sydney 2000 Olympic/Paralympic Games, for the five months leading into the World Athletics Championships (April - August) there are just 16 days where the track is available for training. 16 days of 153 available days - 10%. In 2022 (when there was no Women's Football World Cup) it was still only 27 days - 17%. Australian athletes are unable to train at the main Australian athletics facilities to prepare to take on the world - they have to go overseas to train, not because the facilities are better, but because of policies and priorities locking them out.

Suburban and regional venues are often easier to access than any of the major athletics tracks in our country, and our elite and emerging athletes often travel considerable distances to maintain their training regime. There is no question that drop out rates in our sport are heightened by frustrations in accessing suitable training facilities with consistency and affordability. Therefore to retain and grow participation, we must first address these infrastructure accessibility issues.

Often, elite international athletes are preparing through training on football ovals because they are not locked, rather than purpose-built athletics tracks which are behind locked gates. Or, athletes are forced to travel internationally, at a high cost, in order to access basic training facilities that they should be able to access in their hometown.

4.2 Athlete Impact Examples

- World Champion Gold Medal High Jumper Eleanor Patterson has left Australia to train in Japan for 6 weeks, at great expense, because they can not gain consistent access to SOPAC because the prioritisation for that facility is school carnivals. A facility that was born from the Sydney Olympic Games, with an associated legacy to Olympic Sport, is driving Olympic athletes overseas to train.
- As a specific example in prioritisation of other sports, the Australian Cricket Team is able to train at cricket facilities in NSW built through partnership with the Federal Government, NSW State Government and SOPA. These facilities are not booked out to school children ahead of Australian Cricketers.

5. ATHLETICS FUNDING

RECOMMENDATION # 3

Funding for Olympic Sport should be increased significantly to recognise the unique ecosystem we operate in, ensure NSOs can maximise legacy outcomes across infrastructure, participation and system, and maximise performance results at the 2026 and 2032 Games.

RECOMMENDATION # 4

Funding for athletics should reflect the status of the sport from high performance and commercial perspective at major Games, along with national participation rates leading through 2032+ which, above any other sport, can drive the greatest impact on the health and wellbeing of the nation

5.1 Contribution to Games Success

Athletics is the centrepiece of Olympic and Commonwealth Games events. Athletics takes place in the largest stadiums, drives a significant portion of overall ticket sales and sponsorship to deliver financially successful events and is the focus of national and international television broadcasting.

Domestically, athletics is the most watched sport at the Olympic and Commonwealth Games. More than 20 million Australians tuned in to watch the Tokyo Olympic Games via Seven making it the biggest television and streaming event in history. Six of the top ten most watched Tokyo 2020 events were Athletics events, with the most-watched event of the Games being Rohan Browning in the men's 100 metres semi-final on day nine.

5.2 High Participation Rates

Athletics is a fundamental sport with the single greatest capacity to shift the dial with regard to the health and fitness of all Australians. Athletics (running and walking) is the biggest participation sport in Australia and globally with more than 3.7 Million Australians participating in athletics. At a grassroots and participation level, anyone can participate in athletics with very few barriers to involvement.

If Athletics Australia had the funding and resources, we certainly have the programs and product portfolio ready to roll out and significantly grow participation in our sport as a direct legacy benefit of the Games.

A large participant base is needed to generate a strong, full athletics team for Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Funding shortfalls impact our ability to build and support this base of talented junior athletes and emerging stars in the transition from junior to senior ranks. A talent squad of approximately 300+ athletes in the 15-18 years age bracket is in play, and offering a meaningful program to support these athletes so that they improve and transition to senior elite athletes is costly.

5.3 Cost of High Performance, Operations and Delivery

Much of the funding that sports currently receive is directed towards specific high performance programs. This funding is absolutely necessary to take on the rest of the world - many of our competitors (other countries) receive significantly more (double) high performance funding for their programs. But the base high performance funding hasn't increased over the last three Olympic/Paralympic (four year) cycles. This means Olympic/Paralympic high performance programs have had a significant net decrease in funding over that period.

Over the 10 year period (since 2012) CPI alone accounts for a reduction of 25% for high performance funding (buying power over that period) given the funding has not increased, in addition to the increased cost of wages and flights, particularly the cost of international travel.

Furthermore Olympic sports simply do not have enough funding to support their basic operations, especially with the increasing layers of administration required around important areas such as integrity, child safety, risk management and the like. These necessary administrative needs and costs of NSO operations are increasing in a manner that revenues cannot keep up with. Many NSOs are using antiquated systems and technology for key areas such as finance, CRM, HR, compliance as there is no money to invest in upgrades and this means more manual processing which is resource heavy and increases organisational risk. Nor is the existing funding enough to support the domestic competition structure that enables the domestic high performance competition environments.

When NSO's are in survival mode struggling to fund basic operations, there is no capacity to invest and take risks on new commercial products, systems and growth strategies which can take our sport forward. Government funding should prioritise the whole of sport development for Olympic sports like Athletics that compete on a global scale and inspire the entire population.

5.4 Unique Challenges of the International Sport Ecosystem

The unique international sports ecosystem provides further restrictions on NSOs with many of the commercial rights restricted by the rules of the governing bodies. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) generate significant revenues through sponsorship and broadcast which does not flow down to the NSOs or the athletes in the same way that this does in domestic codes.

Similarly, commercial restrictions are applied to our most valuable asset (the Australian Athletics Team) during the period of the Games when they are in the spotlight, which restricts the ability of NSOs to maximise commercial revenue. Yet the value of this brand is built on the year-round investment of the NSO across all aspects of their operations - including media and communications, marketing, events and high performance programs. Like the legacy piece, the inputs are driven by the NSO but the outcomes and benefits are not delivered back to the NSO.

All sports in this Olympic and Commonwealth Games ecosystem are feeling the impact, struggling to survive, yet alone thrive. Meanwhile, the gap between Olympic sports and professional sports continues to grow. We simply cannot compete, and the government funding needs to recognise this nuance of international sport and commercial restrictions, and recognise it in funding allocations. With this commercial impediment counter-balanced, the opportunity for Athletics Australia to thrive and inspire the whole nation is even greater.

5.5 Financial Challenges for Athletes

Athletics loses many track and field athletes to the professional codes who are becoming more and more aggressive in their targeting of talented junior athletes and can offer significantly more remuneration than the sport of Athletics. Athletics Australia's Olympians are not "rich kids", by any means.

As specific examples, Australia's Olympic High Jump Silver medallist, Nicola Olyslagers, received \$40,000 in direct annual funding through Athletics Australia's NASS scheme, which incorporates the AIS dAIS program. Brandon Starc, Australian Commonwealth Games Gold and Silver medallist and 5th at the Tokyo Olympic Games in the Men's High Jump received \$30,000 in direct funding annually. Nicola and Brandon are the very best in the World at their craft and sport, yet the average AFL player salary is \$406,000, with only 10 players, those being first year rookies, earning less than \$100,000 in 2022. Even incorporating personal sponsorship, the best Australian Athletics athletes, who are the best in the world, and will have millions of Australians watching them during VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032, are not even close to earning the same as the 325th best AFL player in Australia. And yet the government continues to prioritise AFL funding over Olympic sports.

Being a truly global sport, the cost equation for athletes to regularly have exposure to high level competition (either in Australia or overseas) is significant. Funding models from the Government need to reflect this.

6. CONCLUSION

The VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032 Games bring the global stage to Australia. The next decade is critically important to Australia to showcase how we have a strong global sporting presence through success. Lifting our line of sight from a domestic focus to international success requires investment and support and through that provides Australia and Australians with pride. Athletics is extremely well placed to deliver if given the opportunity.

Athletics can benefit from a greater focus on fit-for-purpose infrastructure legacy from VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032, along with providing Australian athletes with priority access to existing infrastructure to train and prepare for the respective Games. Government funding for the sport should reflect its status in the public appeal and commercial success of Commonwealth and Olympic Games and our ability to strongly influence the health and wellbeing of the nation through large participation rates.

Athletics Australia is also a contributor to the group submission to this Inquiry by 21 Sports that highlight the challenges, concerns and priority required to prepare for VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032, including the AOC and CGA recommendations from their recent budget submission papers, specifically, Sport 2030 implementation plans and Paris 2024 and VIC2026 Team Preparation funding for all participating sports.

Athletics Australia looks forward to participating in the Committee's public hearing process.

7. CONTACT

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