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Subject: Formal submission

Dear Anna Dacre,

Please accept this as a formal submission to your inquiry.

### ***The Contribution of Sport to Aboriginal & Islander Wellbeing and Mentoring***

This submission has three main aims:

1. It acknowledges the salience of sport to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but questions the extent to which *participation in sport and physical activity* are as firmly embedded in their everyday lives as is commonly assumed.
2. It acknowledges the tremendous contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to mainstream sports like Australian Rules football, rugby league and boxing, but cautions against an *overemphasis on Indigenous sportive abilities*.
3. It argues that for Indigenous athletes who make it into professional sport, there are particular challenges upon *transitioning to a new life and career* beyond that context.

#### **Aim 1: Indigenous participation in sport**

The significance of sport to Indigenous Australians has been demonstrated in various historical, biographical and community studies (Tatz 1995; Gorman 2005; Hayward 2006). In rural and remote areas, as well as the islands of the Torres Strait, sport has a particular resonance, as suggested by the remark of an Aboriginal Tiwi Islander: “For the Tiwi people football means hope, it means pride and most of all it means life” (Moodie 2008, cited in Tatz 2010). On the mainland, non-Aboriginal commentators have been awestruck by some of the athletic feats of Indigenous footballers, offering plaudits like —freak goals and —eyes in the back of their head (Hallinan, Bruce and Bennie 2004; Hallinan, Bruce and Burke 2005; Coram 2007; Tatz 2009). This adulation is generally well intended, and understandable when viewers are ensconced in the fast-moving drama of sport. However, Tatz has pointed to monumental contradictions (Tatz 2010) in the fascination by non-Aboriginal Australians for so many Indigenous stars of sport. The affection is genuine, but most fans have little knowledge about where these players come from, or the often challenging nature of their lives before coming to prominence as boxers, runners or footballers. It can be all too easy – indeed convenient – for non-Aboriginal people to (wrongly) assume that these athletes are

exemplars of rising Indigenous circumstances (Coram 1999), and indeed that they are a reflection of regular physical activity within Aboriginal communities.

Hallinan and Judd (2009) have contended that Indigenous people take part in sport at rates far above those of Australians in general (2009: 1222). In making this judgment they admit to drawing upon a rather inconclusive data set (2009: fns 6 & 7, 1233). A more cautionary approach might have been taken in light of a *Human Rights and Equality Opportunity Commission* report which argued that ‘while there is a plethora of information available on the general number and characteristics of Australian people who participate in sport and recreational activities (including age, gender, frequency and type of participation), very little data focuses on the ethnic or cultural background of participants’ (Oliver, 2006: 19). This study noted that ‘while many sporting organisations have dedicated Indigenous sporting programs, some have yet to develop specific initiatives to promote Indigenous participation in sport’ (Oliver, 2006: 20). The report also emphasised that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are ... not represented proportionally in sporting organisations, and very few have represented at the elite and national level’ (Oliver, 2006: 19).

At a tangent to sport involvement is the question of physical activity. The Better Health Channel (BHC), an online information resource assured by the Victorian state government, admits that while there is a small range of reliable figures ‘in general, Indigenous Australians are less physically active than the rest of the population’ (BHC, 2009). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), meanwhile, has reported that ‘physical inactivity was the third leading cause of the burden of illness and disease for Indigenous Australians in 2003, accounting for 8% of the total burden and 12% of all deaths’ (ABS, 2008). The same report concluded that ‘after adjusting for differences in the age structure between the two populations, Indigenous Australians were more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be sedentary or to exercise at low levels’ (ABS, 2008). In short, it is difficult to make a case – statistically – that the *playing of sport or engagement in physical activity* has more resonance for Aboriginal people than for other Australians. Among Indigenous people there appear to be differences according to region: ABS figures for 2002 indicate that Aboriginal people in remote areas were slightly more likely to take part in sport (50%) than those in urban areas (45%) (ABS, 2005). A difficulty in making assessments like this, however, is that ABS statistics about Indigenous sport and physical activity are a work in progress; there is so much data to be gathered and evaluated.

Beyond the realm of numbers a cautionary perspective has been put forward by Alison Nelson, whose qualitative research on sport and physical activity among urban Aboriginal youth was prompted by her goal of raising questions and challenging take for granted assumptions about Indigenous physicality, ‘particularly the essentialist notion that *all* Indigenous children both like sport and are good at sport’ (Nelson, 2009: 102 emphasis in the original). From interviewing urban Aboriginal youth, she concluded that:

‘[these] young people did not produce a neat, essentialised view of sport in their lives. There was often complexity and contradiction within and between participants’ comments. There was also diversity in the ways in which they attributed meaning to sport in their lives. Sport seems to provide a

positive influence for some regarding their health and identity. However, for others, sport played little or no positive role in their day-to-day lives.

In a similar vein, Cheryl Kickett-Tucker has made the salient point that although ‘sport remains a site of recognition and power’ for many Aboriginal youth, such as for those who do not identify with classroom education, competitive games ‘may also be a site of ... disempowerment for those [Aboriginal youth] who are not good at sport’ (Kickett-Tucker, 1997, cited in Nelson, 2009: 102).

More research is therefore needed to test the taken for granted assumption that Indigenous people are predominantly sport active. Such inquiries ought to be sensitive to a range of differences such as region, education, gender, age and income. As Oliver concludes:

Without reliable information about who is playing what sports in Australia – and why those sports are or are not attracting Indigenous or CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] participants – it is difficult to determine what specific programs need to be developed to increase the participation rates of different groups. Sporting organisations need to make this data collection a priority (Oliver, 2006: 19).

Colin Tatz, in a separate submission to this inquiry, has argued that sport can make a substantive difference in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, assuming that such physical activity programs are adequately supported and administered. This is because, he argues, where ever sport is played and physical activity levels are significant, there tend to be lower levels of suicidal behaviours in Aboriginal communities. Hence, there is a need to reach as many Indigenous Australians as possible. Comprehensive *participation* programs are needed, not “talent spotting” by football codes or the government-funded Indigenous Marathon Project, wherein only a handful of athletes is supported (Adair, 2012). The idea that high profile Aboriginal and Islander athletes serve as exemplars for others to follow is alluring, but there is no evidence that this translates into sustained sport/physical activity patterns for their communities generally. Localised programs, with locals empowered to deliver them, is what is needed to produce real impacts; not “helicopter” initiatives by non-Indigenous people.

### **Aim 2: The “natural” Aboriginal athlete**

There is a common perception that high profile Indigenous athletes are the living embodiment of what Aboriginal people are “naturally” good at – playing sport. The Indigenous scholar, Darren Godwell (1997, 2000), has concluded that professional sport is not a realistic career path for the overwhelming majority of Indigenous Australians. Scoring tries on the red dust of outback Queensland is the Aboriginal equivalent of ‘hoop dreams’ basketball in urban America.<sup>1</sup> This was a boyhood dream of professional sport that very few could actually realise. Godwell railed against beliefs that ascribed to Indigenous people innate, natural or genetically inherited physical abilities that ‘predisposed’ them, as a group, to be good at sport. He noted that this had been popularised by media superlatives for Aboriginal players, with descriptors like ‘black magic’, which in recent times has been

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal Australians have been prominent in the AFL, NRL and boxing, though virtually absent from other mainstream pastimes, such as cricket, tennis and horse racing.

supplemented by new rhetoric, such as ‘wizardry’. Godwell concluded that a belief in ‘genetic advantage’ for Aborigines in sport was ‘held by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike’. The inference, therefore, was that Aborigines had biologically inherited athletic giftedness, and that this natural advantage over non-Aborigines been internalised and accepted to the point where it had become conventional wisdom. Godwell argued that beliefs about the collective, biologically-driven predisposition of Indigenous people to athletic prowess ‘should not be accepted without critical examination’ (2000:13), and he made a contentious point: that the ‘natural’ Aboriginal athlete was a form of ‘racist social myth’ (2000: 19) which ought to be critiqued by Indigenous opinion leaders. This is because, he insisted, racial stereotypes have the effect – intended or otherwise – of limiting the range of life and career possibilities thought ‘available’ to Aboriginal people (2000: 17). Godwell concluded that ‘Aborigines run the risk of being *typecast in life as sportspeople*’ (2000: 16).

Drawing upon Godwell’s research, we have argued (Adair and Stronach, 2011) that there are risks associated with an obsession about the capabilities of Indigenous athletic bodies. In particular, there is a (generally unspoken) assumption that *Indigenous people ought to rely on their sportive proficiency in order to command respect in wider society*. This overlooks their potential for success in areas where the body is not centre stage, such as in education, science, business, information technology, fine arts, and so on. Thus, although sport remains a crucial domain for Indigenous pride and confidence, Aboriginal athletes – like their non-Aboriginal peers – can benefit from a range of skill sets via education, training and other types of professional or cultural development. The *well-rounded Indigenous athlete* is arguably better placed to adapt to complex socio-economic environments both during elite sport and in a transition phase to life beyond the playing field.

Only a small minority of Aboriginal and Islander athletes (overwhelmingly men) go on to have careers in sport. An *overemphasis* on sport risks reducing the potential of Indigenous people (and men in particular) to their physical attributes – unless athletic participation is *combined with* education and training opportunities.

### **Aim 3: Indigenous athletes after professional sport**

Megan Stronach’s recently completed PhD thesis (2012) examined the career transition process for professional Indigenous athletes in the AFL, NRL and boxing. It therefore considered the impact of sport *beyond the playing field*, and at a time when athletes can no longer rely on their physicality to sustain a career. How they move to this next phase of life is a major challenge.

There have been *very few opportunities* for Aboriginal people, within sport, for post-athletic employment. The coaches, administrators, marketers, media commentators, and so on are overwhelmingly from non-Indigenous backgrounds. Life after sport can also be difficult for Indigenous athletes who come from rural or remote communities and wish to return, for there is often limited employment in such regions. Many retired footballers and boxers want to give “something back” to their communities, and thus act as mentors, but often *lack the skills* to know how to *make a difference*.

Stronach interviewed more than 40 players and administrators, and found that (a) many Indigenous sportsmen are unprepared for life beyond professional sport, and (b) although there are transition programs in some sports (i.e. the AFL and NRL), others (like boxing) have no support mechanism in place (Stronach and Adair, 2010). Moreover, many of the respondents argued that existing career transition programs, while well intended, do not comprise people with any experience of, or understanding about, the complexities of retirement for Indigenous people. Their connections to wider kinship networks, their wish to engage with often distant communities, and thus their sense of responsibility for a group, rather than just themselves, is not easily communicated to career advisers who work within an individualistic paradigm. Stronach's research provided an opportunity for the voices of Indigenous athletes to be heard, and what became clear is that they have complex needs in terms of preparing for life beyond sport, and then transitioning upon the point of retirement. The athletes expressed a need for Indigenous mentors to help them with this process. This might be usefully supplemented by non-Indigenous sports administrators educated about the nuances of Aboriginal culture, needs and aspirations in workplace settings.

### **Summary**

In this submission we have questioned whether Indigenous Australians are as sport active as is often assumed. We agree that physical activity is extremely important in Aboriginal and Islander communities, for both health and socio-cultural reasons. We are concerned that some sport programs (i.e. talent spotting) deflect attention and resources from *actual needs* within Indigenous communities – sport equipment, sport facilities and local administration of programs. We appreciate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander athletes have rightly been admired as iconic contributors to Australian sport. Our message, though, is that Indigenous people are *more than the sum of their physical attributes*, and so any sport development program for children must be accompanied by (or provide access to) education and training (as with the Clontarf Academies). Beyond the stereotype that Aborigines are “naturally” good at sport, there is also a practical concern. The vast majority of those who aspire to “make it” in professional sport are unable to do so; what they then turn to in respect of career aspirations is thus very important. Education and training are, once again, vital parts of the lives of Aboriginal children – and need to be given as much energy and resources as sport. For Indigenous athletes who do ascend to professional sport, we have argued that there are particular challenges for them in terms of post-career planning and transition to life after sport. The *circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sportspeople are complex* – whether coming into high performance sport or transition to life beyond. Many of these people would like to be effective mentors in rural or remote communities, but most do not believe they have the skills to actually make a difference. Programs to assist them to be leaders in the communities they left would certainly be valuable. They may be heroes for what they did on the football oval or in the boxing ring, but *life beyond the playing field is infinitely more complex and challenging*.

Sincerely,

*Daryl and Megan*

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