

The Australian



School sports losing the race

- Nicole Jeffery
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THERE wasn't much that everyone in sports administration liked about the Crawford review of sport, released by the federal government this week, but they did support one recommendation: that physical education be made a compulsory part of the school curriculum.

That proposal has universal support in the national sports community, which has noted with concern the dramatic drop in the physical abilities of young athletes coming into the elite system in the past 20 years as physical education has declined in schools.

"The young athletes we saw 20 years ago were vastly superior in all-round fitness and general co-ordination," says Australian Institute of Sport athletics coach Craig Hilliard. "The ones we see now lack fine motor co-ordination.

"Basic skills like hopping and skipping are lacking. Everything involving physical exertion in schools is seen as too risky. There's a whole element of sport and physical education that's gone out of schools because people are afraid that children will get hurt.

"It means that the athletes we get in here are far less co-ordinated than those of 20 years ago, and we have to spend the first year just getting them in condition. They also tend to succumb to injury a lot earlier. Their development and progress to a high level is taking years longer."

The Crawford panel found that the need to bring sport back into the education system emerged as "one of the strongest consistent themes" in its interviews with sport's national stakeholders.

"Physical education in schools plays a central role in breaking down barriers to participation in sport," the report says. "It provides significant health and social benefits. It was concerning to learn from experts Australia-wide that the education system no longer reliably provides the platform upon which much of the nation's sporting activity is based."

The panel discovered that federal government policy decreeing two hours of physical education be included in schools every week was not being enforced.

"There was no measurement of delivery nor was it mandatory," the report says. "In reality, participation in sport and physical activity is usually left to the discretion of individual schools and teachers to implement."

The report calls for a review of teacher training requirements to ensure all have basic physical education training, as well as the provision of more specialist physical education teachers. These findings came as no surprise to the

nation's coaches, who see on a daily basis the fallout from a school system that has neglected physical education for two decades.

Swimming Australia's national development coach Leigh Nugent says his sport has had to adjust training programs to take into account the inferior athletic skills of the present generation. "In many swimming programs there are far more detailed and comprehensive dry-land components because of the lack of general co-ordination, fitness and flexibility of young kids now," Nugent says.

"For us, flexibility and agility are the big issues. To be a top sprinter requires a high degree of athleticism and the kids now tend to have less athletic development."

Rohan Taylor, head coach at Nunawading in Melbourne, one of the nation's biggest swim clubs, is a believer in dry-land training for swimmers but has noted the drop in athleticism.

"When we take them out to play basketball or something, once upon a time everyone used to be able to play a bit, but now the hand-eye co-ordination is diminished," Taylor says. "We encourage the young kids to play other sports because we believe in the importance of athleticism and general physical development."

Athletics Australia's high performance manager Eric Hollingsworth says there has been a decline in the competency of "young kids from five to 18".

"The general level of skills across all the sports I have worked in shows that. The core skills are down: simple skills like catching, throwing and jumping."

One sport that is bucking the trend is AFL, but it is also casting its nets wider than ever through NSW and Queensland to retain its standards, and many of its young athletes are plucked from other sports that can't offer the same financial incentives.

Hollingsworth says the quality of the very best athletes remains the same, "but where 20 years ago there would have been 25, now you only get 10".

That loss of depth will eventually hurt Australia internationally, if it hasn't already, he warns. "At the very top of the tree we have lost a critical mass of athletes who would keep the best on their toes.

"That means our top athletes are not as hardened as they need to be to succeed in international competition. In the underage group, if they don't achieve a degree of competency in sport, once they feel they are bad at it, they tend not to want to do it any more.

"And I think that loss of competency will flow into coaching, officiating and volunteers, where people don't feel they will have the skills to help."

Nugent has also observed that the ranks of top talent have thinned and is concerned that lack of early exposure to sport has created a barrier to participation for a generation of Australian children. From the gathering of Australia's sports captains in Canberra this week came the message that they didn't mind what sport the youth of the nation played as long as they played something. "Just play" was the catchcry.

Jason Gulbin, who heads the Australian Sports Commission's national talent identification and development program, says general athletic development opens up a range of choices for children. A former physical education teacher, he believes passionately that all children should develop their physical abilities.

"You only have a small window to develop motor skills, neural pathways and body awareness: it's much harder to pick that up later," he says. "To me the key finding of the Crawford report is that there should be more specialist physical education teachers, particularly at primary schools. The current system is flawed and is preventing kids

from having a healthy and positive experience with sport."

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