

# A CROWN FOR AUSTRALIA

STRIVING FOR THE BEST IN OUR SPORTING NATION



Social Justice  
Statement 2014–15



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

# Chairman's **message**

**O**n behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, I present the 2014–2015 Social Justice Statement, *A Crown for Australia: Striving for the best in our sporting nation*.

The 'crown' of the title recalls Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing of an athlete's rigorous training in order to win 'a wreath that will wither' (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). In the words of the Statement, the athlete's reward is 'a forerunner of the imperishable crown that we are striving for in our spiritual lives'.

Australians are passionate about their sport, whether as participants or as supporters, whether following the fortunes of their local club or their national team. Sport brings us together, builds communities and lets us celebrate the joy of movement and skill.

Sport also holds a mirror up to our society. As the Statement says, we like to think that it reflects the best in us as individuals and as a community – but we also have to admit that it can reflect the worst in us. Sport can show us a side to our society that is not only ugly but often unjust as well.

We are becoming too familiar with violence and abuse of drugs and alcohol, both on the field and off it, on the part of players and of spectators. Tragically, the very sport that can bring disparate communities together can also become a megaphone for racism or sexism.

Yet as the Statement says, 'The goal of sport is the good of humans everywhere'.

How, then, can we help build the Kingdom of God through our sporting experience – whether playing or cheering from the sidelines?

One important way is to honour sport's genius for inclusion and recognition. Think of the great gift that Indigenous sports people, both men and women, have given Australia. This Statement includes moving accounts of groups of outsiders who have found purpose and empowerment through their participation in sport – young men from refugee backgrounds in one case, or homeless men in another.

Not least, sport makes a great contribution to the wellbeing and health of our society, both mental and physical. At a time when our life is becoming more and more sedentary, sport can ensure that we develop, care for and rejoice in the bodies that are a precious gift from God. Sport is one of the most important weapons against growing rates of obesity and circulatory disease.

In 2000, Pope John Paul II prayed that God would help the sports people he had met to be 'athletes of the spirit, to win your inestimable prize: an imperishable crown that lasts forever.'

We join Saint John Paul in that prayer.

With every blessing,



Christopher A Saunders DD  
Bishop of Broome  
Chairman, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council

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## Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

**T**he Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is the permanent assembly of the bishops of our nation and the body through which they act together in carrying out the Church's mission at a national level. The ACBC website at [www.catholic.org.au](http://www.catholic.org.au) gives a full list of Bishops Conference commissions as well as statements and other items of news and interest.



# A CROWN FOR AUSTRALIA

## STRIVING FOR THE BEST IN OUR SPORTING NATION



AP Photo/Rob Griffith

Sport is a majestic thing. It can take us to wonderful places.

Whether it's a grand final or a test series, a junior football tournament or local tennis competition, we have all seen how sport can bring communities and the nation together. Sport offers us heroes and heroines who represent our nation around the world.

However, it is in the family in our early years where most of us first encounter the majesty of sport. In the back yard: where gran and grandson become batting partners in a fiercely-contested family 'test match'. At the beach: where sand and water gently accommodate the thrills and spills of diving and catching and tackling and throwing, while the surf offers challenge and contemplation. On the oval: where football and netball and cricket connect us to teammates for the first time.

Sport is a noble thing. It introduces us to people who become lifelong friends. It gives us permission to be tribal, but without guns or death or misery – though losing can be rather unpleasant. It lets us know that life doesn't revolve around 'me'. Worthwhile achievements require others as well: we are not alone; I am with others in good times and in bad. Sport builds perseverance and resilience: hard work, success and failure, honour and humiliation are constant variables in sport. It is rare that fickleness and laziness meet success, so sport can be a wise taskmaster and often a hard one. It tells us clearly: short cuts won't do; you've got to earn it; and 'there's more in you than you realise – take a risk'.

At its best, sport offers a safe and nurturing space where rich and poor, men and women, people of all colours and creeds can meet with a common goal; a place where human dignity is more important than winning the game.

Sport is a national obsession. At work, after church, on the bus or the train, in the street, the same questions bring people together: 'How's the cricket? The golf? The footy? The tennis?'

We like to think that sport reflects the best in us, but if it does, we have to admit that it can also reflect the worst in us. It can be like a crown of thorns. Sometimes it shows things that make us ashamed. As Pope John Paul II said in an address to athletes in 2000:

***It can be a vehicle of high human and spiritual ideals when it is practised with full respect for its rules; but it can also fail in its true aim when it leaves room for other interests that ignore the centrality of the human person.<sup>1</sup>***

It is not uncommon to witness a fanatical 'win at all costs' mindset; violence on the field, on the sidelines or in the street; racist taunts, communal conflict and exclusion of minorities; abuse and exploitation of women; and greedy opportunism that turns social good into business opportunities for a few.

In this Statement, we the Catholic Bishops of Australia want to celebrate the gifts that sport brings to our country and to encourage all that is best in it. Those gifts are gifts from God. But we also need to look at another reality: the times when sport and sports people abandon their ideals, when other interests turn people into commodities, or when sections of our community are excluded from opportunity and joy.

When sport loses sight of that human good, we need to think hard about it. What do those failures tell us about ourselves as individuals and as a society?



# The **majesty** of sport

**T**he majesty of sport can be found in the joy it brings to individuals and groups. But this majesty extends much further. The goal of sport is the good of humans everywhere. It teaches us lifelong lessons, unites communities and can overcome differences and be a force for social justice and reconciliation.

Pope Pius XII, addressing a group of athletes in 1945, reminded them of the words of Saint Paul: 'Whether you eat or drink, whatever it is that you do, do it all for the glory of God' (1 Corinthians 10:31). He added: 'How can the Church not be interested in sport?'<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis has spoken of how this interest has grown:

*The bond between the Church and the world of sport is a beautiful reality that has strengthened over time, for the Ecclesial community sees in sports a powerful instrument for the integral growth of the human person. Engaging in sports, in fact, rouses us to go beyond ourselves and our own interests in a healthy way; it trains the spirit in sacrifice and, if it is organised well, it fosters loyalty in interpersonal relations, friendship, and respect for rules.<sup>3</sup>*

The Church recognises sport to be one of the great institutions of our society that helps individuals realise their human potential and builds up the bonds of the community, fostering communal initiative and responsibility.<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge the great contribution over the years made by Catholic schools and communities. We must continue to recognise that sport is a vital aspect of the society around us.

## **Personal development and the love of sport**

When we first experience sport we begin to learn lessons that can last us a lifetime, whether as a member of a team or pursuing an individual sport. We learn the discipline of playing within the rules of a sport: that you can't handle the ball in soccer, throw it forward in rugby, run with it in basketball, or bowl from beyond the crease in cricket. We learn about persistence and aspiring to our 'personal best'; that skills don't come easily; and that 'a champion team can beat a team of champions'. We learn that others' needs can come before our own, and that others may be our opponents, but they are not our enemies. We learn that we can face pain and disappointment, even humiliation, and still play and win the next day – or even in the next half.



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We learn these lessons when we are young – girls and boys playing in the back yard, in the school ground or in the park. In addition to the sports and physical education offered in Australian schools, 60 per cent of children participate in organised sport outside of school hours.<sup>5</sup> Children have said they love sport because it is fun, for the socialisation, teamwork, safe play and the growth of skills. There is now a substantial body of research showing how important sport is to the physical, emotional, moral and academic growth of young people.<sup>6</sup> As Christians, we know that there is a spiritual aspect, too, that is the foundation of our growth. Being created in the image and likeness of God is fundamental to our humanity: our bodies are intrinsic to our identity and the physical joy of movement and using skills is a precious God-given gift.

These are some of the reasons that sport is seen as a vital part of our development and why we need inspired sports teachers and coaches in our schools. The lessons that we learn from sports in our early days are ones that we can take into life in the wider community.

One prominent sports administrator has said:

***Sport issues a challenge to people to aspire to something different and better. People who participate in sport inevitably are called to achieve, be it a faster result, a more perfect play, a stronger finish or a victory. This call to achievement helps a person learn to set goals and to work hard to realise them.***<sup>7</sup>

A Catholic priest and scholar has commented:

***[S]port can help young people enter adulthood, confident of what they are good at and of the friends they have made. They can learn the importance of commitment, sharing, listening and working with others. They learn what they are good at but also how to fail and lose. A good coach helps a player become aware and respectful of others and how to cope with loss. Players learn friendship based on shared experience and struggle. They look to older players to model how to play. They look to their peers for support and companionship. These bonds can last for life.***<sup>8</sup>

Sport also offers us challenges about how we should live our daily lives. It can make us ask: *What's the right thing to do here? What is just?* It tells us that we will have to live with whatever decision we make.

The experience of Australian batsman and wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist is an example. Playing Sri Lanka in the semi-final of the 2003 World Cup, he scored 22 off the first 19 balls, including an enormous six. On the next ball he attempted a bold sweep shot but edged the ball onto his pads and into the keeper's hands. Gilchrist knew he had hit it and so did the Sri Lankans, but the umpire didn't and gave him not out.

Gilchrist could have said he was entitled to play on, but he acknowledged he was out, and walked.

His decision dismayed some teammates and many watchers, but it inspired many others, and not just cricket fans. It was a rare moment of transcendence, one in which a professional athlete became a point of reference, allowing the spirit of integrity to take centre stage and for justice to prevail.

**Sport is a community builder**

Sport is a wonderful socialiser: it enables people to gather in healthy, supportive environments. This has special benefits for young people, who need to interact with their friends. And when such interactions offer fun, competition, skills and goal-setting, there is a fertile environment for personal development and also the involvement of the local community.

When clubs promote the right culture – fairness, firmness, moral courage – there also exists a wonderful space in which to help adolescents transition into adulthood; a form of initiation where the 'elders' (coaches or managers) set goals and boundaries in a safe, caring and no-nonsense setting. In circumstances like these, young people can learn quickly to listen and flourish. The benefits flow not just to the local community, but to the nation as a whole. Research undertaken for the Australian Football League (AFL) found that, while 69 per cent of respondents regarded sports as important to them personally, 97 per cent saw it as being important to the Australian way of life.<sup>9</sup>

Sport is about more than the players or particular sporting events. Think of all of the volunteers involved in supporting local teams: parents, teachers, coaches, committee members, referees, administrators, scorers and time keepers, fundraisers, caterers and many others. Over two million people – 14 per cent of adult Australians – volunteer their time and effort to sports and physical recreation organisations. Without them, our sporting events would not be a success and, indeed, many of the 26,000 local sporting clubs around Australia would not exist.<sup>10</sup>

For fans and spectators, too, barracking for 'the team' creates a sense of belonging and pride – and common



interests grow naturally around teams of all sporting codes. While no-one suggests that simply wearing team colours or attending sporting events is community in action, they are part of what builds community. For many, being attached to a particular team goes beyond outfits and games to wider areas of interest built around this initial common interest.

So sport has a wonderful capacity to reveal and model key values and aspects of life that go way beyond the playing arena. Even when a team spends years in the doldrums, the communities of players, volunteers and supporters around them show extraordinary resilience and keep faith that one year their loyalty will pay off.

This is an important bond. It is like a 'social glue' that builds up society and holds it together through times of hardship. We think of the many regional and remote areas that have been buffeted by social and economic forces causing unemployment, loss of income, the withdrawal of industry and public services and social decline. They have experienced a kind of 'hollowing out' of their communities. For them, the local sporting club and the traditional Saturday football or netball games remain as one of the institutions providing a meeting place and support.<sup>11</sup>

We think also of the work of groups like the Clontarf Foundation, which has improved the self-esteem, school

participation and social engagement of around 2900 young Indigenous men through sports academies that harness a passion for Australian Rules and Rugby League. Since its beginning in 2000, the foundation has expanded its programs from Western Australia to the Northern Territory, Victoria and New South Wales. The school attendance rate of participants is higher than 80 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

As part of the Australian Catholic University's 'Future in Youth' program, exercise science students have travelled to Timor-Leste to provide structured coaching and training programs in soccer to over 2000 young people in Baucau. With almost 100 per cent youth unemployment and little social and economic infrastructure in the city, the program is helping to improve health, life skills and social networks of young women and men by engaging them through the sport they love.<sup>13</sup>

Initiatives such as these show how sport can help rebuild communities and develop future leaders where exclusion and crises have torn at the social fabric.

## Sport for wellbeing and social inclusion

A pressing challenge in Australia concerns our public health. We used to pride ourselves on being a nation where everyone participated in sport. We may still be a sporting nation, but we are increasingly a sedentary one,



AAP Image/Dave Hunt

and the health consequences are dire. It seems that the time we used to spend in the back yard, the ovals and on the beaches, is now spent in front of a computer or the TV. We can also have a lot of sporting fun today without touching a blade of grass or a grain of sand – all without raising a sweat.

Australia is facing a health crisis and our lack of physical activity is a major factor in this. One in two Australians is overweight and that proportion is likely to rise another 15 per cent over the next 10 years.<sup>14</sup> Obesity is a major cause of illness and death. It has become one of the largest threats to public health in Australia, at a total cost of over \$50 billion a year.<sup>15</sup>

It hardly needs saying that walking, running, swimming, stretching, cycling and so on are critical to cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength and flexibility. In today's stressful and busy world, sports and exercise can help provide a healthy distraction, and reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms.<sup>16</sup>

Sport has a vital role to play in our physical and mental health – but it can also have important benefits for the health of our society. It can open the door for many who are shut out from the society around them. There are many examples where the provision of sporting facilities or programs has been linked to a fall in crime rates.<sup>17</sup>

As well as building up society, sports provide a bridge, reaching out to those who are most vulnerable, providing an avenue into the life of the community around them.

**The Tigers Eleven**

*I think of the Tigers Eleven Soccer Club, formed in Brisbane in the early 2000s as a social outlet for unaccompanied minors who came as refugees from Afghanistan and other parts of Western Asia. The players are mainly Muslim; the team plays in a Christian church soccer competition and is managed and supported by locals from Christian churches in Brisbane. It has helped to break down many barriers between Christians and Muslims, and between Australians and asylum seekers and refugees. Some years ago, the team toured to regional areas and played against local teams, helping to change local attitudes towards asylum seekers from suspicion and fear to wholehearted support.*

Peter Arndt, Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, Archdiocese of Brisbane

**The Matthew Talbot Cricket Club**

*In the late nineties, I had the privilege of coaching and playing with the Matthew Talbot Cricket Club. It was made up of a group of homeless men and we competed in an inner-city league in Sydney. It was a remarkable journey. Men whose lives had been defined by loneliness, addiction and poverty suddenly had a reason to get out of bed. For most of them, it was their first adult experience of being part of a team.*

*One player in particular stands out: 'Nudger'. Bereft of coordination and confidence, the least gifted of us all, he persisted, and this persistence, along with a big heart, paid off. He was one of the first selected throughout the season. It was a wonderful example of sport building up a man and taking him to a place where he didn't think he belonged – in this case, the cricket field. After a slow start, the team reached the grand final ... but lost.*

Fr Peter Day

Participation in sports can be a means for those at the margins of society to move from the edges to the centre. Many individual sports men and women have become trail-blazers during and after their sporting careers. Think of some of the great Indigenous athletes: the Ella brothers in rugby, Evonne Goolagong Cawley in tennis, Michael Long in AFL or Lionel Rose in boxing. Not only did each of these people achieve sporting success themselves. They used their experience and influence to support young Indigenous people participate and find a place in their community.

Similar stories of the movement toward inclusion can be seen in the case of women who have been among the greatest of Australia's trail-blazers. Dawn Fraser remains a household name some 50 years after her Olympic feats. Athletes from Marjorie Jackson and Betty Cuthbert to Cathy Freeman and Nova Peris have become role models for Australian women – and have inspired all Australians. We continue to be proud as we watch new champions such as basketballer Lauren Jackson and cricket and soccer star Ellyse Perry.

The achievements of disabled athletes reveal inspiring stories of determination. Athletes such as Louise Sauvage and Kurt Fearnley have caught the imagination of all Australians for their extraordinary feats over more than a decade each. Eight-time gold medal winner Jacqueline Freney has justly been nominated as the 2014 Young Australian of the Year.





AFP Photo/Timothy A. Clary

These examples show us the transformative nature of sport. It reaches out to people and provides a space where differences can be set aside and people get to know each other in a different context. Sport provides a spectacular avenue for justice and peace.

This transformative power has been recognised at the international level too. At the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, the United Nations launched its International Working Group on Sport for Development and Peace. Cooperating with a range of international organisations and seeking to progress the Millennium Development Goals to address global poverty, the Working Group has recognised the role of sport in building relationships, rehumanising opposing groups, reintegrating ex-combatants, broadcasting a message of peace and creating a space for dialogue, truth and reconciliation.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 6 April as the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. Assembly President Vuk Jeremic said:

***Sport can be a powerful handmaiden for peace and reconciliation. It can bring us closer through shared celebration of achievements of universal appeal and attraction ... In effortlessly throwing asunder all human barriers, sport is indeed the world's universal language.<sup>19</sup>***

How similar is the message of Pope Francis when he addressed the European Olympic Commission in November 2013:

***It is important that those involved at the various levels of sports promote human and religious values which form the foundation of a just and fraternal society. This is possible because the language of sports is universal; it extends across borders, language, race, religion and ideology; it possesses the capacity to unite people, together, by fostering dialogue and acceptance. This is a very valuable resource!***

***I wish to encourage institutions and organisations like your own to propose, especially to the younger generations, sports initiatives as a formation for peace, sharing and coexistence among people. Sporting events are characterised by unity and not division! Build bridges, not walls.<sup>20</sup>***

Put simply, sport is good for us as people. But it really comes into its own when it bridges divides and draws people together. For our personal health, for the life of our communities, and as a nation that believes in the 'fair go' and keeping an eye out for the most vulnerable, Australia needs to be a sporting nation, both at home and abroad.



# A crown of thorns

We have seen the joy that sport can bring to individuals and to communities – to those who participate in sports and to those who support and watch them. In victory and also in defeat, it is as if we share a ‘crown of glory’ when the majestic experience of sport reaches into our lives and our communities. But there is another story, another crown to speak of: a ‘crown of thorns’ that weighs heavily as it mocks and undermines the true worth of sport and its participants. There are three particular challenges.

- Instead of enhancing personal development and the enjoyment of the game, a ‘win at all costs’ mentality can break down and even destroy the individual.
- Rather than building up the community, sport that is excessively commodified can become a honey-pot of cash, power and corruption.
- Rather than building bridges for social inclusion, vulnerable groups can be deprived of the joy of sport and face a wall of exclusion.

Pope John Paul II spoke of this inversion of the merits of sport when he addressed international Olympic organisers and athletes in 2000:

*Unfortunately there are many signs, and perhaps they are becoming more evident, of a malaise that sometimes calls into question even the ethical values that are at the basis of athletic activity. In addition to a sport that helps people, there is another that harms them; in addition to a sport that enhances the body, there is another that degrades it and betrays it; in addition to a sport that pursues noble ideals, there is another that looks only for profit; in addition to a sport that unites, there is another that divides.<sup>21</sup>*

## Winning at all costs

Sport, particularly at elite and professional levels, demands a profound concentration, constant sacrifice, and a willingness to suffer and endure. For a sports person on the field or in the dressing room, there are no excuses. The question is always there: how much more are you prepared to sacrifice, suffer, practise? How far are you willing to go to win?

This unswerving commitment and sacrifice can be inspiring, and when it pays off, the rewards are transcendent for the athletes and for their fans and



supporters. But sometimes the ‘nothing is too much’ slogan promises an illusion. Every human has a breaking point.

When the drive to win pushes individuals and teams beyond fair play and the enjoyment of the game, the dignity of the individual is undermined and the integrity of sport is put at risk.

In the hyper-competitive environment of elite sports, gaining an advantage, any advantage, becomes the ‘holy grail’; a hundredth of a second can be the difference between winning and losing. To gain the winning edge, clubs aggressively pursue all sorts of human expertise: corporate heavyweights, nutritionists, scientists, psychologists, life coaches and motivators.

It seems that this ‘win at all costs’ mentality is creeping into amateur sport, with young people particularly susceptible to pressures to perform, to play while injured, to bend the rules and move beyond the spirit of the game. A recent national survey of players, coaches and officials across all levels of sport found that negative coaching practices and athletes being pushed too hard were the two main challenges faced by players, followed by verbal abuse and players going beyond the spirit of the game. Parents and coaches were most likely to push players too hard. Parents and other players were most likely to instigate verbal abuse.<sup>22</sup> The joy of sport is lost when players are placed under this pressure. It becomes unpleasant, if not damaging. For this reason, we acknowledge the work of many schools in

introducing codes of behaviour concerning the conduct of players, parents and other spectators.

One of the most confronting challenges facing players and administrators in a hyper-competitive environment is the increasing use of performance- and image-enhancing drugs. For some, it is an offer that is very difficult to refuse. Sometimes the offer comes not from the internet or a contact at the gym, but from those running the club or the team. The Australian Crime Commission has identified a rapid growth in this market since 2009, with record numbers of seizures and arrests. The Commission confirms the use of peptides in major sporting codes and that the use of these drugs is growing in other codes and at the sub-elite level.

Sub-elite or non-professional athletes are considered a high-risk group because of the pressure to win a position in elite sport. However much we can understand the pressures that might lead athletes to consider using performance-enhancing drugs, we can never condone that use. Drugs damage the player, undermine the sport and expose individuals, teams and entire codes to criminal exploitation.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, we cannot turn away from another disillusioning aspect of sport in Australian society: the sight of elite sports people behaving badly, becoming violent and mistreating or assaulting women. Some codes are to be applauded for the steps they are taking to deal with this – to prepare athletes for the pressures they will face in what for them has suddenly become a very public life, and to give them training that will prevent violence and combat sexism and lack of respect for women.

As a society, we have a collective appetite for moral leadership, for someone to look up to and inspire us. This is a laudable thing, but needs to be tempered by common sense and fairness. After all, sporting fame not only affords our champions great privileges and opportunities; it also imposes upon them a significant burden. Along with highlighting their abilities and successes, fame spotlights their frailties and failures as well – and very publicly.

It is often said that sport builds character. In some situations, however, it would be more truthful to say that sport displays character. While the title 'role model' can be too readily overstated, when champions do good things we are all the better for it. They are models for good or evil. What they do does matter. Against the tendency of media and gossip columns to place people on pedestals and then take delight when they fall, Pope Francis urges a more nuanced approach that respects the humanity of players. Speaking to the men's soccer teams of Argentina and Italy in 2013, he said:

***... before being champions, you are men, human beings with your merits and defects, with a heart and ideas, hopes and problems. And so, even though you are famous, you must always remain men in sports and in life. Men, heralds of humanity.***<sup>24</sup>

In the end, we should all – athletes and spectators alike – cherish the capacity of sport to change us, to make where we live a better place: to model goodness and decency and fairness. But to do so, not only must the champions be humble and grounded, so must the spectators as well.

In sport, as in everything else, Christ is our model. Participation in sport calls for a spirit of generosity, of service, of sacrifice and of humility. These are the very qualities of Christ:

***Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6–8)***

Sport must never be reduced to a kind of Machiavellian project where the ends justify the means and people are dehumanised. It is dangerous. *It's just not cricket ...* or football, or netball ...

## Big business, big money

Sport is big business. In Australia it is a growing sector that contributes greatly to our economy. Australians spent \$8.2 billion on sports products in 2009–10 or 1.5 per cent of total household expenditure. The sport and physical recreation sector offers growing career opportunities, particularly for young Australians. There were over 95,000 people whose main job was in this sector at the time of the 2011 Census.<sup>25</sup>

Global reach and the huge financial resources have made sport accessible to millions of Australians in ways that could never have been imagined a few decades ago. Modern professional sports require enormous investments – both personally, from athletes themselves, and from governments and corporations to build venues and support the enterprises that sports have become. The face of sport has been altered by big money. To take only one example, the AFL's revenue comes primarily from sale of broadcasting rights, which in 2011 were worth \$1.23 billion in a five-year deal.<sup>26</sup>



With such financial energy comes enormous pressure. Sport becomes a commercial entity. Elite athletes can make vast sums from playing and as much or more from endorsements, but in return, they can become the 'property' of the corporations they play for. They and even umpires and referees can seem like mobile advertising screens. Competitions, events or even TV replays are named for a sponsor. Events can be timed not for the convenience of the fans and families who want to watch in the stadium but for a national or global TV audience. Ticket prices are sometimes astronomical and beyond the reach of the average family.

The growing influence of sport as an entertainment industry can reduce participation to a kind of passive 'onlooking'. It can even interrupt religious observance and the Lord's Day. In 2004, Pope John Paul II reminded us here in Australia of the weakening of Sunday observance:

*When Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes subordinate to a secular concept of 'weekend' dominated by such things as entertainment and sport, people stay locked within a horizon so narrow that they can no longer see the heavens.<sup>27</sup>*

A decade later, this challenge remains and has intensified. We see that not only sports and entertainment, but a broad range of social arrangements including weekend trading have further encroached into the sacred time of Sunday. Where the market place dominates Sunday and turns it into 'just another day', individuals and families are damaged, as are the worshipping communities, and the nation's Christian heritage.

This highly commercialised environment can throw up many ethical conflicts. For years, people of good will battled to break the link between tobacco advertising and sport. There continues to be public concern about alcohol advertising in sport and its effect on young people and the wider community.<sup>28</sup> Most recently, there has been a public outcry over the dramatic rise of sports betting, particularly the intrusion of advertisements for online bookmakers. The impact and language of betting are reaching a wider public than ever before – and affecting the young. It is commonplace to hear children predicting the outcome of a match by quoting odds rather than analysing players' form.

In Australia, the total recorded expenditure on gambling in 2008–09 was just over \$19 billion – an average of \$1,500 per adult who gambled. Betting on sports other than racing increased by 278 per cent last decade.<sup>29</sup> The Australian Crime Commission says that this increase has been driven by the rise of both Australian

and overseas corporate betting agencies, by the easing of restrictions on nationwide advertising, and by developments in technology.<sup>30</sup>

This issue becomes critical when we hear of the growing influence of organised crime for illegal gain. According to the Australian Crime Commission:

*The integrity of professional sport in Australia is increasingly being threatened, with organised criminal groups and identities developing an increasing presence in the professional sport sector. As the popularity of sports betting grows, organised crime groups will increasingly target professional sport.<sup>31</sup>*

This is a global problem. Organised criminal syndicates involved in drug trafficking, money laundering, match-fixing and fraud are targeting players, coaches, officials and support staff. Professional sports and sports clubs are vulnerable to the infiltration of criminal elements through sponsorships and other business relationships.<sup>32</sup>

Early in 2013, Europol announced it had uncovered a network of over 400 match and club officials, players and serious criminals suspected of attempting to fix more than 380 professional football matches in Europe. It is estimated they had generated over €8 million in betting profits and over €2 million in bribes to those involved in the matches. In the process Europol identified another 300 dubious matches outside Europe.<sup>33</sup>

These criminal groups are now targeting sub-elite sports, because of the lower level of official scrutiny and the greater ease with which individuals can be corrupted. Apparently, criminal identities and groups may spend years grooming athletes to ultimately engage in practices such as match-fixing.<sup>34</sup>

Arrests in 2013 for alleged match-fixing in Victorian Premier League suggest that criminal syndicates are expanding their markets globally. This is a threat that we cannot take lightly. The potential for corruption poses a direct threat to players and teams, to local sporting clubs and events, and to the integrity of sport itself.

Who's in? Who's out?

Sport is a gift to individuals and communities. It gives joy to millions and brings the opportunity for social inclusion and unity. For particular groups, there have been extraordinary high points – heroes and heroines who have changed their communities or carved a place in history. Others, however, continue to experience exclusion and isolation.

The Age/Wayne Ludbey



Instead of bridges, they have encountered walls.

There are many groups whose participation in organised sports and recreational activity has been affected by the commodification of sport, the merchandising of equipment and higher prices. People experiencing poverty have limited opportunities. Seventy per cent of people who are employed participate in sport, while only 55 per cent of people who have withdrawn from the labour market are participating.<sup>35</sup> Those in the richest 20 per cent of households have a participation rate of 80 per cent. This falls to a little over 45 per cent for those in the poorest quintile.<sup>36</sup> The participation rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults is only 30 per cent. And people with disabilities, who face a range of barriers including physical limitation, access issues and much higher levels of poverty, have a participation rate of only 24 per cent.<sup>37</sup>

We have spoken of how important sport is for the growth of children. It is a shock to hear of a growing number of parents who are unable to meet the rising costs of organised sports. A survey of over 400 parents of 5–12-year-old children found that cost was a significant barrier. The major expenses were for uniforms, followed by entry fees to sports centres, club membership, coaching fees and sports equipment. A third of parents said they would be a lot more likely to allow their children to participate if prices were lower. The cost pressures were higher for poorer families and those in non-metropolitan centres.<sup>38</sup>

In the world of professional sport, too, cost can be a barrier. Where clubs, sporting codes, athletes and teams cannot attract media interest and sponsorships, certain groups are disadvantaged. Female athletes, sports people with disabilities and the minor codes generally receive very little television coverage.<sup>39</sup> They have far greater difficulty in gaining funds through product or venue sponsorships and investment in the development of their teams. Lack of coverage and low investment can be a vicious cycle in an economic environment where corporations are focused on maximising the financial return they will receive on an investment.

One of the most confronting forms of exclusion as a sporting nation is the racism we have witnessed on and off the field, across sporting codes and at professional and amateur levels. We think particularly of the racist taunts against Indigenous players by players and spectators. Many have shown enormous courage in confronting racist attitudes, advocating for Indigenous rights and working for the betterment of their codes and communities. While they have suffered the indignity of racism, they have worked admirably to change their sport and their society.

Remember how Nicky Winmar captured the imagination of Australians in 1993 when he confronted racist taunts with a defiant affirmation of his own identity. In that unforgettable image, he points with pride to the colour of his skin and names his race as the issue. In 1995, Michael Long pursued the issue of racism beyond inadequate mediation arrangements, resulting in 'Rule 30'. Long said, 'The AFL's racial and religious vilification rule doesn't just cover Indigenous players; it's for everyone of all colours, races, and religions. It doesn't only apply to football: it's the way we must live.'<sup>40</sup>

Another AFL player, Adam Goodes, attracted national attention when he engaged with a young person over the racist taunts shouted at him during a game. In being named 2014 Australian of the Year, the National Australia Day Council said he was chosen 'for his leadership and advocacy in the fight against racism both on the sporting field and within society – a stance which has won him the admiration and respect of people around Australia.'<sup>41</sup>

People like these have been a force for greater awareness and change, not just in their codes, but in all codes and at all levels of sport and more broadly in Australian society. There are many other examples of sports men and women who have been a force for change – working to ensure that sport is inclusive and seeking to transform us into a truly sporting nation.



# A crown that lasts forever

**D**o you not realise that, though all runners in the stadium take part in the race, only one of them gets the prize? Run like that – to win. Every athlete concentrates completely on training, and this is to win a wreath that will wither, whereas ours will never wither. So that is how I run, not without a clear goal; and how I box, not wasting blows on air. I punish my body and bring it under control, to avoid any risk that, having acted as a herald for others, I myself may be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

We have spoken about the blessings that sport offers us as individuals and as a community. The ‘wreath’ that Saint Paul speaks about is a great thing – a reward for rigorous training of both body and spirit and a forerunner of the imperishable crown that we are striving for in our spiritual lives. It is not an earthly crown that will perish or a crown of thorns that will diminish our shared humanity.

Sport is one valuable element in our work to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth – a kingdom where all are included and empowered. As Pope John Paul says, Saint Paul, in this passage, is drawing a contrast between the stadium races of Corinth, in which there could be only one winner, and the higher race – one in which everyone can be a winner.<sup>42</sup> The point is that we all run together.

That inclusiveness and unity is something that Pope Francis spoke of in 2013:

**... our whole life moves towards a goal; and this search – the search for the goal – is strenuous, it demands a struggle, commitment. And it is important not to run alone! In order to arrive you must run together: the ball is passed from hand to hand and you move forward together until you reach the goal. Then you celebrate!**<sup>43</sup>

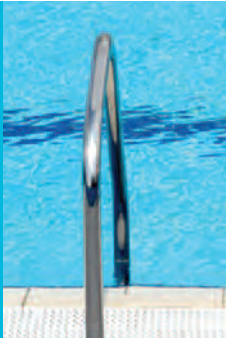
In the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*, the character of the athlete Eric Liddell is given these lines:

**I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure.**

That memorable phrase recalls another passage from Paul’s letter (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) in which he reminds us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. ‘So use your body for the glory of God’, he tells us. Pope John Paul commented that sport is not merely a physical activity but, like everything human, it is spiritual. Sport ‘is not just physical strength and muscular efficiency, but it also has a soul and must show its complete face’, the Pope said.<sup>44</sup>

So when we ‘glorify God in our bodies’ we also glorify God in our spirit. Sport is an opportunity to celebrate ourselves as a marvel of divine creation – as unified beings, rejoicing in the opportunity to come closer to God through the Incarnation of Christ. Pope Benedict XVI referred to:

**... the Incarnate Word, Light of the world that illumines man in all his dimensions, including sports. There is nothing human – except sin – that the Son of God by becoming man did not give worth to. He ‘worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved’, as the Second Vatican Council reminded us ... in Gaudium et Spes (n. 22).**<sup>45</sup>



## Beauty, comradeship, generosity

It should come as no surprise that the Church has so much to say about sport. It is because sport is an integral and fascinating part of our society. Indeed, many aspects of sport resonate strongly and perhaps even embody some of the key principles of the Church’s social teaching.

In the development of each person, we see that sport promotes the inherent dignity of the individual, the ‘beauty’ of each person created in the image and likeness of God. Sport is for building the God-given dignity of the person – not destroying it.

In building up communities, sport fulfils a vital role in promoting the common good, a ‘camaraderie’ or comradeship that extends well beyond the playing field. Sport is for building communities – not destroying them.

In showing a preferential option for those who are vulnerable and oppressed, sport shows a ‘generosity’, a special concern that reaches out to anyone who is in need. Sport is for building bridges – not walls.

Pope Francis says:

*... during the game, when you are out on the pitch, you display beauty, generosity and camaraderie. If a match lacks these qualities it loses force, even if the team wins. There is no room for individualism; team coordination is paramount ... It is true that national and international organisations professionalise sport, and it should be this way. But this professional dimension must never push aside the initial vocation of an athlete or team: be amateurs. When an athlete, even a professional one, cultivates this dimension of being an 'amateur', society benefits and that person strengthens the common good with the values of generosity, camaraderie and beauty.<sup>46</sup>*

The world of sport has much to offer us as a sporting nation – a nation that strives also to be fair and just.

### **The transforming power of sport**

There are two burning questions that sit deeply in every human heart: 'Am I somebody?', 'Do I have a place?' These are questions of human dignity and belonging. Everybody seeks this dignity and belonging and sport is just one way in which we can find this meaning in life.

These questions are particularly important for people who face greater challenges than most in our society. They are questions that come wrapped in bodies of all different shapes, sizes, abilities, creeds and colours:

**The young man marginalised because of his weight.**

**The teenager immersed in a life of crime and gangs.**

**The woman confined to a wheelchair.**

**The loner who doesn't know how to belong.**

**The child excluded because of the colour of her skin.**

For many, these different circumstances become a struggle between life and death, prosperity and poverty, misery and joy, hope and despair, dignity and humiliation. And, for many, it is sport that changes everything:

**The young man carrying too much weight is now carrying his teammate off the field.**

**The teenage gangster is now a man who carries a football instead of a weapon.**

**The wheelchair athlete can now be on a podium listening to her national anthem.**

**The loner now belongs to a church soccer team.**

**The girl is now included in the team, because that's what sport demands: the only colours that matter are the team's colours.**

For many people sport offers an answer and, as people of faith, we are called to recognise the transformative power of sport for all, particularly the most vulnerable. That is why we must treasure and safeguard sport from those forces that undermine its integrity.

We call on all levels of Australian society to protect and promote the best in our sporting nation.

As a nation, we must defend the integrity of sport from corruption and organised crime that undermine the transforming power of sport in the lives of individuals, communities and our country.

Local communities are called to harness the love of sport and the contribution of players, volunteers and spectators for the good of all and with a welcoming spirit that reaches out to people who are excluded and in need.

Each individual and family has a role to encourage participation in sport for personal development, where the discipline of training is rewarded with the satisfaction of performance, where competition is balanced with comradeship, and where observance of the rules encompasses also a spirit of generosity.

We are sisters and brothers – athletes running together in this human race. United in the race, we must remember that sport is a means of celebrating our own human identity, an occasion to realise ourselves as women and men fully alive.

When we rejoice in it, we rejoice in the continuing creation of God and the human nature that Jesus shares with us. In this context, let us pray that we will be transformed in body, mind and spirit.

*Lord Jesus Christ, help these athletes to be your friends and witness to your love ... help them to achieve a harmonious and cohesive unity of body and soul.*

*May they be sound models to imitate for all who admire them. Help them always to be athletes of the spirit, to win your inestimable prize: an imperishable crown that lasts forever. Amen!<sup>47</sup>*



# WANTED: Volunteer Workers

## Kimberley Catholic Volunteer Service



The Diocese of Broome, Western Australia, urgently requires volunteers to assist with the work of the local Church on Aboriginal Missions. There are various important voluntary tasks: administration, building maintenance, gardening, shop staffing, cooking, cleaning. Placements are preferred for a period of six months to two years.

In return for being part of the team, we offer accommodation, living expenses and an allowance.

### For further details and an application form please contact:

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**Bishop Christopher Saunders,  
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