

# GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT: AN AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY

Lisa Gowthorp  
Bond University, Australia

## Keywords

Sport governance, High performance sport management, The Olympic Games

## Background

The structure of the Australian sports system is a top-down hierarchy overseen by the Federal Government. The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) is the government body responsible for overseeing the governance, management and funding of National Sporting Organisations (NSOs). The NSOs are responsible for achieving success at international sporting competitions, including the Olympic Games. The ASC provides the majority of high performance funding and resources for NSOs, who rely heavily on this support to operate effectively in order to achieve international sporting results. Following an independent review of the Australian sport system, the review panel described the Australian high performance sport system as “one of the greatest inefficiencies in delivering elite success on the world stage” (Crawford, 2009, p. 17). A disappointing performance by the Australian Olympic Team at the London 2012 Olympic Games further highlighted the need to examine the Australian high performance sport system. As a result, the emphasis for examination was directed towards the ASC-NSO relationship and the governance of these two organisations. In order to improve the ASC-NSO relationship, findings by Arnold, Fletcher and Molyneux (2012) suggested that leaders and managers within elite sport must; focus on establishing an approach to strengthen relationships; attempt to understanding roles within each other’s organisations; and develop contextual awareness of tasks, in order to maximise the attainment of international sporting performance objectives. Thus, their study concluded that Olympic sport programs if successfully led, managed and supported will ultimately produce positive performance outcomes in elite sport.

## Aim of research / methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the ASC and Olympic NSOs to determine the effect the relationship had on Olympic performance. Five Olympic NSOs were examined, including; Athletics Australia, Cycling Australia, Rowing Australia, Swimming Australia and Yachting Australia. All five NSOs are successful Olympic sports in Australia, who have consistently achieved results at previous Olympic Games. Furthermore, each NSO receives significant funding from the ASC and as such are expected to continually achieve success at the Olympic Games. The ASC-NSO relationship was examined through an agency theory framework. According to agency theorists, problems within an organisation are usually associated with relationships among stakeholders and underlying ‘contracts’ or working arrangements that are the basis of these relationships (Mason & Slack, 2005). The research examined the ‘contract’ between the ASC and the NSO, gaining an understanding of the ASC-NSO working arrangements, as well as identifying potential issues that may affect Olympic performance. The research incorporated a qualitative methodology that utilised document analysis, insider information and semi-structured in-depth interviews.

## Findings

The findings identified reasons why governments are involved in high performance sport and highlighted the implications associated with government involvement in daily NSO operations. The NSOs suggested the ASC’s involvement in high performance sport should be as a funding provider only, and resented the ASC directing and governing their programs and operations. Furthermore, the NSOs preference was to gain high performance advice and leadership from the Australian Institute of Sport, as the ASC was not perceived as experts in high performance sport and therefore unable to add value to an NSO’s high performance operations. The findings indicated a lack of synergy between ASC expectations and the NSO’s operational capacity. The ASC implemented national policy documents, planning and reporting procedures for NSOs in order to provide accountability measures for Government funding and for measuring international sporting performance. The results suggested that government-led agendas often frame sport policy, rather than the longer term interests and development of specific sports. In addition, the findings highlighted concerns regarding the sustainability of high performance sport and international sporting success in Australia. Furthermore, the findings also identified a lack of a unified and collaborative high performance sport system in Australia. The ASC identified itself as the leader of high performance sport in Australia; however, the findings of this research concluded that the ASC does not currently have the capacity, capability and knowledge to fulfil this role. Recommendations to improve this situation are offered.

## References

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