

STANDING STILL NO OPTION

# Sports tsars brace for change



Off-field leaders: The chief executives from different sporting codes who took part in the latest ANZ WA/WestBusiness CEO Voice event. Pictured: Megan Powell

### The executives at the top of WA's sporting codes are preparing to shake up the way they do business to meet society's demands. Ben Harvey reports

Studying an increasingly fickle audience is emerging as the most pressing problem facing WA sport, the chief executives of the State's leading codes have warned.

Meeting the demands of social-media obsessed fans was vying with the fight for resources as sports' biggest headache, according to 16 leading sports executives who attended this week's Australian Institute of Management WA/WestBusiness CEO Voice event.

The chief executives, who spend much of their time competing with each other for funding, found common ground in the problem of how to change their codes to retain players, members and fans.

Swimming WA chief executive Darren Bazilly summed up the mood of the room when he said: "I wonder if we are not all guilty of saying, well this is the way I grew up in sport."

"I think there is a real danger for sport at the moment that we have this disconnect between what is happening in society and what we are doing," he said.

"People have got more choice than ever and I wonder if we in sport are reacting to that. What I

have seen in the US is the disconnect between the entertainment space and the reality of what the human endeavour is all about."

Football West boss Peter Hugg said soccer was feeling the heat.

"If you look at what people consider to be tradition -- 11 a side, Saturday afternoon on a grass pitch. Now we have beach football, summer six, indoor football, super sevens, outdoor eight, football five, FIFA 2011," he said.

"The problem of retaining the fan base was even more worrying than retaining athletes, other executives warned.

Perth Wildcats chief Nick Marvin identified online as the greatest threat to his code.

"We are fearful people will stop coming to games because it is all online," he said. "How do you get the product to evolve to get people out of their house, come to the venue and go home?"

WA Football Commission head Gary Walton suggested the length of games could be putting people off.

"Are people willing to get to spend five hours to get to, get from and watch a sporting event? They may have 20 years ago but not necessarily today," he said.

"Are we willing to be brave

enough to restructure our games to meet societal demands? We are seeing shorter versions of different games to deal with that."

Long-serving West Coast Eagles boss Trevor Nisbet said there was evidence that fans were starting to opt for the lounge room experience. Some West Coast fans preferred being on the waiting list because it meant they would watch five or six games live "and the other games on TV."

The problem of shortening attention spans was acute for Rowing WA chief Luke Callier, who said interest in his sport spiked around the Olympics but fell away quickly. "The difficulty is attracting kids to a sport where it is six or eight years before you are going to be in a podium."

**NEED FOR A UNITED VOICE**  
The CEO Voice guests agreed they should be a stronger lobby group.

"If we added up everyone's membership base it would be pretty significant," basketball great and RV Sport chief executive Andrew Vilhrov said.

Mr Hugg said sporting bodies needed to "more militantly" warn road too much was expected.

"We are trying to be all things to all people," he said. "We, as an

organisation, are involved in something like eight health programs. When was it sport's job to save the world?"

Rugby WA boss Mark Sindorberry said that "we don't have a united voice that is heard with a single message".

Mr Nisbet said the benefits of sport were underused.

"We haven't educated the community that if you get kids playing sports you aren't going to need the hospital," he said. "They are in least environments and there is an opportunity for them to grow in other areas. It helps us with health, with education, with social well-being."

**HAIL THE VOLUNTEER**  
Mr Sindorberry said most codes were "under resourced on the administration side" and questioned existing structures.

"Our corporate structures detract or assist from our aspirations as organisations? I think we need a conversation about private ownership or community ownership -- structures that might assist the sport," he said.

## THE CEO VOICE SERIES

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"It's getting very hard to get volunteers these days because you have got to have a police clearance, you have got to do this, you have got to do that," middle-distance Olympian and shadow sport and recreation minister Peter Watson said.

**FIGHT FOR FACILITIES**  
Department of Sport and Recreation director general Ron Alexander is bracing for fierce demand for sports facilities.

"You may be living next to a school where your kids go but after 3.30pm you get locked out for safety reasons," he said.

"It is happening in government schools and private schools. It usually happens because someone commissions a risk management report and there are a couple of back-letter lawyers on the school board.

"The perfect storm comes when we have higher densities, so at a time when sportspeople are looking for more space... schools are putting fences around themselves."

Surfing WA chief Mark Lane said red tape was a problem.

"We have moved so far away from common sense with the amount of forms and applications we have to fill out for a single program," he said. "Surfers have plenty of playing fields out there. There are just big fish with sharp teeth that like to swim in

them. With every single event, the issue of compliance is getting greater and greater."

Ms Smith-Gelder said the Building the Education Revolution program was misguided.

"Nobody should have got anything at a school unless it was for multiple use," she said.

Nottall WA boss Simon Taylor said some netball clubs were turning children away.

"Wanneroo has got 67 netball courts," he said. "How

many more can you put in?"

Waterpolo WA chief Dale Lalaitany said his sport was at a particular disadvantage because it required facilities that are 25m in length. "Not many LGAAs like to dig holes, they prefer to fill them in," he said.

Mr Walton predicted a time when "the oval, whatever shape it may be, starts to have as many lines as a basketball court that turns into a netball court, which turns into a volleyball court."



Simon Taylor: chief executive of Netball WA

We have clubs and associations that are having to turn away kids.



Darren Bazilly: chief executive of Swimming WA

People don't know how to relate to each other. That wasn't there 10 years ago.



John Sackton: chief executive of WA Rugby League

If they (the NRL) want growth we can give them growth. But we need fuel in the tank.



Trevor Nisbet: chief executive of the West Coast Eagles

Sport helps us with health, with education, with social well-being.



Andrew Wilhove: former basketball player and chief executive of RV Sports

Sport's power to get a kid's attention is an untapped resource.



Ron Alexander: head of the Department of Sport and Recreation

Sport is about participation. That's the dog, the tail is elite sport.



Nick Marvin: chief executive of the Perth Wildcats

We are fearful people will stop coming to games because it is all online.



Gary Walton: chief executive of the WA Football Commission

If we don't have the fields to play on we are in trouble.



Mark Lane: chief executive of Surfing WA

With every single event the issue of compliance is getting greater and greater.



Peter Watson: Olympian and sport and recreation shadow minister

We have to get schools to open up their ovals.



Peter Hugg: chief executive of Football West

We are trying to be all things to all people. When was it sport's job to save the world?



Mark Sindorberry: chief executive of Rugby WA

We are all under resourced on the administration side.



Luke Callier: chief executive of Rowing WA

Creating your own media channels is important.



Dale Saklatvala: chief executive of Water Polo WA

We need some alternative income streams.



Diane Smith-Gelder: business leader and former Basketball Australia chair

Funding is available but you only get it for a particular program. You don't get it for the administration.



Christina Matthews: chief executive of the WACA

We are naive that somewhere in our code that (drugs) don't exist.