



Athletics Australia's Submission to the Select Committee on the 2026  
Commonwealth Games Bid

## **Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid**

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## 1. ABOUT ATHLETICS AUSTRALIA

Athletics Australia (AA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a Submission to the Inquiry being conducted by the Select Committee into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid (the Inquiry).

AA's submission will address matters relating to clauses (f) and (g) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

AA is the national governing body for the sport of athletics in Australia and is recognised as such by the World Athletics (WA), Commonwealth Games Australia (CGA), the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), Paralympics Australia (PA), and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC). Together with our State and Territory-based Member Associations, AA is charged with ensuring the encouragement and promotion of athletics in Australia and acting in the best interests of the sport of athletics from grassroots participation and athlete pathways through to high-performance.

AA is also charged with ensuring adequate representation of Australia and driving successful outcomes in athletics at the Commonwealth Games, the Olympic Games, the Paralympic Games and other international meetings. Based at Athletics House in the Melbourne suburb of Albert Park, AA is a not-for-profit organisation.

Athletics is one of the biggest participation sports globally and in Australia and has led the way with regard to inclusion and equality for over 100 years. More than 3.7 million Australians participate in Athletics, while 1.2 million Australians indicated that athletics is the sport with which they have the strongest affinity. Across our participant and competition base, we have a demonstrated commitment to gender equality and provide opportunities for athletes from all walks of life to become involved in our sport. Our *Athletics for the Outback* and *Raise the Bar* programs focus on delivering athletics clinics and events in remote and regional communities for young Indigenous Australians. *Raise the Bar* uses athletics as the vehicle to expose Indigenous students in years 10, 11 and 12 from across Australia to the various tertiary education and career opportunities available to them.

At a high-performance level, Australian athletics is thriving. Standout performances at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games saw Nicola Olyslagers take home silver in the High Jump, Kelsey-Lee Barber bronze in the Javelin, Ash Moloney bronze in Decathlon, along with incredible Olympic final performances from the likes of Jessica Hull and Stewart McSweyn. Two weeks later during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, we saw Madison de Rozario (T53 800m and T54 Marathon), James Turner (T36 400m) and Vanessa Low (T61 Long Jump) collect gold medals.

At the 2022 World Athletics Championships in Oregon, we crowned two World Champions in Eleanor Patterson (High Jump) and Kelsey-Lee Barber (Javelin). Western Australia's Nina Kennedy soared to bronze in the pole vault. Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games saw Australian athletes win 24 medals, including ten gold.

In 2023, the Australian Team performances lifted another notch achieving a record six medals at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest and a further 14 medals at the World Para Athletics Championships in Paris. The current Australian Athletics Team lays

strong claims to rival the greatest. World Champions Nina Kennedy, James Turner and Maria Strong produced a golden climax to a year of excellence beginning at the 2023 Chemist Warehouse Australian Summer of Athletics, which saw big names deliver record crowds and television viewers.

### Team Australia Snapshot

#### 2021 TOKYO OLYMPIC GAMES

	Athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Top 4-8	SB	PB	NR	AR
Female	35	0	1	1	6	7	4	2	
Male	28	0	0	1	5	4	7	2	
Total	63	0	1	2	11	11	11	4	0

#### 2022 EUGENE WORLD ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

	Athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Top 4-8	SB	PB	NR	AR
Female	31	2	0	1	5	4	5	0	1
Male	31	0	0	0	3	3	1	1	
Total	62	2	0	1	8	7	6	1	1

#### 2022 BIRMINGHAM COMMONWEALTH GAMES

	Athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Top 4-8	SB	PB	NR	AR
Female	51	6	5	3	24	3	5		
Male	40	4	5	2	18	3	4		
Total	91	10	10	5	42	6	9	0	0

#### 2023 BUDAPEST WORLD ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

	Athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Top 4-8	SB	PB	NR	AR
Female	37	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
Male	29	0	0	1	3	1	2	1	
Total	66	1	2	3	5	3	4	2	1

#### 2023 PARIS WORLD PARA ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

	Athletes	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Top 4-8	SB	PB	NR	AR
Female	15	1	3	2	19				
Male	22	2	5	1	14				
Total	37	3	8	3	33				

Note:

SB – Season Best, PB – Personal Best, NR – National Record, AR – Area Record

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AA was positioned to provide a multi-faceted contribution to the Victoria 2026 Commonwealth Games (VIC2026), as the only integrated (able and para-athlete) international multi-sport event being hosted in Australia prior to the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Brisbane 2032).

The most significant and public role AA plays is in the preparation and leadership of the High-Performance program, which delivers the athletes who would have competed in VIC2026 and will contest Brisbane 2032. In addition, there are significant underpinning programs, which deliver those athletes to the startline such as: talent identification and pathways, coaching, competition preparation and world-leading specific high-performance preparations. These programs are long-term initiatives that exist year round; they cannot be turned on in the final six months before a major Games. All facets of these programs need to be constantly refined, developed and delivered throughout to achieve success.

The successful delivery of international events such as VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032 are highly reliant on all National Sporting Organisations, in particular AA, to provide:

- the technical knowledge required for the building of the venues;
- the adherence to World Athletics specifications; and
- the experience to deliver the competition expected by the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), as well as media partners and the general public.

AA's assistance to these events extends to the recruitment, provision and preparation of the 130+ volunteer Technical Officials, testing of the competition environment and the building and support for interest in the sport.

The cancellation of VIC2026 has had and continues to have a devastating impact on our sport and our athletes. The manner in which the news of the cancellation was delivered further compounded the angst, with the then Premier of Victoria stating that he made no apology for cancelling the Games to instead invest in regional Victoria. The upheaval this decision has caused for athletics in Victoria and Australia, as well as the Commonwealth Games is immeasurable, with a blatant disregard for the significant logistical, emotional, financial and reputational damage caused. The Commonwealth Games brand may never recover from this episode, and in that, hundreds of past athletes who have competed in the green and gold for Australia with pride will now experience a diminished public perception on the value of their performances in this event.

Specifically, the VIC2026 cancellation has impacted:

- the reputation of Victoria and Australia as an event host, and therefore our ability to attract elite athletes to Australia to participate in our domestic competition series, including the highest profile event in the southern hemisphere, the Maurie Plant Meet – Melbourne, a World Athletics Continental Tour Gold Meet;
- the return to a regular 4-year competition cycle for Australia's elite athletes, already disrupted over the previous three years by COVID (more so in Victoria than anywhere)

else) and now further impacts on athlete competition plans with uncertainty over 2026 with no host for the Games being confirmed as yet;

- structural pathway for the next generation of Australian athletes trying to break through in international competition. Notably, many of our Australian stars first launched onto the international scene via the Commonwealth Games including 16-year-old Cathy Freeman, the first Indigenous Australian person to become a Commonwealth Games gold medalist in Auckland in 1990, and then little-known 23-year-old Steve Hooker who secured gold in his first major international competition at the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games;
- the ability to inspire Aussie kids, watching homegrown heroes take on other nations on home soil;
- AA's ability to identify, develop and retain the technical knowledge required to successfully deliver international events of this stature;
- AA's opportunity for financial recovery from overseas/international competition with a home Commonwealth Games, a celebration of Commonwealth Games sport and the pathway towards the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic and Paralympic Games and ultimately 2032 Brisbane; and
- the commercial opportunities for AA and its Member Associations via our grass roots participation programs and the commercial opportunity for our High-Performance athletes, now with zero possibility of maximising the interest in and success of Team Australia at the VIC2026 Games.

None of these impacts will be confined to Victoria. They will carry forward to Brisbane 2032.

The legacy opportunities from major international events such as VIC2026 and Brisbane 2032 should be significant. These legacies, however, must include those who put on the show, being the Commonwealth Olympic and Paralympic sports, and not primarily the professional football codes. Even before the cancellation of VIC2026, AA had concerns about the legacy benefit for athletics, and this has only increased since the cancellation with a scaling down of the proposed legacy venue in Ballarat.

The past two iterations of the Commonwealth Games have provided no infrastructure legacy to Athletics. In fact, since 2010 there has been a loss of the warm-up track for Melbourne 2006 (originally a legacy of the 1956 Olympic Games), the traditional home of Athletics in Victoria, Olympic Park, which was demolished so AFL players didn't have to walk too far to train.

Athletics fares poorly in relation to Games infrastructure legacy with Games athletics tracks often being temporary and the long-term facilities benefit being to delivered to sports such as AFL and cricket.

Infrastructure facilities, insofar as they exist in Victoria (and nation-wide), do not allow for athletics as a sport to flourish, or be prioritised, with venues being either not suitable for competition delivery, or managed as multi-sport venues limiting access for athletes to train due to other stakeholders being given priority access.

Equally, funding for the sport of athletics should reflect the status of the sport in contributing to Games success. In this context, AA contends that athletics universal appeal as demonstrated through the delivery of the highest number of athletes, the highest number

of participating nations and the highest audience and viewer numbers, should result in the delivery of dedicated facility infrastructure for athletics.

AA would welcome the opportunity of working more closely with the Victorian Government to maximise legacy for the whole of the sport of athletics, our athletes and the communities where they live.

Recruitment and retention of volunteers is also becoming increasingly difficult. For a sport like athletics, which relies on large volunteer workforces, the impact of VIC2026 cancellation is even more significant. Major events provide a significant boost to morale, encouraging new recruits and ensuring retention and ongoing training in the current cohort in readiness for the excitement of a home Games. The cancellation of VIC2026 means an urgent pivot and complete overhaul of AA's Officials Recruitment and Preparation program.

The impact on our participation programs is also significant. As a result of the cancellation, there will be no boost from Australians connecting with their hometown heroes in a home Games – it is a lost opportunity and massive financial hit to our sport.

The uplift that comes with hosting a home Games has evaporated overnight, and as a sport, we are left floundering to adapt and deliver while so much uncertainty still abounds.

We remain in limbo with regard to planning our 2026 (and 2027) event calendars while uncertainty remains around the re-scheduling of the Games, both in terms of timing and location, impacting commercial opportunities. The impact on high-performance athletes, AA and our Member Associations across the country will likely flow into the years ahead, as we remain hamstrung in planning schedules, travel and competition until the 2026 edition of the Games is resolved.

In addressing clauses (f) of (g) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, the four recommendations AA has set out in this submission have been structured to address:

1. Fit-for-purpose infrastructure legacy from VIC2026 that must be provided for the sport of athletics, our athletes and the communities where they live, and the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government to build a state-wide facilities plan for the next decade.
2. Greater access to existing and future infrastructure for athletics, including prioritisation for high-performance athletes to prepare for competition (domestic and international).
3. Sport capacity building initiatives to be supported with a particular focus on the Officials Recruitment and Preparation program to ensure a strong workforce, which is the backbone of the sport.
4. Boosting funding for athletics to reflect the status of the sport from a community accessibility high-performance and commercial perspective at major Games. This funding must address the resulting lost opportunities from the cancellation of VIC2026, along with national participation rates leading through to Brisbane 2032 and beyond which athletics, above any other sport, can drive the greatest impact on the health and wellbeing of the nation.

### 3. INFRASTRUCTURE LEGACY - A FORWARD PROGRAM

#### RECOMMENDATION #1

Fit-for-purpose infrastructure legacy from VIC2026 that must be provided for the sport of athletics, our athletes and the communities where they live and the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government to build a state-wide facilities plan for the next decade.

Athletics fares poorly regarding Games infrastructure legacy.

While athletics is a centrepiece of every international multisport Games schedule and venue facilities, the athletics track is most often built as a temporary facility, dropped into a major football or cricket stadium.

This was been the case in 2000 (Accor Stadium), 2006 (MCG) and 2018 (Carrara Stadium). It was to be the case in 2026 (Eureka Stadium) and will be for 2032 (The Gabba). At the completion of the respective Games, the athletics track is ripped up and removed from the venues leaving little to no legacy facilities infrastructure for athletics.

Athletics personnel invest significant time and energy into planning the Games, undertaking multiple site visits, providing input and expertise to help ensure a successful venue upgrade, all of which benefits professional codes such as football and cricket after the Games. When Games legacy is discussed, it is legacy benefits for professional football or cricket codes that is the focus, not legacy for athletics.

This is not a sustainable dynamic for AA, as athletics does not possess the financial resources of commercial sports such as the AFL, which is underpinned by billions of dollars in broadcast and commercial revenues. As such, for athletics, the ROI against the expenditure of extremely scarce resources, time and expertise in the design of these temporary facilities frequently does not stack up. AA also contends that the ROI for taxpayers with these “legacy” facilities reverting to the commercial sports is also dubious given the financial capacity of the commercial sports to fund facilities investment through their own broadcast and commercial revenues.

In a rare positive example of forward-thinking legacy, the Sydney 2000 Athletics infrastructure legacy benefit was strong, with a warm-up track that remained beyond the period of the Games, even though the main stadium was converted into a football stadium. This should be an example for how future events should configure legacy benefits for athletics with a suitable competition venue accompanied by an adjacent warm up venue as a result of all major Games hosted in Australia, including for 2026 and Brisbane 2032.

As stated, this approach is rarely embraced with a view to the development and legacy of a long-term athletics competition venue to host any significant events beyond club or regional meets. If a warm-up track remains after the Games, it inevitably lacks the necessary infrastructure (grandstands, competition rooms, photo finish room and tower, etc.) to help grow the sport in that region.

As a specific example of poor infrastructure legacy for athletics, the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games warm-up facility was taken from athletics and turned into a training



oval because AFL footballers from the Collingwood Football Club didn't want to walk 300m to the adjacent oval.

For the 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast, neither the main competition track nor the warm-up track was retained, again because the legacy priority favoured AFL, in this instance the Gold Coast Football Club.

Most of the plans for athletics for VIC2026 were focused on legacy for AFL and cricket via the various upgrades planned for Eureka Stadium.

AA had some oversight on the proposed legacy venue from the VIC2026 bid, being the athletics track in Ballarat that would have served as a warm-up track during the Games and remained as a permanent facility.

It is encouraging that this facility build is continuing for the benefit of the sport and Ballarat community in the wake of the VIC2026 cancellation. The current plans for Ballarat, however, include only the absolute bare minimum amount of infrastructure to support the operations of this facility, limiting its suitability to host a range of events from community to the elite level.

AA would like to see the Ballarat facility upgraded to a Category 1 facility – capable of hosting World Athletics one-day meets, taking international athletics to regional Victoria, as well as the National Athletics Championships, driving significant economic impact for regional Victoria. Such a configuration would be utilised and provide greater benefits for the local community, for local athletics and to drive participation and health benefits for all.

The Ballarat facility appears to be under development as a Category 3 venue, a level suitable for interclub competition and schools meets, which is a massive wasted opportunity for Victoria. Even if development continues at this lower level, there is still significant infrastructure that needs to be incorporated into the planning to make it fit-for-purpose. For example, an undercover area with seating (steps, benches, full grandstand) and appropriate shade structures throughout are required in order to deliver a venue that is user friendly for spectators and athletes even at community level.

AA would like assurances on greater access, and priority access for athletics and high-performance athletes in the new athletics venue for Ballarat, in line with the parameters set out in Recommendation 2.

Further to this, AA would appreciate the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government to build a state-wide facilities plan for the next decade, which will continue to support athletics as the number one Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic sport, and the largest participation sport in Australia. This would include both athletics tracks, and general running tracks / paths that are accessible and safe for all, from community participants to the elite level.

This broader strategic facility investment in athletics would align with the Federal Government's *Elevate 2042* framework, and help restore Victoria's status as the sporting capital of Australia and support growth in participation of athletics via greater access to

more facilities across the state for elite athletes, as well as the athlete within all Victorians, young and old.

At a time when we are witnessing other jurisdictions take giant steps forward, it is crucial that Victoria not be left behind. Two examples are:

- significant investment by the NSW Government in the Sydney Marathon, a legacy event of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, as a candidate race for the Abbott World Marathon Majors within the broader strategy for New South Wales to become **the** running destination in Australia; and
- Brisbane as the host city of the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and how this is driving regional areas throughout Queensland to develop their regional strategies and infrastructure investment to leverage opportunities evolving from Brisbane 2032.

In developing a longer-term facility plan, AA is seeking to ensure that:

- more athletics facilities and running tracks are built across the state;
- these facilities are open, available and prioritised for use by athletics;
- these facilities are accessible, affordable, welcoming and safe; and
- these are facilities that encourage people and communities to engage with athletics and live more active lifestyles.

In addition, it is critical that the 'home of athletics' in Victoria, Lakeside Stadium, includes an expanded warm up area, ensuring it remains fit for purpose as the premium athletics facility in the state, capable of hosting international and large-scale national events.

#### 4. EXISTING AND FUTURE INFRASTRUCTURE SUITABILITY AND ACCESS

##### RECOMMENDATION #2

Access to existing and future infrastructure should be fit-for-purpose and more available for athletics, and include prioritisation for high-performance athletes to prepare for competition (domestic and international).

There are significant infrastructure deficiencies across Australia that considerably impede the opportunity to grow the sport of athletics, particularly with a view to attracting national and international level competitions, and fully showcasing the sport.

There are only two venues in Australia that have a competition venue with a full adjacent warm-up track. Neither of them is in Victoria.

AA had hoped that this deficiency would be addressed through the facilities investment associated with hosting VIC2026.

The two venues with this capability are: Sydney Olympic Park, Homebush (NSW); and Queensland Sport and Athletics Centre, Brisbane (QLD).

While this is a requirement for World Athletics or World Para Athletics level championships, it is also increasingly valuable for holding large scale events such as the Australian All School Championships and Australian Athletics Championships due to the growing number of competitors in these events and logistical requirements of fitting all events within a crowded program. These championship events are highly sought after by host cities due to the large number of participants, as well as the accompanying persons and spectators they attract across an extended period, which translates into room nights and associated economic uplift.

The Lakeside Stadium warm-up area only has a six lane 60 metre straight. As such, it does not allow for a full 100m run and is so small that it is frequently overrun with athletes trying to warm up. As a result, warm ups are compromised, putting athletes at risk of injury.

This configuration means that Lakeside Stadium is sub-par in terms of being a facility that can host elite national and international events.

An upgraded Lakeside Stadium would assist in attracting more events to Victoria.

Upgrades to Lakeside Stadium should include:

- enclosed warm-up area with greater separation between athletes and fans;
- extended warm up track and warm up area to allow for more runners, plus vertical jumps sites;
- upgraded and certified hammer/discus site in the warm-up area to enable competition to be held there (currently only suits throws up to 50m; only suitable for Under 16 age group and lower);

- the safety net along the throws sector at the warmup area needs to be a lot higher, so that the walkway can be used safely;
- seating to replace the two grassed ends at the bends;
- new videoboard at the northern end and upgraded board at the southern end;
- alternate layout to enable athletes to exit the track and get to post-event formalities without having to go through a public area (current set up cannot be locked off as it is used for emergency vehicles and stadium egress);
- all the in-ground pits cabling needs to be upgraded to allow for simple connection for running down front and back straights to maximise competition conditions; and
- upgraded on-field scoreboards for results for a better fan experience.

Lakeside Stadium also has a number of other design challenges that make it difficult to operate as Victoria's premier athletics venue for major international meets.

It has front access grandstands with emergency vehicle access between the track and grandstands. This means there is a huge gap from the track to the grandstands, and during major events when people stand in the walkway to get close to the action, it means that the view of the track for the lower half of the grandstand is impacted. Currently, the two options for safe operation of the venue are:

- keep the walkway clear and limit fan/athlete interaction, which comes at significant cost for security personnel, and impacts the experience and the atmosphere; or
- allow people access to the walkway, which means most spectators are standing for the duration of the meet and we are unable to sell premium reserved grandstand tickets due to impeded view.

The venue capacity does not allow for spectators filling the walkway. As a result, for a major meet, the venue might be declared at full capacity, when half of the grandstand seats remain empty while spectators fill the walkway. The look of empty grandstands does nothing to showcase the sport and has a significant negative impact on television images broadcast around the world.

#### **4.1 Infrastructure Access Challenge Examples**

The lack of access to Lakeside Stadium and other existing athletics facilities for the sport of athletics, and especially our elite athletes, is a growing issue.

The sport remains locked out of the nation's athletics venues for significant periods of time – quite literally. They are closed venues, without open access to the sport and our stars, even when not booked for something else, unlike in Europe where athletics tracks are open venues, accessible to anyone wanting to use them at any time – 24/7.

Athletics venues in Australia are often operated as multi-sport venues with almost every other private or commercial booking taking precedence over athletics, often for months at a time. Similarly, equipment sheds are often under lock and key so accessing basic items such as starting blocks and hurdles for athlete training sessions is difficult, if not impossible at many of our major venues.

The priority for many of the country's athletics tracks is commercial revenue (even those built with continuing legacy outcomes specified in their charter) and so they are often bulk booked by schools for full days (7am-5pm), not allowing any high performance or state level training when in reality they are only used between 10am-3pm.

At Sydney Olympic Park Athletics track, a legacy from the Sydney 2000 Olympic/Paralympic Games, for the five months leading into the 2023 World Athletics Championships (April – August) there were just 16 days where the track was available for training (16 days of 153 available days – 10%).

In 2022 (when there was no FIFA Women's World Cup), it was still only 27 days - 17%.

Australian athletes are unable to train at the main Australian athletics facilities to prepare to take on the world - they have to go overseas to train, not because the facilities are better, but because of policies and priorities existing in this country that lock them out.

Suburban and regional venues are often easier to access than any of the major athletics tracks in our country, and our elite and emerging athletes often travel considerable distances to maintain their training regime. There is no question that drop-out rates in our sport are heightened by frustrations in accessing suitable training facilities with consistency and affordability. Therefore, to retain and grow participation, we must first address these infrastructure accessibility issues.

Often, elite international athletes are preparing through training on football ovals because they are not locked, rather than purpose-built athletics tracks which are behind locked gates. Alternatively, athletes are forced to travel internationally, at a high cost, in order to access basic training facilities that they should be able to access in their hometown.

As stated, Lakeside Stadium was developed as the 'home of athletics' after the Victorian Government announced a major redevelopment in 2008 to accommodate an athletics track as part of removing athletics from Olympic Park when it was taken over by Collingwood Football Club.

Despite the 'home of athletics' tagline, and multiple athletics organisations being major tenants at the venue since 2011, Lakeside Stadium operates as a multi-sport facility with South Melbourne Football Club being based there. Consequently, Lakeside is one of the worst venues in Australia in regard to access for athletics. In essence, in Victoria, athletics has been locked out of and is not welcome in its own 'home'.

Some examples of how our athletes' access to Lakeside Stadium is constantly hijacked include (this is not an exhaustive list):

- the starting point is a locked venue, with only small windows of allocated training times in the afternoons on some days of the week;
- there is a designated priority season for football and priority season for athletics, with access even more limited during the football window;
- allocated training times (regularly established as 3pm – 7pm) do not work for athletes needing to train after school/university/work;

- the sport is locked out for weeks during the Formula One Grand Prix every year without any compensation;
- the facility is currently used for school carnivals for the majority of the time; and
- other major events are routinely prioritised over athletics. This includes the recent months-long FIFA Women's World Cup training period. There is limited shareability during these periods for the multi-sport venue; instead, the athletics venue locks out our sport and our athletes.

#### **4.2 Athlete Impact Examples**

Despite bookings having been made for high performance training at the Lakeside Stadium track, these are regularly cancelled, often on the day, due to another later booking being prioritised. Regularly, despite the cancellation of the high-performance bookings, the track lies empty for much of the day.

As a consequence of athletics being shut out of our own 'home' at Lakeside Stadium, many of our elite athletes and their coaches do not train there as they cannot trust that it will be open, or that they will not be subject to late cancellations of their bookings.

There should be a consideration for how Lakeside Stadium can be better prioritised as a high-performance facility for athletics. This would not just be for the 30 Victorian 'NASS – National Athlete Support Structure' athletes, but an extended cohort of elite, pathway and developing athletes. High performance athletics athletes train with a coach, most of whom are not employed by the sport, and train alongside national level athletes, junior athletes, club athletes and, quite often, also their international/NASS colleagues.

As a high-performance track, Lakeside could also be used by Victorian Institute of Sport athletes from other sports.

## 5. SPORT CAPACITY BUILDING

### RECOMMENDATION #3

Sport capacity building initiatives to be supported with a particular focus on the Officials Recruitment and Preparation program to ensure a strong workforce, which is the backbone of the sport.

The opportunity of a home Games provides strong incentive to build out the volunteer team on which our sport relies. Without VIC2026 proceeding, AA has to revise its Officials Recruitment and Preparation program to ensure we have a suitably qualified and enthused workforce to deliver our sport at all levels in Brisbane 2032, from grassroots every weekend through to the highest level. AA wants Victoria to be well represented in the Australian Olympic and Paralympic team officials line-up.

The recruitment and training strategy that introduces and mentors up-and-coming Technical Officials operates in conjunction with our summer season events across Australia and involves close to 800 volunteers aged between 20 – 80 years.

It includes a combination of:

- targeted marketing and recruitment programs for prospective officials, drawing from identified talent pools (e.g. school teachers);
- seminars and training sessions, led by some of Australia's most qualified Referees;
- WARECS courses and evaluations so that Australia qualifies more Bronze, Silver and Gold level Referees within the World Athletics framework;
- one-on-one mentoring program to help address the ageing workforce; and
- hands-on experience across the major meets (e.g. National Championships, Athletics Invitational Meets, etc).

Additional funding is required to support the management and delivery of this program across the domestic summer season, which will need to be supercharged without the lure of a home Games in 2026.

## 6. INSPIRATION OF THE NATION

### RECOMMENDATION #4

Funding for athletics should reflect the status of the sport from a high-performance and commercial perspective at major Games and the resultant lost opportunities from the cancellation of VIC2026, along with national participation rates leading through to Brisbane 2032 which, above any other sport, can drive the greatest impact on the health, fitness and wellbeing of the nation.

Athletics is the centrepiece of Commonwealth, Olympic, Paralympic and Games events.

Athletics takes place in the largest stadiums, drives a significant portion of overall ticket sales and sponsorship to deliver financially successful events and is the focus of national and international television broadcasting.

Domestically, athletics is the most watched sport at the Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games. More than 20 million Australians tuned in to watch the Tokyo Olympic Games via Seven making it the biggest television and streaming event in history. Six of the top ten most watched Tokyo 2020 events were athletics events, with the most-watched event of the Games being Rohan Browning in the men's 100 metres semi-final on day nine.

The Games spotlight shines strongly beyond this major event cycle, with the sport of athletics leveraging the Games moments, stories and triumphs for whole of sport growth.

Young kids, inspired by their heroes in the green and gold, get more active, try new sports, and set new goals off the back of the home Games experience.

Talented emerging junior athletes sitting in the grandstands cement their own ambitions, seeing the Games and the green and gold as being within their reach and part of their destiny.

Grown adults go from armchair athletes to actual runners inspired to pound the pavement, to walk, jog or run for fun, fitness or better health outcomes.

Signature events such as the World Athletics Continental Tour Gold Meet, the Maurie Plant Meet in Melbourne are established and develop because of the way athletics has resonated with general sports fans during key Games moments.

AA works to leverage this spotlight, this interest, and this inspiration to grow the sport.

The cancellation of VIC2026 destroyed these inspirational and aspirational opportunities and will impact on all areas of our sport across the nation, with the repercussions being felt for years.

### 6.1 Junior Product

Athletics is a foundational sport. It is uniquely positioned to help children develop fundamental movements skills such as running, jumping, throwing and rolling, that form



the basis of almost every other sport and physical activity. Athletics, therefore, has a unique role to play in the overall sports ecosystem, but also in the positive impact it can have on the health and wellbeing of Australian children through improving physical literacy.

AA will imminently launch a new fun and inclusive junior athletics program for Australian children.

VIC2026 represented a focal point and a unique opportunity, both pre and post the Games for this program to grow its footprint and connect tens of thousands of Australian children with an activity to support their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development in a supportive environment.

This would have seen a significant uplift in athletics participation in Victoria and Australia, which in turn would have represented a tangible legacy outcome of the 2026 Commonwealth Games.

Without this opportunity, we need to supercharge our go-to-market plan to ensure Aussie kids get moving.

## **6.2 National Talent Development Program**

AA currently runs a very basic national junior talent squad program, which requires a significant funding injection and uplift to retain talented athletes in our sport, and to inspire and prepare the next generation of both athletes and coaches who will form Team Australia in 2028, 2032 and beyond.

This program, to be run in partnership with the State/Territory Member Associations and the National Institute Network, aims to identify and nurture young athletes and aid with their transition to senior ranks by providing:

- Education – nutrition, injury prevention, integrity in sport, etc;
- Financial support – for competitions, medical expenses, living costs, etc;
- Programs aimed at supporting their training commitment – e.g. athlete friendly job network, mentor network, regular testing and assessment programs with biomechanists, etc; and
- Competition opportunities – to compete against Australia and the world's best athletes domestically and internationally.

The above program would also extend across developing coaches, aiming to build out the qualifications, expertise and experience of the next generation of athletics coaches and support them in making this their full-time career.

Without the additional lure of a home Games in 2026, AA needs to pivot quickly in this space to provide additional programs and incentives for our developing talent, so that we don't lose them to the professional codes.

### **6.3 Running Australia Network**

Athletics (running and walking) is the biggest participation sport in Australia and globally with more than 3.7 million Australians participating in athletics. At a grassroots and participation level, anyone can participate in athletics with very few barriers to involvement. As a result, athletics is the sport with the greatest capacity to shift the dial with regard to the health, fitness and wellness of all Australians.

The Running Australia Network is a new product in development at AA (in conjunction with our Member Associations), aimed at supporting everyday Australians to walk, run and roll and live healthier, more active lives.

We are building an online community to inspire the athlete inside all Australians by utilising the existing expertise within the AA community, industry leading experts in health, nutrition, coaching, physiotherapy. In addition, our elite distance running stars will support the Running Australia Network by sharing valuable information and insights to assist people on their fitness journey.

Existing Member Association recreational running networks, clubs and AA events will also provide a platform for activations, along with growing a national run club footprint and exploring new community focused events in the future.

Victorians have been among the most locked down people in the world, and off the back of COVID, the VIC2026 Games was to have been a fundamental part of activating AA's participation and pathways programs to ensure a fitter, healthier Victoria.

A large participant base is needed to generate a strong foundation for thriving sport. Funding shortfalls impact the ability of athletics to build and support this base of active kids, talented junior athletes, and inspire adults who want to live longer, healthier lives.

If AA had the funding and resources, we certainly have the programs and product portfolio ready to roll out and significantly grow participation in our sport as a direct legacy benefit of the Games, albeit a now cancelled Games.

### **6.4 Team Australia – the current cohort**

Athletics loses many track and field athletes to the professional codes who are becoming more and more aggressive in their targeting of talented junior athletes and can offer significantly more remuneration than the sport of athletics.

We also lose athletes to the 'real world' with talented athletes retiring early from the sport to focus on university or a 'real job' as they can no longer justify the sacrifice they make to represent Australia. AA's Olympians are not "rich kids", by any means.

By way of example:

- one of Australia's top athletes who has reached the Olympic podium, receives \$40,000 in direct annual funding through AA's NASS scheme, which incorporates the AIS dAIS program; and

- a further next tier athlete, who is an Olympic finalist, receives \$30,000 in direct funding annually.

These athletes are the very best in the world at their craft and sport.

By way of comparison, the *average* AFL player salary is \$406,000, with only 10 players, those being first year rookies, earning less than \$100,000 in 2022.

Even incorporating personal sponsorship, the best AA athletes, who are the best in the world, and will have millions of Australians watching them during Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games are not even close to earning the same as the 325th best AFL player in Australia.

Being a truly global sport, the cost equation for athletes of regularly having exposure to high level competition (either in Australia or overseas) is significant. Funding models from the Government need to reflect this even more so after a significant loss of opportunity via the cancellation of VIC2026.

Athletics (alongside almost all Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic sports) has been massively disrupted during the last 3 years due to COVID. This was even more so in Victoria where athletes were locked out of training or significantly impacted for 18 months, including the lead-in to the delayed 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Competition was compromised for that whole period.

What was on offer as the light at the end of the COVID tunnel was a return to the 'normal' 4-year cycle – Olympic/Paralympic Games, World Championships, Victorian Commonwealth Games, World Championships, Olympic/Paralympic Games.

This created hope for the Australian Team, an opportunity for financial recovery for AA from overseas/international competition with a home Commonwealth Games, a celebration of Commonwealth Games sport and the pathway towards 2028 in Los Angeles and ultimately Brisbane 2032.

Now, with no confirmed host for the 2026 Commonwealth Games, and a reasonable consideration if it goes ahead that it may be in 2027, AA must seek alternatives for this generation of the Australian Team for international competition experience.

These alternatives can only be effectively delivered at great cost, will not be as great an experience and will in no way provide an opportunity for the establishment or elevation of any athlete's public profile, thereby denying them of one of the few opportunities to benefit commercially from their sport.

Any replacement athletics competition tour will involve a smaller number of athletes at a compromised level of competition, most likely in a smaller scale match-up in Japan or other parts of Asia.

How are our athletes and our sport compensated for this? This must be a priority of the Victorian Government as our sport and our athletes are in survival mode right now.

It is impossible to thrive when you are focused on just trying to survive.

AA stands ready to work with the Victorian Government in developing and delivering solutions to all of these challenges.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

International multisport events such as the Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games bring the global stage to Australia.

VIC2026 would have brought that stage to Victoria and given our athletes the pathway and legacy outcomes that are inherently embedded in such pinnacle events.

Athletics desperately needs a greater focus on fit-for-purpose infrastructure legacy. AA was hoping VIC2026 would address these needs in Victoria.

As a result of the cancellation, AA must now turn its attention to how we continue to provide our athletes with priority access to existing infrastructure so they can train and prepare for elite events, while also providing participation and pathway opportunities for people in communities throughout Victoria.

Government funding for the sport should reflect its status in the public appeal and commercial success of Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games and the ability of athletics to strongly influence the health, fitness and wellbeing of the nation through large participation rates.

The recommendations set out in this submission are forward focused on how AA can work with the Victorian Government and what needs to be done now to not just recover the lost legacy opportunities that would have been delivered through VIC2026, but to reconfigure how government investment for athletics in Victoria properly addresses systemic failures going back decades.

AA contends that the four recommendations made in this submission will deliver better value for all Victorians by:

- ensuring more fit-for-purpose athletics facilities across the state, which are capable of hosting more competitions in Victoria for our sport, including hosting national and international events in regional Victoria to help restore Victoria as the preeminent sporting state;
- ensuring athletics facilities are accessible to high-performance athletes year-round to enable them to train and prepare uninterrupted in Australia;
- assisting to amass a suitably qualified and enthused volunteer workforce to deliver our sport at all levels, from grassroots every weekend through to the highest level, maintaining Australia's position as a global leader in technical management and competition delivery of athletics;
- delivering greater sport participation opportunities to all Victorians via program initiatives that leverage the sport's foundation skills and encourage kids and adults alike to move more often;

- shifting the dial of the state with regard to health, fitness and wellness by ensuring more Victorians walk and run regularly, as part of the Junior Product and Running Australia initiatives;
- achieving greater retention of junior athletes in the sport, especially during that crucial teenage period as they finish school and transition from junior to senior ranks.
- ensuring a stronger Australian Team, and Victorian cohort within that team, compensated for the devastating impacts of the last few years in a manner that retains them in the sport and enables them to pivot and prepare for future international team representation; and
- fosters a stronger sport administration, with both Athletics Victoria and AA able to thrive, not just survive.

AA looks forward to participating in the Committee's public hearing process.

## 7. CONTACT

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