

Softball: *Softball Australia*

'Softball is the sport of choice for Indigenous women, which is why Softball Australia is committed to continuing the ISP (Indigenous Sports Program) well into the future'.¹

Softball is a truly international game, with participants in over 100 countries, and well established professional leagues in America and throughout Asia. The popularity of the sport worldwide is also reflected by its Olympic status.

The origins of softball in Australia can be traced back as far as 1856 to the goldfields of Ballarat.² Since then, it has grown to become an integral part of Australia's sporting landscape, offering well organised local, state, national and international competitions at all participant levels. Australia is currently the only country to have their four national teams (open men and women, and under 19 men and women) ranked in the top three in the world.³

However, because softball is played during the peak summer months and has to compete with major sports such as cricket for media coverage it is classed as a second tiered sport in Australia.

Softball Australia

The Australian Softball Federation was formed in 1947 by softball associations in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales. Softball now spans the country, involving players at school, club, state, national and international levels. Eight Australian Championships are now conducted each year: women's, men's, under 23 women and men, under 19 women and men, and under 16 girls and boys.

Softball Australia aims to provide opportunities for people to participate at all levels and in all forms of softball, by developing, promoting and managing the game in Australia. There are two forms of softball: Slowpitch and Fastpitch. Fastpitch is played at the competitive level, while Slowpitch is the recreational variety.

Who plays softball?

During the 1995/1996 season, softball participation peaked in Australia (coinciding with the sport's first Olympic Games participation), but the sport's membership has declined by approximately 20 per cent since then.⁴

It is a problem in all parts of the country, including both seniors and juniors. A survey carried out by Queensland Softball Australia and Softball Australia found that junior players 'wanted more from their experience'.⁵



In 2004–2005, the estimated numbers of registered participants in the sport was 38,347, with 25,586 (66.7%) of those women. Softball has been a major sport in the schools program for some time now. An estimated 150,000 people are non-affiliated members (e.g. primary school, secondary school, universities etc) with approximately 119,462 (79.7%) women participants.⁶

There is no data on the number of Indigenous or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) members; however there are an estimated 1,277 non-affiliated Indigenous members in state association (1,185 women). There are no estimates for members from CALD groups.

Sport development

Softball Australia manages the participation and development of softball in the community through various programs from grass roots to elite level sport, which span every state and territory in Australia.

Even though the sport offers two distinctive formats (Slowpitch and Fastpitch), targeted programs, such as Project CONNECT and the Indigenous Sports Program, have been developed to make softball an inclusive sport and promote the game to the wider community.

Project CONNECT is a joint partnership between the Australian Sports Commission and the Australian Paralympic Committee, designed to create greater opportunities for individuals with a disability, while the Indigenous Sports Program is run in partnership with the Australian Sports Commission (ASC).

In softball, there are some barriers that can affect the number of participants taking up the game. Softball is a user-pays sport and the cost to play is dependent on the level at which a person participates. This can limit participation from people of a low socio-economic background. However, Softball Australia is developing and implementing strategies 'to provide equal opportunities and equality to not only women involved in the sport, but men, people with disabilities, and alike'.⁷

Following are some of the programs to encourage participation from youth, Indigenous and people from CALD backgrounds.

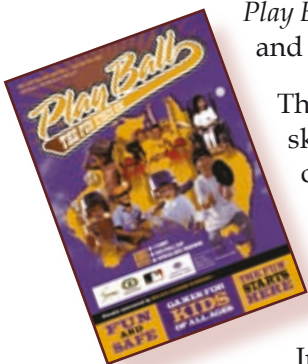
Youth development – Play Ball

Play Ball is a joint initiative of the Softball Australian and the Australian Baseball Federation and forms part of the ASC's Targeted Participation Growth Program.

The program utilises several modified bat and ball games to introduce participants to skills and activities common to softball and baseball. Each state softball association is committed to increasing junior participation, using this program as the vehicle.

The objectives of the *Play Ball* program are to provide opportunities for children to participate in games and activities in a learning environment that is fun, safe, and based on the principles of fair play.

In the first year of the program (2003–04), approximately 9,000 children around the country participated in this initiative. It continued to experience steady growth in 2004–05, with 10,117 registrations.⁸



New modified games

Softball Australia has developed four new modified games to aid junior membership growth and provide a pathway for children to successfully and confidently enter the ranks of softball. The emphasis of these games is on participation, social interaction, enjoyment, safety, progression and skill development.

The new games are called Diamond Ball, Tee Ball (new version), 3 Pitch Softball and Fast Track Softball. Diamond Ball is geared toward the seven and under age group. It is a pre-Tee Ball game where a foam bat and ball can be used to remove the fear that children sometimes have of being hit with the ball. The next version of the game is Tee Ball, followed by 3 Pitch Softball. 3 Pitch introduces the child to a pitched ball, rather than hitting off the tee. The batting team's own coach is the pitcher. Fast Track Softball is the last game in the series, requiring the fielding team to have their own pitcher. These games progressively build the skill level of the players by increasing the challenges they face.



Increasing Indigenous participation

Softball Australia recognises that opportunities to increase the participation of Indigenous people in the sport are under threat because of the increase in competition from other sports and the lack of development, resources and planning for delivery.⁹ As a result, Softball Australia continues to work closely with state associations and external delivery organisations to ensure that there are opportunities to develop softball in the Indigenous community, especially with softball currently being the 'sport of choice for Indigenous girls'.¹⁰

In the last year, the Indigenous Sporting Development Program (whISPers) continued to gain momentum across the country with state associations making the most of the program. Activities included junior camps, skill clinics, state carnivals and officiating courses. Hundreds of adults and children have been introduced to softball in many regional and remote areas of Australia.¹¹

In partnership with the Athletes as Role Models Tour (ARMTour), high profile softballers Kate Quigley, Danni Hanna, and Ilsa Wakeling visited Indigenous children in isolated communities in the Northern Territory to help convey and encourage healthy lifestyle ideals.¹²

The program is a joint partnership with the Australian Sports Commission and aims to increase softball participation across all age and gender groups, provide access to facilities and equipment and to increase the numbers of officials participating in the sport.

Softball Australia's Project Officer - Development is working with Indigenous Sport Development Coordinators in all states and territories to provide coordinated programs focusing on these key areas. Following is an overview of some of the ISP activities in ACT, SA and NT.



ACT

Softball Canberra, the ACT Indigenous Sport Program and Sport and Recreation ACT continue to assist with the development and participation of Indigenous people by helping the whISPers softball teams (male and female junior teams, a senior female team and a newly-appointed senior mixed slo-pitch team) participate in local competitions.

The whISPers club is already a partially self-funded club with assistance from Softball Canberra, Softball Australia and the ACT Indigenous Sport Program. Each player makes a contribution towards team costs. The goal is that teams become self-funded and operate as part of an incorporated club.

The ACT Indigenous Sport Program office works in collaboration with the Aboriginal Corporation for Sporting and Recreational Activities Centre (better known as Boomanulla Oval) and the Queanbeyan Indigenous Coordination Centre to enhance the whISPers softball program.¹³

Northern Territory

The Indigenous Sporting Development Program in Northern Territory aims to introduce Indigenous communities to the game of softball and increase participation through coaching, scoring and umpiring clinics, workshops and seminars, as well as identify potential representative players.

In 2004–05, the program was targeted at Croker Island, Tiwi Island, Gove and Katherine in the Northern region, and Tennant Creek and Alice Springs in the Southern region.

To increase participation in the program the ISP officer visits communities whenever possible and makes use of Indigenous role models to introduce the game; conducts skills development clinics; develops a platform to establish regular competition; and identifies leaders capable of running a competition between communities in their respective zones.¹⁴

Western Australia

Softball Australia's ISP program is aimed at increasing softball participation amongst young women within the Indigenous community. The program is targeted in the areas of Kununurra, Halls Creek and East Kimberley region in Western Australia. The other targeted areas are in the Katherine region – Binjari, Kalkaringi, Timber Creek and Borroloola communities.¹⁵

Indigenous Community Softball Carnival Program

Indigenous softball carnivals create softball opportunities for Indigenous communities throughout Australia and are designed so that communities within a region can play against each other in a competition. This encourages Indigenous communities to further develop their own teams to a standard of representing their community.

The carnival has a social atmosphere to encourage older women and younger girls to participate. They also produce a pathway to state representative programs for Indigenous players from the regions.



The way the program works is the state association appoints a carnival coordinator to oversee the Indigenous softball carnivals. The coordinator approaches an Indigenous sport development officer in their area, who then contacts three community sport and recreation officers in each region to host a carnival.¹⁶

Role model – Stacey Porter

Stacey Porter was the first Indigenous female to represent Australia in softball at the 2004 Olympic Games, and was awarded Female Sportsperson of the Year at the 2005 Deadly Awards. She was also named the 2005 Australian Female Softballer of the Year at Softball Australia's Awards of Excellence. Stacy promotes community awareness and recognition of the sport and, along with Australian open men's softball team member Jeff Goolagong, appears in promotional posters for Indigenous softball.¹⁷

Harmony Day and softball

As part of Softball Australia's commitment to providing an inclusive sport, the organisation supported Harmony Day in 2006. Local children from various Indigenous and ethnic groups were invited to participate in pre-game activities and then enjoy a sausage sizzle.

All state softball associations were encouraged to undertake Harmony Day activities. Clubs and associations organised a range of events and took the opportunity to promote softball to new and diverse communities.¹⁸

Softball Australia, in partnership with Softball NSW and the Blacktown City Council, celebrated Harmony Day in March (2006) at Blacktown Olympic Park during the Australia vs Japan women's international.

Making softball safe and inclusive

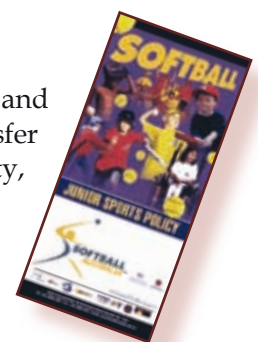
Softball Australia promotes its Member Protection Policy, Child Protection Policy and Codes of Conduct and Ethics to the softball community. The code of ethics for Fastpitch and Slowpitch softball requires participants to:

- 'Refrain from making racist jokes', and 'refrain from using profane, insulting, harassing or otherwise offensive language' and 'adhere to Softball Australia's anti-harassment policy' (players).
- 'Respect the rights, dignity and worth of every human being regardless of age, gender, ethnic origin, religion or ability' (coaches).

Junior sport policy

As a team sport softball provides an opportunity to develop physical, social and emotional abilities. A wide variety of skills and abilities developed in softball transfer to nonathletic careers and influence social factors such as community pride, identity, and leisure.¹⁹

The Junior Sport Policy encourages safe, enjoyable and supportive softball environments for young participants aged 5 to 17 years. The policy has been



developed for association/club administrators and coaches to provide guidelines and direction so a consistent approach toward junior softball can be achieved across Australia.

Member Protection Policy (MPP)

Member protection is a term used to describe the way people in sports organisations, associations and clubs can participate in activities in an environment free from inappropriate behaviours such as harassment, discrimination and abuse. This applies to players, administrators, coaches, spectators, officials and referees.

Member Protection involves protecting members from harassment and inappropriate behaviour, adopting appropriate measures to ensure the appropriate people are involved in the sport, providing a process for complaints to be raised and addressing members' education.

The MPP covers issues such as discrimination and harassment, which are defined as:

- **Harassment** is any behaviour by a person which is offensive, abusive, belittling or threatening which is directed at any other person or a group of people and which refers to a particular characteristic of that person or group of people. Harassment can be expressed or implied, physical, verbal or non-verbal. Examples include: abusive behaviour aimed at humiliating; innuendo or taunting; offensive emails, letters, notes; displaying offensive materials (e.g. posters, computer screen savers).²⁰
- **Discrimination** is treating or proposing to treat a person less favourably than someone else in certain areas of public life on the basis of an attribute or personal characteristic they have. Of relevance to this project, these attributes or characteristics include: race; physical features or religious belief/activity.²¹

Implementing the MPP

The Board of each softball association is responsible for taking all reasonable steps to ensure the implementation of the MPP by: displaying codes of behaviour on notice boards, educating individuals to whom the MPP applies, advising members of the importance on the MPP at general meetings, and referring members to the MPP on Softball Australia's website (www.softball.org.au).

Complaint resolution procedure

Softball Australia has established procedures for dealing with complaints under the MPP. This includes: the appointment of at least one Member Protection Officer (MPO), one mediator per state association, a hearings convener and a hearings tribunal.

The most effective strategy is to appoint a MPO who acts as the first point of call in a club, association, state or national softball organisation for any queries, complaints or concerns around harassment and abuse in sport. The MPO provides confidential advice, information and moral support to the person alleging harassment. Softball Australia encourages softball clubs to appoint at least one trained MPO.

Complaints can be made informally or formally, and the MPP contains a resolution procedure for both. The person making the complaint will be referred to a MPO who will listen and

provide information about the available options, provide support and refer the matter to a hearings convener for a hearing under the MPP if required. A matter can proceed to a hearing with or without mediation first. All complaints will be handled promptly, seriously, sensitively, and confidentially at all stages of the procedure.²²

Endnotes

¹ Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

² http://www.softball.org.au/powered_by_Interfuse/extra.asp?id=7.

³ Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

⁴ Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

⁵ http://www.softball.org.au/_uploads/asf/extra/file_255.pdf.

⁶ Submission to the *Senate Enquiry into Women in Sport and recreation in Australia* at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/womeninsport/submissions/sub24.pdf.

⁷ Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

⁸ Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

⁹ Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

¹⁰ Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

¹¹ http://www.softball.org.au/powered_by_Interfuse/extra.asp?id=14.

¹² Softball Australia 2004–05 *Annual Report*.

¹³ WhISPers Softball Program – ACT Softball Association 2005–06.

¹⁴ NT Indigenous Sporting Development Program 2005–06.

¹⁵ Indigenous Sporting Development Program SA 2005–06.

¹⁶ Indigenous Community Softball Carnival Program.

¹⁷ *Deadly Vibe* Issue 106. December 2005 at www.vibe.com.au.

¹⁸ *The Softballer*, March 2006, P2.

¹⁹ Softball Junior Sport Policy.

²⁰ Softball Australia Member Protection Policy.

²¹ Softball Australia Member Protection Policy.

²² Softball Australia Member Protection Policy.

