

Jan Swinhoe, President, Athletics Australia

“From Tokyo to Birmingham - Athletics inspiring and transforming lives” 5th
July 2022

Jan Swinhoe gave us a very eloquent outstanding comprehensive overview of the key issues for athletics in Australia.

Her scope included the elite level, which was very timely in the week before the World Championships in Eugene Oregon and then about 3 days later the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham UK. For her to make time in a hectic schedule finalising administrative preparations as well as personal organisation just before she embarks on these two major events, was greatly appreciated.

Her address also covered the universality and relatability of athletics, with participation of exercise at all ages being so important for an individual's well being, both physical and mental. Unlike many other sports, the barriers to participation are low. Shorts and joggers are all that is needed, and competitions are available covering all levels and age groups. We can all “do it for life”. Athletics Australia fosters such events as the Sydney Running Festival, which may involve about 40,000 runners when it is to be held next September

The universality can be seen at the Olympics, where 200 of the 206 countries had an athletics team at Tokyo (compared with only 23 countries fielded a swimming team, and only 13 had a team >20 swimmers), whilst cost of equipment and/or facilities limit participation in many sports.

Australia is doing well in athletics now, having won many medals at Tokyo, and public interest is high. Indeed the highest TV ratings for the 2 most watched live events involving Australians were both athletics, despite neither yielding a medal (though both far exceeding expectations – Rohan Browning in 100 metres semi, and Peter Bol in 800 metres final).

In her appointment to the Athletics Australia Board, Jan applied her actuarial expertise and governance, audit and risk management experience to adapt Athletics Australia to the modern accountability expectations and demands of athletes, government, sponsors and the public. Budgeting and financial control systems were introduced that fitted the high level of government funding. When she joined, governments provided 95% of funding. These days federal

funding is entirely directed at the elite level. As President, Jan has set a goal to reduce the dependency on government funding to 50%, and has already reached 64%, thanks to strong commitments from sponsors such as Chemist Warehouse (who are attracted to the healthy images and to the lack of anti-social behaviour of the athletes).

Transgender has been a hot topic recently for other sports. The issue arose in athletics a few years ago when the south african 800 metre female runner with XXY chromosomes was winning all events by several seconds. World Athletics settled on a policy with qualification based on testosterone level, rather than personal gender identification or appearance.

Little Athletics is still separate from Athletics Australia despite agreement at federal level that a merger would provide a smoother pathway to the senior level, as some L-A state votes did not pass the required 75% endorsement. Nevertheless, there is good cooperation, and there are many who successfully transition, most notably Sally Pearson.

Amateur/professional distinction is not an issue in the sport, noting funding to specific athletes is relatively low compared to many other sports where players are paid substantial salaries. The few athletes that do have substantial annual income receive most of their funds from sponsorships. It is notable that many of the senior athletes are tertiary educated heading towards careers outside the sport.

On behalf of us all, John O'Connor thanked Jan for making the time just prior to her trip to give us such an excellent talk, which was so informative and inspirational, though it is probably doubtful that many of our members will be ready to register for the next marathon!

PJ