

Australian Performances at the Winter Olympics: MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

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ABSTRACT: This historical investigation traces Australia's performance in the Winter Olympic Games and shows how the nation was a late bloomer, having won all twelve of its medals over the last twenty years. Reasons for the recent success are attributed to: increased financial commitment; the cultural importance of sport; the spin-off effect of Summer Olympic Games' success; improved infrastructure support; the new off-setting cycle of Winter and Summer Games; the targeted approach of concentrating on events with the most likelihood of success; and a certain amount of luck. The Australian Olympic Committee, many experts and media commentators declared the Australian performance in Sochi reasonably successful, with three medals won. However, there was disappointment expressed by the Australian Sports Commission, which implemented its new Winning Edge program in 2012 and expected slightly better results. The Sochi Games produced some unfortunate publicity for the Australian team, including an athlete funding row and a lack of team cohesion. Recommendations for improvement include a review of how team success is evaluated and the establishment of an Australia Olympic House at future Games, a feature which could minimize controversies. Based on the Sochi medal results as well as the fifteen top-ten finishes achieved by Australian athletes, the outlook for the 2018 Winter Games looks positive.

KEYWORDS: Olympics, Sochi, Australian Olympic Committee, Winning Edge Program, Australian Sports Commission, Olympic Houses.

Introduction

In the Winter Olympics, Australia has been a late bloomer. Australia has won 468 medals in the Summer Games from 1896 to 2012, with a more modest tally of 12 in the Winter Games, only in the last 20 years. Australia first had athletes at the Winter Games in 1936, and has participated continuously since 1952. While there is a huge amount of research and information on Australia in the Summer Olympics, the overall documentation of the Winter Games has been more limited and sporadic. There have been a few book chapters as well as a large number of magazine articles, online blogs and newspaper reports usually around the time of each Winter Games.¹ Comprehensive research investigations have been far more limited. In the five research articles that the author has completed on this topic, the most comprehensive piece was 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games: A Late Bloomer' published in 2012 in the *Journal of Olympic History*.² In the 1990s, John Deane wrote of Australia at the Winter Olympics, and Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) historian Harry Gordon included a chapter on the Winter Games in his 1994

- 1 See for example Jeremy Wilshire, *One of Those Days: The Triumphs and Tragedies of Australian Sporting Heroes*, Melbourne Books, Melbourne, 2002, pp. 251–60; Richard Baka, 'Better Late Than Never: Australia's Winter Olympic Medalists', *The Conversation*, 7 February 2014. <http://theconversation.com/better-late-than-never-australias-winter-olympic-medallists-22884>. Accessed on 12 May 2014.
- 2 Richard Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games: A Late Bloomer', *Journal of Olympic History*, vol. 20, 2012, pp. 38–47; Richard Baka, 'The Olympic Winter Institute of Australia: A Unique Partnership Model for High Performance Sport' in Robert Barney, Michael Heine and Nigel Crowther (eds), *Cultural Imperialism in Action: Critiques in the Global Olympic Trust. Eighth International Symposium for Olympic Research*, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, October 19–21, 2006, pp. 127–39; Richard Baka, 'Australian Winter Olympic Games Gold Medalists: Three Unique Stories' and Richard Baka and Brett Osler, 'Golden Opportunities: Australia's Next Generation of High Performance Training Centres,' in Richard Baka, Anthony Church and Darwin Semotiuk (eds), *Leveraging Legacies: The Future of Sport and Physical Activity, Proceedings of the 17th Biennial Conference of the International Society for Physical Education and Sport*, University of British Columbia, Canada, June 21–24, 2009; Richard Baka and Rob Hess, 'Doing a 'Bradbury!': An Analysis of Recent Australian Success at the Winter Olympic Games', in Robert Barney, Kevin Wamsley and Scott Martyn (eds), *The Global Nexus Engaged: Past, Present, Future Interdisciplinary Olympic Studies. Sixth International Symposium for Olympic Research*, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, 2002, pp. 177–84.

book *Australia and the Olympic Games*.³ Gordon's forthcoming Olympic book, *From Athens with Pride: An Official History of the Australian Olympic Movement*, will devote several chapters to the Winter Games.⁴

In many respects, the Winter Olympics have always been the poor cousin of their summer counterpart. It was not until 1926 that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) retrospectively sanctioned the first official Winter Olympic Games which took place in Chamonix, France in 1924. Despite continuous involvement in the Summer Olympics from their inception in 1896, Australia's participation in the Winter Games has been somewhat low-key and sporadic. In some ways, this patchy involvement is understandable, and perhaps reflects a common belief that Australia, because of its geography and climate, is devoid of history and tradition in winter sports.⁵ However, snow and ice sports do have a heritage in Australia, with one of the oldest ski clubs in the world founded at Kiandra, New South Wales, in 1870.⁶

Kenneth Kennedy, the first person chosen to represent Australia in the Winter Olympic Games, and Freddie McEvoy, an Australian who was captain of the British bobsled team, both competed at the 1936 Winter Olympic Games, held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. Up until the early 1990s small teams between three and 15 members went to the Winter Games. In each case, very little in the way of government support or funding was provided.⁷ In contrast, the Australian team in Sochi in 2014 was a record-breaking 60 athletes and one third bigger than the team taken to Vancouver in 2010.

In the face of a relatively low level of participation and minimal government support, it is not surprising that Australia's medal tally up to 1992 was an unflattering zero. The 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics brought Australia its first Winter Games medal, won in the 5000m relay by the men's short track speed skating team. Another bronze was won in 1998 in Nagano by Zali Steggall in downhill skiing. By the 2002 Salt Lake Games, this tally rose with gold medals won by Steven Bradbury in short track speed

3 John W. Deane, 'Olympic Winter Games', in Wray Vamplew *et al.* (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 321–24; 'Australia at the Winter Olympics', Paper presented at Sporting Traditions, the biennial conference of the Australian Society for Sports History, Launceston, July 2. 1993; Harry Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994, Australia had athletes at the winter Olympic Games starting in 1936 and then continuously from 1952 to the present.

4 Harry Gordon, Email correspondence, 8 April, 2014.

5 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 38.

6 Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, p. 412.

7 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 38.

skating (he was also won a bronze in 1994 as part of the relay team) and another by Alisa Camplin in women's aerial skiing. The total increased to six at the Turin Games in 2006, with gold to Dale Begg-Smith in mogul skiing and a bronze to Alisa Camplin in women's aerial skiing.

At the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, Australia experienced its best ever result: gold to Lydia Lassila in the women's aerial skiing, gold to Torah Bright in the women's snowboarding half-pipe and silver to Dale Begg-Smith in the men's mogul skiing event (see Table One). The President of the AOC, John Coates, summarized the Australian performance in Vancouver as 'our best ever'. The medal tally of two gold and one silver placed Australia thirteenth and represented the most successful result for Australia at a Winter Olympics and was the fifth consecutive Winter Games at which Australia won medals.⁸

Table One. Australian Olympic Winter Medal Tally: 1936–2014

Years	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total/ Rank	Number of Athletes	Top 10 placings
1936–92 Various	0	0	0	0	3–15 (varied)	0
1994 Lillehammer	0	0	1	1/22	27	5
1998 Nagano	0	0	1	1/22	24	1
2002 Salt Lake City	2	0	0	2/15	27	6
2006 Turin	1	0	1	2/17	40	6
2010 Vancouver	2	1	0	3/13	40	8
2014 Sochi	0	2	1	3/24	60	15

Note: Medal totals to determine country rankings are not official but are most often based on the number of gold medals won as opposed to total medals. As a result, Vancouver and Salt Lake City were the highest rankings for Australia despite the total number of medals won being equally high for Sochi.

The Sochi Games were the sixth consecutive Winter Olympics at which Australia won medals. Torah Bright followed up from her Vancouver success with a silver medal in the women's snowboard half-pipe. Lydia Lassila likewise copied Bright by repeating her Vancouver success by winning a bronze in women's aerial skiing. Although both of these medals were not as good as their gold medals in Vancouver, both athletes were very pleased with their Sochi performances. The third medal in Russia was a surprise as Dave Morris took out silver, the first ever podium finish in men's aerial skiing.

8 John Coates, 'President's Address' at AOC AGM, 15 May 2010.
http://corporate.olympics.com.au/files/dmFile/AGM_2010_President_AddressFINALfor_Web_2.pdf. Accessed on 8 May 2014.

The following sections of the article provide a discussion of the key reasons for Australia's recent success at the Winter Games.

Money Can Buy Medals

A much larger financial commitment from both the Australian Sports Commission (ASC)/Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) of the Australian Government and the AOC was a major reason for the improved performance. Government funding to sport in Australia increased dramatically in 1972 under the new Labor Government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, which introduced the first major government funding of sport and recreation programs. The initial funding was fairly meagre, but a poor showing at the 1976 Montreal Olympics — Australia won no gold medals and placed a disappointing 32nd — precipitated a substantial transformation in national sport policy. This resulted in the building of the AIS in 1981, the emergence of the ASC in 1985 and ever-increasing expenditures on elite sport programs.⁹ The AOC had given only token attention and support to Winter Games athletes until the 1980s, preferring to concentrate on summer sports. With the new government funding schemes in place, the AOC was in some ways forced to rethink its philosophy on supporting winter sports and it began to cooperatively fund Olympic athletes in both summer and winter disciplines. Over the last 30 years, there have been a multitude of sport policies implemented and new funding initiatives established for high performance sport, exemplified in the recent Winning Edge strategy put in place in 2012.

Historical, Geographical and Cultural Factors: The Importance of Sport Down Under

As sport historian Richard Cashman makes clear, Australia owes much of its sporting heritage to Britain. As far as sporting traditions are concerned, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the British military introduced and popularized a number of non-indigenous games such as cricket, hockey, soccer, badminton and squash throughout the Empire.¹⁰ With this support from the mother country, Australia developed into a sport-loving nation.

In a strange way, the distance between Australia and the major hubs of international sport in Europe and North America has proved somewhat of a bonus rather than a negative feature. This is because a unique high performance sports model had to be developed that would work for a nation literally half-way around the world from most of the international sport action. Faced with this geographical isolation, Australian athletes

9 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 43.

10 Richard Cashman, *Paradise of Sport: The Rise of Organized Sport in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 1–19.

had to come up with creative means to get international experience, often by residing for long periods of time at overseas locations. This has been especially true for winter sports athletes due to Australia's lack of appropriate facilities, unsuitable weather conditions and the fact that the competition season was in the northern hemisphere. By having to endure such hardships, Australian athletes became more hardened competitors in a challenging environment. Many successful Australian Olympians seemed to be mentally toughened and were not affected by the intimidation factor, instead developing a mind-set that they can compete with the best.¹¹

Success Breeds Success and a Bit of Luck

Australia's historical connection with sport and fascination with winning on the world stage in Olympic and other sports is an important part of its culture. In particular, Australia's success in the Summer Games has had a spin-off impact on the Winter Games. The notion that success breeds success seems applicable. The large number of medals in recent Summer and Winter Games fired up the media and public at large to expect big things from Australian athletes wherever and whenever they compete. Of course, there has also been an intangible element of luck best evidenced by Bradbury's freakish win in Salt Lake City to make it the first-ever winter gold, Camplin's knee which held together for a bronze medal in Turin and Morris winning a surprising silver medal in Sochi in men's aerial skiing.¹² But luck can work both ways, and in Sochi the best medal hope, Alex 'Chumpy' Pullin, did not reach the podium, a result that sometimes befalls the favoured athletes in unpredictable winter disciplines such as snowboard cross, where collisions and falls are commonplace. Nicole Jeffrey commented that 'The Australian team has been lucky at the Winter Olympics before: cue Bradbury. In Sochi the team competed well but without luck in sports where luck, or judging vagaries, plays a significant part.'¹³

Infrastructure Support:

Improved Cooperative Relationships and Partnerships

Tied in directly with increased financial aid to elite athletes was the provision of better coaching, improved training facilities and greater opportunities for competition. For example, monetary assistance meant that Australian winter sports athletes could relocate to Europe and North America during the northern hemisphere winter. Overseas they had access to world class facilities, the best coaching, state-of-the-art training techniques and top-level competition.

11 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 43.

12 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 46.

13 Nicole Jeffrey, 'Three medals not a failure', *The Australian*, 24 February 2014.

A major development for Winter Olympic sports was the AOC's formation of the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia (OWI) in 1998. The purpose of this new body was to specifically develop elite performances in winter sports by Australian athletes through the provision of adequate funding, world-class sports programming and technical coaching. A major contributor to the OWI budget is the AOC which is now committing \$1 million plus per year (from 2010 to 2014), a total which was increased shortly after success in Turin. The *2013 OWI Annual Report* shows revenue in excess of \$3.8 million, with contributions of approximately \$2.2 million coming from the ASC/AIS via a number of different grant programs and \$1.2 million allocated by the AOC, with the remainder coming from financial and contra support from sponsors and other private sector sources.¹⁴

The OWI is also linked closely with the Victorian and New South Wales Institutes of Sport and winter national sport federations, to supply an overall national technical direction for the individual sport throughout the athlete pathway in Australia. Several alpine resorts including Thredbo (alpine skiing) and Perisher (mogul skiing and snowboard half-pipe) in New South Wales and Mt Buller (aerial skiing) in Victoria serve as the home bases for many of the winter disciplines. Over the years the OWI has had very strong leadership and support from key individuals like Geoff Henke, Ian Chesterman (the Sochi *Chef de Mission*), Geoff Lipshut and Rino Grollo. These individuals have worked closely with Government levels, the AOC, sporting bodies and the private sector resulting in a partnership philosophy which is a key feature of this extremely successful model. With the move of the OWI headquarters into the \$60 Million Medibank Icehouse (National Ice Sports Centre) in Melbourne in early 2010, this key organisation's role in high performance programs for winter sports moved to a new era of professionalism. This impressive facility boasts two full size ice rinks with spectator seating for 1000 people, a fitness centre, change rooms, a café, pro shop and player's lounge with room for functions, administrative offices for the OWI, a sports medicine clinic and other athlete support facilities. The sports involved in the facility include ice hockey, figure skating, short track speed skating and curling. Besides assisting elite winter athletes there is also a large component of recreational sport involvement primarily in the area of skating and hockey.¹⁵

In 2012, the Australian Sports Commission opened its new European Training Centre in the province of Varese in northern Italy. This overseas venue is a European base for athletes, coaches and support staff and is a

14 Olympic Winter Institute of Australia, *2013 Annual Report*. http://www.owia.org/assets/static/20131118_-_2013_owia_annual_report_web02.pdf. Accessed on 8 May 2014.

15 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 44.

new unique feature of the impressive and highly successful Sports Institute/Academy network in Australia. While originally established for use by only summer sports, winter sports are now also being accommodated.¹⁶

A New Cycle and New Sports Equals Results

The new Olympic cycle adopted in the 1990s with the summer and winter games alternating in even years resulted in a greater profile for the winter Games from many different perspectives — the media, the public and sponsors. In particular, the media profile for the Winter Games improved at both the international level and within Australia when the Winter Olympic Games no longer shared the same year as the Summer Games.

A second key IOC initiative was the adoption of new Winter Games events such as short track speed skating and extreme-style sports such as freestyle skiing and snowboarding which appealed to a new and generally younger generation of Australians accustomed to a traditional surfing, water sports and summer beach culture. The IOC was forced to take action due the emergence of an alternative popular sporting competition — the 'X Games' — which had begun to capture the attention of the younger generation. Suddenly, it became 'cool' for many young Australians to spend time in a winter sports setting. The surf and sea now had to share the limelight with the snow and slopes. The attraction to new winter sports by a large number of participants meant a much greater pool of talent from which elite athletes could emerge.¹⁷ In an interesting development twelve new events were added to the Sochi program and many of these were in the newer extreme-style sports.

An improvement in winter sports facilities, hosting international competitions and the development of an elite athlete club infrastructure in Australia also contributed to recent Australian success. While the Australian Alps are not nearly of the same calibre as such well-known winter areas as the Rockies in North America and the Alps in Europe, the emergence of top-class domestic resorts has contributed to the growth of winter sporting activities in Australia. The southern hemisphere, represented by Australia and New Zealand, has also been added to list of World Cup alpine and freestyle skiing events, particularly in snowboarding, mogul and aerial skiing. To a certain extent, the fact that the Australian winter season is the opposite of the northern hemisphere has meant that Australian winter sports athletes can almost train and compete year round, using both overseas and domestic settings.¹⁸

16 Baka and Osler, 'Golden Opportunities'.

17 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 45.

18 Baka, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games', p. 45.

The Targeted Approach

A very important reason for the Australian recent success in winter sports has been a philosophy of using the limited financial resources and targeting sport disciplines most likely to elicit positive results rather than taking a broad brush approach of sprinkling money to lots of different sports. From its inception, the OWI has basically tried to fund athletes and coaches in a very limited number of winter sports including alpine skiing (downhill and cross country), figure skating, skeleton, bobsleigh, speed skating as well as snowboarding and freestyle skiing. The new Winning Edge strategy mentioned previously followed immediately after a lacklustre performance at the 2012 London Games, leading to high spending on athletes likely to do well. Simon Hollingsworth, CEO of the ASC strongly supported Winning Edge, believing it was a structure increasingly being seen in countries that achieved medal success. 'You have to spend your money in a fairly narrow way to get an outcome.'¹⁹

Post Sochi Review

The expectations of success by the AOC at the 2014 Winter Olympic Games remained high going into Sochi, with Coates claiming that the performance objective for the Australian team was to place within the top-fifteen nations on the total medal standings (for which it was anticipated four or more medals will be required). Indications from Australian performances in recent international competitions in the lead-up period to Sochi pointed to a strong probability that this goal would be met.²⁰ The final outcome of two silver medals and one bronze left the AOC reasonably satisfied in that this tied the largest number of medals won at a Winter Games in Vancouver when Australia finished thirteenth compared to 24th in Sochi. Australian Chef de Mission Ian Chesterman was upbeat about the Sochi results:

We would have liked a gold medal (in Sochi) but we know how hard they are to get ... We set out for these Games with a view to win medals and we have done that again. I don't take that for granted because I've been around since 1994 when this team won its first medal, a bronze. So once again we have proven that we are world-class in many programs here and while we didn't reach our highest target, which was a stretch target, we can walk away here with our heads held up very high, knowing we have three medals plus what

19 'Australian Sports Commission chief executive not happy with Sochi medal haul, defends pay disparity'. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-02-26/asc-boss-unsatisfied-with-sochi-2014-haul/5286340>. Accessed on 8 May 2014.

20 John Coates, 'President's Address', AOC AGM, 4 May 2013. http://corporate.olympics.com.au/files/dmfile/AGM_2013_President_Address.pdf. Accessed on 8 May 2014.

I believe is an incredibly strong performance with 27 top-sixteen results. That's nearly half the team produced a top-sixteen result at these games.²¹

On the other hand, the CEO of the ASC, Simon Hollingsworth, went on public record to voice his disappointment with the Sochi medal tally. 'It was solid ... but we were unsatisfied. To walk away with three medals without gold was a little disappointing. That was not to take anything away from the athletes who got on top of the podium.'²² This reaction by Hollingsworth had a lot to do with the new ASC Winning Edge strategy implemented in late 2012 in the wake of the Olympic disappointment in London. At the 2012 Games the Australian team continued its steady medal decline since the pinnacle of Sydney (a fourth place with 58 medals) finishing in tenth place with 35 medals at the London Games. One of the major objectives of the new strategy was to target funding heavily towards athletes identified as having a strong medal potential, with the ASC setting a very high bar of a top-fifteen medal table finish in Sochi. The short time frame to implement the new strategy less than two years after London as well as the unpredictability of some events in which Australians were favoured meant the goal was not realistic.

There was also comment in the Australian press that the Sochi result was a failure because no gold medals were won. But Jeffrey, in her analytical review in *The Australian*, concluded that three medals was not a failure. She elaborates by commenting that to finish in the top fifteen was always an ambitious goal and one that team leaders expected would have required four to five medals. This was grossly underestimated and it would have taken eight medals, which was beyond the most optimistic predictions.²³ Andrew Webster wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that 'Despite the knockers, Sochi was a success'.²⁴

If one carefully analyses top-ten performances by athletes and not just medals attained, there is some optimism of an overall increased level of success by Australian winter athletes in the future. Chesterman noted that the Australian team would continue to be ambitious in its goals for winter sport and he believed that the AOC should retain the same top-fifteen target for the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. He commented that, if we want to be high achievers, perhaps those things that did not go well in Sochi might work out differently at the next Games.²⁵ On a positive note is the fact that of the 60 Australian athletes in Sochi, 27 had a top-sixteen finish and 43 (70 per

21 Jeffrey, 'Three medals not a failure'.

22 'Australian Sports Commission chief executive'.

23 Jeffrey, 'Three medals not a failure'.

24 Andrew Webster, 'Despite the Knockers, Sochi was a success', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 February 2014.

25 Jeffrey, 'Three medals not a failure'.

cent) were first-time Olympians.²⁶ Even Hollingsworth had a similar outlook for the future noting the fact that fifteen athletes achieved a top-ten finish which was the best ever output (See Table One). He concluded that this helps set up Australia for the 2018 Games, and the Winning Edge strategy would also benefit from an extra four year's tweaking by then.²⁷

A major distraction and rather unsavory issue in Sochi was the airing of grievances by a number of Australian winter athletes. The matter was in some ways linked to the Winning Edge funding model where the ASC's approach of large funding support to a pre-Games high achiever, Alex 'Chumpy' Pullin (estimated at \$500,000 in the four years leading up to Sochi), was criticised as it came at the expense of lower-ranked athletes being given substantially less support. Even before Sochi, a few athletes such as Torah Bright, Scotty James and Jarryd Hughes, started a social media hash tag termed team outcast to show their support for some team-mates re inequitable funding issues. But in their defense, this group did not use the hash tag once the games started.²⁸

The matter came to a head and was aired in a letter made public by Bruce Brockhoff, the parent of Belle Brockhoff, a snowboard cross athlete. His complaint was that his daughter only received \$38,000 of funding and did not have access to the same training and services that some other team members received. What compounded the situation is that this came out on the eve of Pullin's event. Chesterman and Hollingsworth both felt that this funding row was ill-timed and, while it may not have ultimately affected Pullin's performance, it did not help.²⁹ Bright and Brockhoff also were both quick to distance themselves from the negative comments made by the upset father.³⁰ Hollingsworth commented that 'Some of the external comments were disappointing. People outside of the team throwing comments like that, it's hardly conducive, there's a time and a place'. He went on to stress that he still felt that the Winning Edge's targeted approach was the correct strategy but that communication with athletes and their families needed to be improved and there was a greater need to engage with athlete's families.³¹

Belle Brockhoff was also targeted in unpleasant social media comments and hate tweets concerning her very open stance on being a gay athlete. As Russia had received massive worldwide criticism for its anti-gay legislation

26 Victorian Olympic Council, *102nd Annual Report of the Victorian Olympic Council 2013*, p. 6.

27 'Australian Sports Commission chief executive'.

28 'Australian Sports Commission chief executive'.

29 Jeffrey, 'Three medals not a failure'.

30 Andrew Webster, 'Team boss says rant hurt Alex "Chumpy" Pullin's chances' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 February 2014.

31 'Australian Sports Commission chief executive'.

— with some threats of boycotts and possible protests in Sochi - none of this eventuated to any large extent. But the gay rights issue was always festering beneath the surface and this coupled with the AOC athlete funding row must have placed significant pressure on Brockhoff. While she finished eighth overall in the snowboard cross, she too was unlucky and was knocked off her board and out of the medals in the semi-final by an aggressive Canadian snowboarder, Dominique Maltais, in this very unpredictable winter sport.³²

The Australian Olympic team experience in Sochi was characterised by several unfortunate controversies, which included infighting and a lack of team unity. National Olympic Hospitality Houses (NOHHs) are set up as temporary establishments by the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) of all major Olympic nations to serve as a type of home away from home or embassy of sport. They are normally based on a private, not public model, and entry to them is restricted to the Olympic family of a nation including its Olympic association, athletes, sponsors, relevant government sport agencies, the media, special guests and most importantly the family and friends of competing Olympians. The venues include bars and eating areas for food and beverage often reflective of the country, a media centre and broadcasting section, an area for medal celebrations, internet access, ticketing and tourist services, live television viewing areas and meeting rooms for sponsors and other events. Germany's *Deutsches Haus* dates back to the 1988 Calgary Olympics and over the last 20 years France, Italy, the USA, Canada and most others have set these up. In London alone there were an estimated 45 NOHHs.³³ Although the AOC does an overall excellent job of selecting and managing its Olympic team at both Summer and Winter Olympic Games, it does not have an Australian Olympic House (AOH). It did operate one in Atlanta in 1996 but it has steadfastly refused since then to introduce this concept, citing a lack of return on investment and a belief that the venue might turn out to be too boozy of an atmosphere. In all of the investigative studies completed to date and internal reviews undertaken by the NOCs that operate these venues, there is overwhelming positive feedback and support for NOHHs. Since national Olympic sponsors cover much of the cost of these establishments and income is generated from

32 Andrew Webster, 'Sochi Winter Olympics Boardercross semi-finalist Belle Brockhoff the subject of gay hate tweets', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 2014.

33 Richard Baka, 'Bucking the Trend: National Olympic Hospitality Houses in an Australian Context', in Richard Baka and Rob Hess (eds), *On the Periphery: New Perspectives on the Olympic Movement*, Walla Walla Press, Sydney, 2013, pp. 57–64. See also Richard Baka, 'A Home Away From Home: Why Australia Needs Olympic Houses', *The Conversation*, 13 August 2012. <http://theconversation.com/a-home-away-from-home-why-australia-needs-olympic-houses-8808>. Accessed on 12 May 2014.

public entry and sales of food and beverage, they will probably remain as a permanent fixture in cities hosting the Olympics. Even the IOC examined this phenomenon during the 2012 London Games in order to document the important role these NOHHs now play in contributing to a positive atmosphere in a host city by allowing more public participation.³⁴

A recommendation is for the AOC to consider the implementation of an AOH at future games. In Sochi there was an Athlete Lounge in the Olympic Village that was reserved for the Australian team but this was not accessible to most other users.³⁵ The AOC and the ASC believe they need to communicate and reconnect better with their athletes and their families. The funding fiasco witnessed in Sochi as well as the pressure put on Brockhoff as a gay athlete could possibly have been minimized or avoided completely if there had been a gathering place for all of the Australian Olympic family to get together, bond and create a cohesive unit. The fact that virtually every other major Olympic nation has a NOHH where athletes' families and friends are welcomed, mix with the media, government officials, sponsors and the NOC means that they become more intimately involved in an Olympic Games experience with less controversial episodes. It leads one to believe that they are serving a very important and useful function. The ASC and the AOC need to take note of this concept in future planning.

Conclusion: A Need for Some Tweaking and a Slight Rethink

Although somewhat of a late bloomer Australia has had a relatively consistent and slowly improving Winter Olympic Games record since 1994. While it is doubtful Australia will ever become a powerful force in the Winter Games, it has recorded a significant improvement over the last 20 years and added to its overall reputation as one of the great Olympic nations. There is definitely far more interest in the Winter Games than ever before, evident by the expanding size of the Australian Olympic team of athletes, much larger funding and support programs of the ASC, AOC and OWI, increased sponsorship for winter sports and a keen interest by the media and the public.

At least one author believes that Australia's passion for doing well at the Olympic Games and winning medals is perhaps not a totally healthy attitude. John Deane concluded that an overemphasis on medal accumulation or a

34 Gashaw Abeza, Richard Baka, Richard Burton, Norm O'Reilly and Benoit Seguin, 'National Olympic Hospitality Houses: Objectives, Variations and Mini Cases', in Richard Baka and Rob Hess (eds), *On the Periphery: New Perspectives on the Olympic Movement*, Walla Walla Press, Sydney, 2013, pp. 33–40.

35 'Chesterman congratulates Team'. <http://www.corporate.olympics.com.au/1280DFD0-9CE0-11E3-B36A005056A37760>. Accessed on 8 May 2014.

winning is everything philosophy is to some extent detrimental to Australia's overall involvement in the Olympic experience.³⁶ The reality is that Australia is a successful but relatively small Olympic nation in comparison to the Olympic juggernauts and, while this nation should strive for excellence, it should perhaps not be overly preoccupied with the medal tally. AOC historian Harry Gordon does not support this view. In 2009 when the controversial *Crawford Report* recommended a new sport policy designed to enhance more sport participation and less emphasis on the funding of elite sport, the AOC set up its own Study Group to try to effectively lobby against this change. Gordon was critical of the *Crawford Report*, which he felt 'fails to comprehend a simple truth: that Australians, both the elite athletes and the passionate supporters of sport, love the process of winning. Coming second does not entice them'.³⁷ When many of the *Crawford Report's* recommendations were shelved, Coates was only too pleased to report that the Australian Government 'genuinely got it and were not prepared "to scale back Australia's Olympic opportunities and expectations" on their watch'.³⁸

To some observers, the Sochi performance by Australia was perhaps slightly disappointing given the record breaking team size of 60 athletes with initial expectations of four to five medals. To others, the effort was commendable when assessing the entire team's performance. There also remains optimism for Pyeongchang, South Korea in 2018 as there appears to be more depth to the Australian Olympic Winter Team, more athletes qualifying for finals than ever before and the emergence of new talent who may perform better at future games after gaining invaluable experience in Sochi. The Winning Edge strategy may also start to show increased dividends for both summer and winter games performances. The media, ASC, AOC, OWI and the public may find a better balance in determining what constitutes success and how Australia's role and performance in the world's peak sporting event may be evaluated. Besides a quest to win on the world stage, perhaps Australia can find ways to improve rates of sporting participation, get better at acknowledging the performance of its Olympic athletes — regardless of medal success — and introduce the concept of an Australian Olympic House to enhance team unity, all the while continuing to be a prominent contributor to the Olympic movement.

36 John Deane, 'Australia at the Olympic Winter Games: A Post-Turin Review' Guest lecture at Victoria University, 2006.

37 Coates, 'President's Address' (2010).

38 Coates, 'President's Address' (2010).