

# **EA BOARD HIGH PERFORMANCE REVIEW PANEL (HPRP)**

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# **OVERVIEW AND PLAN**

The Equestrian Australia (EA) Board formed a small working panel group in October 2012 that was tasked to review the EA High Performance (HP) Program and its activities in the year preceding the London Olympics. This review and its outcomes was intended to complement and integrate with the invited Australian Sports Commission (ASC) facilitated review of the EA High Performance Program.

The EA Board High Performance Review Panel (HPRP) was comprised of Warwick Vale, Des Hughes, Wendy Hunt and Rossanne Mason.

The HPRP formulated the following scope and priorities for its review project.

## **Scope (in Priority Order)**

### **1. Selection/Nomination process and appeals**

- a. Considering the resources, strategies, planning, management, communication, documentation, agreements
- b. Review outcomes.

### **2. HP program and activities – 2011/2012**

- a. Considering the resources, strategies, planning, management, communication, documentation, agreements
- b. Review outcomes.

### **3. Performance of personnel – 2011/2012**

- a. Management, office, coaches, vets, NPD, Chefs, Owners, Selectors, riders, others etc
- b. Debrief and review.

### **4. HP Veterinary program**

- a. Considering the resources, strategies, planning, management, communication, documentation, agreements.
- b. Review outcomes.

## **Timeline**

- Report to the EA Board by end December 2012.

The HPRP consulted with and considered the following with respect to their review.

1. Selector debriefs (in all HP sports)
2. Rider debriefs (in all HP sports)
3. National Performance Director (NPD) debriefs (in all HP sports)
4. EA High Performance Manager (HPM) Brett Mace debrief and summary report
5. EA Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Grant Baldock debrief and summary report
6. Relevant documentation
  - a. EA Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) nomination documents (in all HP sports)
  - b. All provided appeal submissions, emails, documentation, reports, letters and findings (in all HP sports)
  - c. Other correspondence (in all HP sports).

The HPRP requested and was provided with email correspondence relating to the HP program, team selection, AOC, appeals etc from members of the EA HP teams.

# **HPRP KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The HPRP made the following determinations in respect of their review;

1. The selection of rider/horse combinations for international competitions in 2012 was a difficult job for the EA HP team and selectors. The selection of the athletes for the 2012 London Olympics proved to be very difficult in comparison to previous Games and created much controversy.

During the selection for the London Olympic Games in 2012, riders from all sports appealed non selection to the – Amy Graham (J), Emma Mason (E), Megan Jones (E), Sonja Johnson (E) – withdrawn, and Hayley Beresford (D) . All National Federation (NF) Appeals Tribunal appeals were declined, with two riders going on to appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). In all cases the CAS appellants were unsuccessful.

The HPRP felt that there were these significant underpinning factors that resulted in these selection appeals;

- a. The current EA team selection policies and procedures were found to be overly complicated, difficult to understand and inherently problematic to administer. They are not written in plain English, nor with a consistent language throughout. The documentation lacks a clear selection timetable and a validation process for management. The complex and intricate details of the policy documents were not completely comprehended by NPDs, the EA HPM and EA selectors.
- b. It was evident that some riders did not properly understand the complexity of the nomination criteria. Specifically they do not fully understand how the rules and criteria are applied by EA Selectors. These riders did not properly understand the appeals process, nor did they appreciate the reality of the limited scope/avenues for a successful appeal.
- c. The ability of the HP team (manager, selectors, NPD, staff) in each discipline to develop, interpret and apply the selection/nomination documentation was variable across each sport. The HPRP determined that EA did not optimally manage these areas in the HP Program. The complexity of the EA Olympic Team nomination process necessitated an in depth management focus, delivered by management/volunteers that had not received sufficient training and mentoring and who suffered from under extremely tight timelines. Further scrutiny of their decision making processes by the EA Appeal Tribunal Hearings created increased stress and pressure. The end result was that some volunteers felt that it was “trial by fire” and likened their experience to being “thrown in the deep end”.

The HPRP finds that there was insufficient training, induction, procedural guidance/mentoring and management overview provided to selectors and NPDs to help them with their difficult roles and decisions.

- d. The HPRP determined that the selection process could have benefited from closer EA Board scrutiny, supervision and oversight.

The HPRP is satisfied that the dominant objective of all selection panels and the selection documentation was to appoint the best team to represent Australia at the London Olympic Games. There is no evidence for, nor is there a concern of the HPRP that any corrupt decisions were made in any sport discipline.

2. There is an apparent and harmful disconnect between the sport in Australia and the HP Program in all three sports. The EA HP program needs to improve overall communication and membership engagement. The HP program needs to be more inclusive, informative and interactive with the national sporting disciplines and the membership at large. There is a general feeling of lack of communication at all levels. There is a definite need for much better communication between HP, NPDs, selectors and the riders. The communication of relevant plans, rules, decisions, and media releases to all levels of the sport/membership is suboptimal. Failure of the HP program to effectively engage, consult, communicate and inform the sports via the established sport committee and branch structures has generated antipathy and distrust amongst some key influential members. Further the HPRP found evidence that lack of engagement with the sports was resulting in a loss of history, experience and appropriate guidance to the hard pressed HPM and NPDs. There was some sentiment that this situation had worsened since the abandonment of HP Panels.

The HPRP recommends that EA reconnect the links between key players in all disciplines e.g. EA sport Committees, National Judges Committee, coaches, owners and State Sport/Branch Committees. The HP program needs to produce a feeling across the whole sport and organisation that they belong to the sport, are engaged with the HP part of the sport and can contribute to the success of the HP program. The HPRP feels that a consequence of this will be a greater commitment by more participants/riders to aspire to the HP program.

The HPRP has concerns that the newer features in the HP program all three disciplines that have arisen from natural evolution and progression have struggled to get full acceptance of many EA members. This seems to be more apparent in the discipline of jumping. A consequence of this is a process of ongoing undermining and rejection of change. The HPRP feels that factors that prevent full acceptance by these members are; the sport at an elite level is becoming more euro-centric and that Australian based members are far removed from Europe and its competition trends and environment.

The likelihood of some of our elite riders continuing to be based in Europe, has potential to further make the EA HP program and profile out of sight/out of mind to Australian EA members. There is significant resentment about EA supporting riders who are based permanently offshore.

3. Some volunteers engaged in the HP program currently have a feeling of lack of worth, and that their opinions are not valued. They feel disconnected from the program. The team nomination appeal process and subsequent media furore left some of our selectors and athletes feeling unsupported by the membership at large. Support to riders and HP officials/volunteers by EA management during the NF Appeals was well structured and appreciated.
4. EA HP Program financial and management performance reporting did not meet the needs of EA. The HPRP found that the HP program would benefit from greater attention to the financial management of its activities and expenditure. The HP program would benefit from specific KPI's in areas of financial control and HP results.
5. The NF Tribunal Appeals created an intolerably onerous workload for all involved. There were many hours of the CEO's time, High Performance Management, NPDs, Selectors and the EA Commercial team that took the focus away from other vital roles in the lead up to the London Olympics.

The HPRP identified that the appeals created significant disharmony and discourse within the sport and the Olympic Games teams/HP management. The disharmony created was the most damaging in the sport of Dressage and substantially affected team preparation, cohesion and morale. The brand of Australian Dressage was also damaged by the media reporting of this appeal.

Of all EA activities, the selection/appeal process and outcomes have the greatest potential for legal challenge, to create membership disaffection and affect the delivery of the HP program goals. This was realised at a level that was unprecedented and very damaging in the sport of Dressage in Australia.

The NF Appeals Tribunal found fault with EA and the selection process in both Jumping and Dressage. EA was found not to have correctly applied the selection criteria with two Jumping riders who were eligible for automatic selection and was referred to reconsider their decision. It was apparent to the HPRP that the jumping nomination requirements were incomplete in their ability to be able to give direction to selectors in the circumstances that arose at nomination events. The jumping selectors were able to correctly revise the basis for their selection decision in a manner that was fair and acceptable to the NF Appeals Tribunal, such that team composition did not alter.

The NF Appeal Tribunal found that the Dressage Nomination Policy was found to be confusing in many areas, and the Jumping selection policy was lacking instruction. The opinion of the HPRP is that these were issues that were entirely preventable with more diligent management.

Team selections were delayed due to appeals in all three disciplines with Dressage and Jumping having appeals progress to CAS. While all the appeals were ultimately dismissed, this caused significant disruption to these team's preparation. The period between team nomination and up until the conclusion of the appeals process was a wasted, stagnant and divisive period in terms of being able to continue on with team logistics, support, transport, harmony and final Olympic Games planning/staging. A significant issue was that reserves could not be announced until the appeals were completed.

6. The HPRP determined that the EA HP program results would be improved by increasing veterinary resources and services to the program. The veterinary support program has benefited from the structural changes initiated in the HP program. A further commitment to address greater relationship building and engagement between team vets and riders/owners will be an important advantage.
7. The HPRP found that discretionary selection pathways/policies are high risk in their capacity to continue to incite criticism and to generate grounds for appeal that are almost never likely to be successful. The provision for discretionary selection in all three policies is a most significant risk factor for selection appeals and criticism. The discretionary components of the policies are the most difficult for selectors to apply. However, there is overwhelming support from within the sport and the HP management for the continuation of discretionary powers within the policies and the value that they give to appropriate team selection. The HPRP advises that there is a greater onus on the HP program and its policy application to better communicate the basis of any discretionary decision making to all interested parties in a clearer, more transparent manner.

8. Many riders also need to develop a longer term plan to win medals. There appears to be a lack of planning on some of the rider's part to prepare their horses over a four year cycle. Some riders have yet to develop the full skill set that is required to compete as elite international athletes and win medals. This lack of professionalism and a failure to take a holistic approach to being an Equestrian Australia elite athlete is serious problem that needs urgent attention. Mentoring of riders to take a more comprehensive and systematic approach to achieving their high performance goals and results is needed.
9. Succession planning for selectors, NPD's, Team Chefs is a concern. Australia has a very limited and small pool of "qualified" candidates for volunteer roles. Despite the immediate past performance problems identified by the HPRP, it is concerning to the HPRP that there is a lack of depth in potential replacement EA officials. Over many years, there has been significant investment, by both EA and those voluntary individuals themselves, in establishing the current 'brains and experience trust'. EA must navigate cautiously any waters that yield succession in the area of EA HP officials and staff. The impact of loss of corporate knowledge must also be considered highly during the process of rebuilding/reconfiguring the EA HP management teams for the next Olympic cycle.
10. The HPRP is concerned about the effect that conflict of interest with HP officials is managed by EA. The HPRP accepts that conflict of interest can be managed for merit and competency based appointments – but this may come at a cost. The HPRP concludes that there exists a perceived historical and ongoing conflict of interest applicable to some officials. The HPRP recommends that with appointment of officials in this category, that the policies that cover conflict of interest need to be reviewed. It is suggested that the Board ensure that new policies have a greater weighting against applicants with actual or perceived conflicts of interest.
11. The HPRP raises concerns about the potential of rider behavior, media controversy and poor management communication to impair both the image and integrity of the sport. The HPRP found that the behaviour of some riders and management during the selection period, the appeals, nomination events, and immediately pre-games period was damaging to the integrity and brand of EA.

Around team selection, there was open and overt conflict between members of the dressage squads. These conflicts were brought right into the public eye, and spilled into the mainstream media, newspapers, TV and internet in a way that has not been experienced by EA before. The inability or failure of EA to effectively respond to the controversy added fuel to the fire. During the NF Tribunal Appeals, an information vacuum/communication and paralysis on EA's part added to the already building membership and public concern and distrust.

The impact of social media and internet forums to create a negative image of EA and its selected riders was not anticipated. It seemed that a membership revolt" was happening, with EA members adding commentary to the actions of EA.

Although team members were well supported through the 'media storm' by EA, it is apparent to the HPRP that the public nature of all comments made and the controversy had a very damaging effect upon both rider and team morale.

It is the opinion of the HPRP that the failure of EA to ensure that members do not bring the sport into disrepute has damaged the standing of EA amongst its membership, its volunteer officials and the AOC. Officials and potential officials are put off working in volunteer HP roles as they fear being on the receiving end of this type of behaviour and having their reputations damaged.

The riders concerned were never disciplined or even warned that their behaviour had crossed the line and has breached the EA member protection policy, the squad rider agreement, and the AOC's code of conduct. The HPRP advises that EA completely reconsider its current approach to members who transgress EA policies in respect of behaviour.

EA may benefit from an international benchmarking comparison of its policies and procedures with respect to its member code of conduct.

12. The HPRP determined that despite an Olympic performance outcome that was less than expected, the actual management of the Equestrian team attendance and contribution in London was outstanding. The Australian Equestrian team logistical planning/support, team management, team support, transportation, staff participation, athlete support, horse care, coaching, veterinary care etc were all delivered at a level that was needed to optimize the performance of the Australian riders and horses at the Games.

The HPRP noted the many curve balls that arose during the immediate pre-games period and during the Olympic Games competition. The HPRP highlights the skills, commitment and dedication shown by both EA HP Management, EA Team Support Staff, EA volunteers, EA Officials, Australian Athletes, horse owners and grooms that was needed to deal with these in such a competent manner. The HPRP noted that high credit is warranted and deserved in these areas of team cohesion, cooperation and professionalism.

The team management did well to secure affordable accommodation with a house that was able to house support team staff (farriers, physios and EA staff) as well as reserve riders for Dressage and Jumping. More importantly the EA House was positively received by the riders as they could easily access physio treatments and use as a retreat away from the pressures of competitions. It was a place that was utilized for performance analysis, team briefings/debriefs as well as could be accessed by owners, rider's families and other Australian Equestrian Team supporters. The positive feedback received from riders, owners, families as well as the AOC, again reinforced EA's commitment to an inclusive team culture and support. (For more details please see addendum to this report).