



Australian Government

Australian Sports Commission

EQUESTRIAN AUSTRALIA – REPORT

2012 London Olympics Review

**Facilitated by David Crocker on behalf of the Equestrian
Australian Board.**

April 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The participants of the 2012 Australian equestrian team for the London Olympic Games reported pride and satisfaction in their experiences at the Games. They believe the preparation camp leading into the Games was a very good builder of their positive team culture.

However, despite the positive feelings of representing their Country and doing it as a Team, the athletes were unable to achieve the results that were targeted for Equestrian at the Games. It appears that a lack of clarity in the program objectives, and a genuine performance culture were contributing factors to lower than expected performances along with the international competitiveness in what can be a financially challenging sport.

This review consisted of one-on-one consultations, a workshop and survey with 30 participants to inform the findings. The recommendations to address many of the findings from the review will predominately require improved communication, planning, implementation and some behavioural changes, all of which can cost more time than money, but all of which can underpin future successful campaigns.

In compiling this report, I appreciated the frankness of those I talked with and am thankful for the willingness of the contributors to offer viable alternatives in how things can be improved into the future.

David Crocker

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Finding 1:

Equestrian Australia failed to meet its performance objectives at the London Games.

Finding 2:

There was no unifying high performance goal for the London Olympic campaign.

Finding 3:

Selectors for the London Olympics were recognised broadly for doing a difficult job to the best of their ability considering the complexity of the task. Concern for the role and the quality of the people to carry out the role into the future exists.

Finding 4:

The subjective nature of the selection policy needs to be better balanced with more objective performance requirements.

Finding 5:

The selection policy was generally considered fair and did select the best possible team for the London Olympics.

Finding 6:

Communication of selection policy and selection process from Equestrian Australia needs to be dramatically improved to increase key stakeholders understanding of what they need to do and by when to qualify for the Rio Olympic Games.

Finding 7:

The program lacked a high performance culture that was consistent with values and behaviours of successful world class programs.

Finding 8:

That the experience was enjoyable for most of the Team and the main contributor to this was the pre-Games camp that assisted in building a generally healthy team culture.

Finding 9:

The Owner Program has been a good start but needs further development.

Finding 10:

Media and issue management by Equestrian Australia was not effective in minimising the distraction to a large number of the team members at the London Games.

Finding 11:

Athlete personal management was not as effective as it should be for athletes competing at the London Games.

Finding 12:

Access to horses of international standard is inconsistent.

Finding 13:

Combinations of horses and riders that can be internationally competitive are outside of Equestrian Australia's control.

Finding 14:

The Vet Program needs enhancement to increase earlier engagement with riders and owners.

Finding 15:

International eventing results can be produced here in Australia or overseas.

Finding 16:

Being overseas is critical for developing dressage and jumping to international standard.

Finding 17:

It is broadly agreed eventing can deliver medals in the next Games cycle.

Finding 18:

Jumping can deliver an individual medal in the next eight years.

Finding 19:

Dressage is unlikely to deliver a medal performance at an Olympic Games or World Equestrian Games in the next eight years without a significant intervention.

Finding 20:

Significant improvement in communication at all levels is required.

Finding 21:

Riders need greater support to ensure their professionalism with holistic planning and their relationships with owners and vets.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: establish unambiguous performance targets

That the Board of Equestrian Australia establishes unambiguous performance targets for the Rio Olympic cycle for both the system and prioritised combinations. These should be objective targets and include:

- a. results at key relevant competitions
- b. equestrian relevant high performance system measures that indicate progress in:
 - i. both tactical and physical preparation
 - ii. coaching and training environment support

Recommendation 2: conduct an holistic review of selection policy and process

That the Board of Equestrian Australia holistically reviews the selection policy and processes for major teams using the Australian Sports Commission's 'Getting it right' publication as a guide to good practice with particular consideration of:

- a. The policy relating to selectors
- b. Increasing the balance of objective and subjective criteria
- c. Use of a legal practitioner highly experienced in drafting selection criteria to assist development of the policy framework and processes

Recommendation 3: develop performance culture

That the high performance management team of Equestrian Australia develops and implements a high performance culture program that is consistent with successful performance cultures.

Recommendation 4: pre Games Camp

That a pre-Games camp be utilised in future campaigns to underpin preparations and team culture.

Recommendation 5: evolve the owners support program

Equestrian Australia must continue to evolve its relationships and suite of benefits for owners with international quality horses to achieve the objectives of the high performance program.

Recommendation 6: increase ownership and access to international horses

Equestrian Australia continues build relationships with individuals and syndicates to increase probability of retaining ownership and access to international standard horses for Australian riders.

Recommendation 7: intervene to improve combinations

Equestrian Australia needs to take a more interventionist approach earlier in the development pathway to increase the probability of combinations that can win medals at the World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games.

Recommendation 8: enhance Vet program

The Vet program needs enhancement to increase earlier engagement with riders and owners to ensure: trust; earlier diagnosis and treatment plans; and, depth of understanding in the horse's recovery history.

Recommendation 9: prioritise available resources

That Equestrian Australia prioritises its available resources to the programs and combinations that demonstrate a higher level of probability to deliver medals at the World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games in the next eight years with a priority order being; Eventing and then Jumping

Recommendation 10: investment into Dressage

That Equestrian Australia appropriately invest into the dressage program and combinations considering that medals at the World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games are highly unlikely in the short to medium terms.

Recommendation 11: develop rider professionalism

Equestrian Australia needs to investigate opportunities for a professional development program for riders to support their holistic development, planning, and their relationships with owners and vets.

Recommendation 12: develop stakeholder communication plans

That the management team at Equestrian Australia develops comprehensive key internal and external stakeholder communication plans that:

- a. establishes the strategy and structure for delivery of key messages
- b. establishes the strategy and structure for management of media issues

c. clarifies the policy relating to media and social media use

Equestrian Australia's performance objectives

Equestrian Australia established the following targets for the London Olympic Games:

Discipline	Target	Actual Result
Dressage Team	Top 6	9 th
Dressage Individual	Top 8	37 th / 42 nd / 43 rd
Eventing Team	1 medal (1 Gold)	6th
Eventing Individual	1 medal (1 silver)	13th/ 16th / 35th
Jumping Team	Top 6	= 10th
Jumping Individual	Top 10	20 th / = 35 th / = 41 st / = 72nd

It is clear that the program did not achieve its performance objectives at the 2012 London Olympics. An interesting aspect during the review process was the lack of clarity on what the objectives for the program were. Neither the Equestrian Australia Strategic Plan, nor the High Performance Handbook explicitly state performance targets for the London Olympics. The High Performance Plan had London Olympics performance targets listed in its body only from June 2011.

The lack of an explicit and universally agreed target can undermine the ability to have a unifying purpose which is a key ingredient in successful performance cultures. Not having explicit performance targets can also subjugate the focus of program resources being appropriately prioritised.

Finding 1:

Equestrian Australia failed to meet its performance objectives at the London Games.

Finding 2:

There was no unifying high performance goal for the London Olympic campaign.

Recommendation 1: establish unambiguous performance targets

That the Board of Equestrian Australia establishes unambiguous performance targets for the Rio Olympic cycle for both the system and prioritised combinations. These should be objective targets and include:

- a. results at key relevant competitions
- b. equestrian relevant high performance system measures that indicate progress in:
 - i. both tactical and physical preparation

The selection process

The process of selection for the Olympic equestrian team was set out in the *2012 Australian Olympic Team: Equestrian Australia nomination criteria*. The process of agreement with the Australian Olympic Committee on selection policy was considered to be more difficult with lengthier delays for the 2012 Olympic Games than previously experienced by Equestrian Australia. In particular the Dressage selection policy was not finalised until very late into the selection process.

The role of the selectors

From the majority of those inputting to the review, the selectors were commented upon respectfully recognising as volunteers they have a complex task to carry out. Little was understood in how and when Selectors are appointed and there was concern about the depth of quality selectors available currently and greater concern about the future considering how demanding the role can be and how much pressure and scrutiny they are under.

With Equestrian Australia's primarily subjective approach to selection, selectors need to be appropriately skilled and resourced to ably meet their responsibilities. This includes their broad experience in the discipline, knowledge of horsemanship with a number of comments suggesting that judges should not be selectors due to the potential of a conflict of interest being the main reason for this view. In resourcing selectors appropriately, key consideration was ensuring that they have the capacity to attend key events no matter the location and that they have access to the most relevant performance data.

A major frustration for riders was the lack of communication with Selectors. Information they sought included updates on how they were being perceived at any point of time and any areas for improvement. It was considered that National Performance Directors could play an important role in ensuring communication loops exist between all of the parties.

It was noted on a number of occasions the level of confidentiality that Selectors need to operate within, due to what can be at times commercially sensitive information around the soundness of a horse, that may impact its value is another issue that further complicates the role of a selector.

Finding 3:

Selectors for the London Olympics were recognised broadly for doing a difficult job to the best of their ability considering the complexity of the task. Concern for the role and the quality of the people to carry out the role into the future exists.

Description of the overall selection philosophy and process

Equestrian Australia's selection philosophy sets out to identify combinations to achieve the best possible results as an individual and as a team, with eventing, dressage and jumping each having discipline specific selection criteria. To accomplish this philosophy, the policies contain a primarily subjective approach that places the disciplines' selection panels in an unenviable position of having to weigh a considerable amount of factors up when making their determinations.

It is appropriate that variations exist in the detail and process of each discipline, however a more consistent approach should exist in the drafting to strengthen Equestrian Australia's structure of the core elements across the selection policies, such as weighting those events that most closely match the Olympic format.

The nature of equestrian with the complexity of its overall high performance structure and system lends itself best to a subjective formula, however a stronger set of objective factors should be given greater consideration, particularly around increasing or maintaining performance standards through the qualification process. Continuing such a strong balance of a subjective selection approach will possibly generate future selection appeals which are expensive in time, money and emotional energy.

Finding 4:

The subjective nature of the selection policy needs to be better balanced with more objective performance requirements.

Was the selection process fair and appropriate?

Despite their lack of detailed understanding of the policy, interviewed participants and from comments made at the forum, it was generally considered that the selection process was fair and appropriate with acknowledgement that this process did not advantage or disadvantage a combinations ability to be selected for the Olympic team, particularly in regards to a combinations training location. It is a different matter that being based overseas is

considered advantageous in a combination's preparation, particularly in dressage and jumping.

Again, from input to the review, it was believed that the best combinations for London were selected across the disciplines. Alternative combinations were not considered to be capable of delivering results better than what was achieved.

Finding 5:

The selection policy was generally considered fair and did select the best possible team for the London Olympics.

Description of the selection process communication

It is evident that a lack of understanding of the policy by key stakeholders including riders and owners existed. The development and distribution of the policies and subsequent publishing on websites only was insufficient in communicating the selection policy to athletes, owners and other relevant stakeholders. Additional efforts for future policies should include the implementation of group and/or individual briefings, so as to explicitly outline the detail in how the policy operates and the rationale behind it.

Finding 6:

Communication of selection policy and selection process from Equestrian Australia needs to be dramatically improved to increase key stakeholders understanding of what they need to do and by when to qualify for the Rio Olympic Games.

Recommendation 2: conduct an holistic review of selection policy and process

That the Board of Equestrian Australia holistically reviews the selection policy and processes for major teams using the Australian Sports Commission's 'Getting it right' publication as a guide to good practice with particular consideration of:

- a. The policy relating to selectors
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The London Olympic Games experience

Performance culture

As part of the review, a survey of team members was undertaken with the overall majority of respondents indicating that their personal goals (53%) and the team objectives (86%) were not achieved in London. It is of note that only 30% of participants provided positive feedback around factors that contributed to achievement of goals for team and individual whilst 70% of participants highlighted the biggest factors that provide barriers for team and individuals in achieving goals.

Several key themes emerged that the team felt contributed to a lack of performance in London and achievement of team goals. Numerous respondents indicated that poor performance was as a result of either 'bad luck', poor preparation and/or quality of horses for competition.

There was an absence of any focus on standards for achievement for athletes around skill, fitness and behaviour, and there was no evidence throughout the review process around performance targets for the team or individual being developed, communicated or agreed with the individuals within the broader squad or final team.

Finding 7:

The program lacked a high performance culture that was consistent with values and behaviours of successful world class programs.

Recommendation 3: develop performance culture

That the high performance management team of Equestrian Australia develops and implements a high performance culture program that is consistent with successful performance cultures.

The positive parts of the London Olympics campaign

The overall experience for 73% of the team at the Games was rated as either enjoyable or very enjoyable. Primary reasons for this identified by the respondents was the healthy team culture and the pride of being a member of the Australian Olympic Team and the general environment and experience that the London Games offered.

In identifying factors that assisted individual performance, support staff was a consistent comment with specific mentions of the strong vet team and the support of team chef and management. The well-structured and well organised pre Games training camp was noted on a number of occasions and the peak in camaraderie through this initiative. The impact of the Equestrian Australia management team on this experience was balanced. Respondents that held a negative view were concerned with issues that were communication centred. In contrast one respondent noted “communication between management and athletes has seriously improved since 2010”. In considering what other aspects individuals performed well at the 2012 London Olympic Games, owners felt they supported their horse and rider and a number of comments regarding the care of the horse from the broader team were made.

Very positive responses were received from the owners regarding their access to their horses and the riders and the level of recognition that Equestrian Australia afforded them.

Finding 8:

That the experience was enjoyable for most of the Team and the main contributor to this was the pre-Games camp that assisted in building a generally healthy team culture.

Recommendation 4: pre Games Camp

That a pre-Games camp be utilised in future campaigns to underpin preparations and team culture.

Finding 9:

The Owner Program has been a good start but needs further development.

Recommendation 5: evolve the owners support program

Equestrian Australia must continue to evolve its relationships and suite of benefits for owners with international quality horses to achieve the objectives of the high performance program.

Areas for improvement in the London Olympics campaign

Of the 30 respondents, four considered the experience unenjoyable. A broader view existed that media management around the Hayley Beresford matter was not managed well by Equestrian Australia. When asked to identify aspects of what was most disliked about the London Olympic Games, survey respondents identified the underperformance of the team as

the primary issue. Logistical matters such as uniform and nutrition - which are outside of the control of Equestrian Australia - were also areas of frustration.

When asked, 'What aspect did you NOT perform well at the 2012 London Olympic Games', a number commented on their disappointment in personal performances with one respondent commenting "...the world has moved but we hadn't." This was similar to comments made during interview on three occasions. Personal management issues around nutrition, sleep, staying well and being positive under pressure were explicitly mentioned on multiple occasions as aspects individuals believed they did not manage well.

Finding 10:

Media and issue management by Equestrian Australia was not effective in minimising the distraction to a large number of the team members at the London Games.

Finding 11:

Athlete personal management was not as effective as it should be for athletes competing at the London Games.

Ideas to improve future campaigns

In seeking what could be transformative ideas to improve Australia's international performance during the workshop, a number of key issues around the lack of genuine international quality horses available to Australian riders was identified. A contributing factor to this is the international status of the sport and its attraction to wealthy individuals/countries who buy the best horses (particularly for dressage and jumping).

A significant challenge for Australia in this global arena is access to high enough quality and quantity of international standard horses. Quality domestically bred and trained horses are more likely to be sold to an international buyer than retained in Australia for competition purposes. Further to the challenges of accessing and retaining the right horses is ensuring that the best combinations of horse and rider occur, as rider and owner relationships are not primarily created from a perspective of what is good for Australian results at an Olympics.

It was also noted that Federation Equestrian International competition rules allow for declaration of a horse's nationality for the next Olympics up to 31 December of the year before the Olympic Games. This can exacerbate the horse retention risk late in the cycle.

Finding 12:

Access to horses of international standard is inconsistent.

Finding 13:

Combinations of horses and riders that can be internationally competitive are outside of Equestrian Australia's control.

Recommendation 6: increase ownership and access to international horses

Equestrian Australia continues build relationships with individuals and syndicates to increase probability of retaining ownership and access to international standard horses for Australian riders.

Recommendation 7: intervene to improve combinations

Equestrian Australia needs to take a more interventionist approach earlier in the development pathway to increase the probability of combinations that can win medals at the World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games.

Comments during the workshop and several one on one interviews generally complimented the Vet Program leading into the Games and the leadership of that program. Issues that were identified as needing to be improved were around the level of mutual trust between owner, rider and vet to ensure appropriate treatment and recovery plans were developed. Most saw this improvement to be around earlier and more frequent engagement between the parties.

Finding 14:

The Vet Program needs enhancement to increase earlier engagement with riders and owners.

Recommendation 8: enhance Vet program

The Vet Program needs enhancement to increase earlier engagement with riders and owners to ensure: trust; earlier diagnosis and treatment plans; and, depth of understanding in the horse's recovery history.

A common discussion during interviews and the workshop related to the training location necessary for combinations to develop into consistent world class performers. Without being specific as it is an individual matter, it is broadly considered as necessary for dressage and jumping riders to have significant amounts of time in Europe to refine their craft to world

class standard. There was a strong view that eventing riders do not need to spend as much time overseas because of the quality of the horses, riders and level of competition in Australia.

Finding 15:

Being overseas is critical for developing dressage and jumping to international standard.

Finding 16:

International eventing results can be produced here in Australia or overseas.

A component of the workshop considered the potential for dressage, eventing and jumping to deliver medals at the next and future World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games. This discussion was facilitated to help identify performance goals that could assist Equestrian Australia management with their performance submission to the Australian Sports Commission and to assist the Equestrian Australia board in establishing objectives for the high performance program. It was identified that eventing has the best probability of delivering individual and team medals in both the short to longer term; that dressage is not in a position to deliver a medal in the next eight years without a significant intervention with a combination; and that jumping could deliver an individual medal in the next eight years on its current trajectory.

The Australian Sports Commission recently announced its future performance objectives in the Winning Edge strategy and that investment will be aligned to these performance objectives. This cascades the challenge to Equestrian Australia to prioritise its investment to align with the objectives of the Australian Sports Commission. This poses immediate challenges to the way that Equestrian Australia will need to consider its funding to dressage commencing in the next financial year and beyond.

Finding 17:

It is broadly considered eventing can deliver medals in the next Games cycle.

Finding 18:

Dressage cannot deliver a medal performance at an Olympic Games or World Equestrian Games in the next eight years without a significant intervention.

Finding 19:

Jumping can deliver an individual medal in the next eight years.

Recommendation 9: prioritise available resources

That Equestrian Australia prioritises its available resources to the programs and combinations that demonstrate a higher level of probability to deliver medals at the World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games in the next eight years with a priority order being; eventing and then jumping.

Recommendation 10: investment into dressage

That Equestrian Australia appropriately invest into the dressage program and combinations considering that medals at the World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games are highly unlikely in the short to medium terms.

General comments

A notable matter for comment is the holistic development that riders need to improve their professionalism in planning and relationships with owners and vets. It was noted on several occasions that often the pathway that riders take to enter their profession does not consist of a structured training and development program. With those employed in the industry not being of significant numbers, the design of a specialised tertiary program may not be viable so other ways to support those particularly at the high performance end needs to be developed to minimise the risks of them, being: not being able to sustain a living in the industry; damaging potential long term relationships with owners; and having unproductive relationships with vet services.

Finding 20:

Riders need greater support to ensure their professionalism with holistic planning and their relationships with owners and vets.

Recommendation 11: develop rider professionalism

Equestrian Australia needs to investigate opportunities for a professional development program for riders to support their holistic development, planning, and their relationships with owners and vets.

Broader considerations that need to be made by Equestrian Australia relate to the overwhelming feedback that communication has not been at an acceptable level to the key stakeholders of owners and riders. This has taken some broad yet connected themes which

can be addressed by overarching policy, strategy and structure that takes a proactive approach.

Finding 21:

Significant improvement in communication at all levels is required.

Recommendation 12: develop stakeholder communication plans

That the management team at Equestrian Australia develops comprehensive key internal and external stakeholder communication plans that:

- a. establishes the strategy and structure for delivery of key messages
- b. establishes the strategy and structure for management of media issues
- c. clarifies the policy relating to media and social media use

Conclusion

The recommendations to address many of the findings from the review will predominately require improved communication, planning, implementation and some behavioural changes, all of which can cost more time than money, but all of which can underpin future successful campaigns.