



Grassroots funding is key to Olympic glory

THE waiting is over and the final training sessions have been completed.

For our athletes in Beijing, all the dreams, ambitions and years of hard work and preparation come down to this one moment.

The 29th Olympiad is under way, and like millions of people around the world, Australians will be following all the action and drama.

While the performance of our Olympians will rightly take centre stage between now and the closing ceremony on August 24, there has been much debate in the lead-up to the Olympic Games about funding for elite sports in Australia.

Much of this debate has centred on calls by Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) president John Coates for the Government to increase funding to ensure our athletes remain internationally competitive and our coaches and scientists aren't lured overseas.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was unequivocal in response, stating that: "I can say to the AOC that this Government will be their strong financial partners into the long-term future."

Comparisons have been made with the large funding injections made by the British Government over recent years as it counts down to the London Olympics in 2012, with some saying Australia is in danger of being left behind.

Yet at the same time, others have been arguing strongly that the Australian Government already spends too much money in pursuing Olympic and Commonwealth gold.

Like the Prime Minister, I want Australia to continue to enjoy the outstanding international success our sportsmen and women have been achieving over the past decade and more.

Money is important when it comes to elite sport. But so too is how we utilise

Kate Ellis
 in Beijing



the taxpayer funds the Government already invests in organisations such as the Australian Sports Commission and other national sports bodies.

The Australian Government wants our elite athletes to continue to excel at the international level.

However, this must not come at the expense of grassroots programs to encourage young kids and teenagers to get involved in sports and other physical activities.

What has been missing in this debate so far is a recognition that this issue goes well beyond the race for gold medals and Olympic glory.

We wouldn't currently have a strong Olympic team competing in Beijing without also having a strong and vibrant grassroots sporting culture in communities throughout Australia.

Elite sport and grassroots sport are not mutually exclusive; they depend on each other.

Elite sport provides important role models and heroes, particularly for young kids and junior sport clubs, which in turn encourages greater participation.

Sporting greats like Steve Waugh, Leisel Jones and Harry Kewell don't just appear overnight.

They are developed and nurtured from a young age through junior clubs and teams into senior and elite ranks.

The people who help direct and shape the performances of our young stars and top athletes – the coaches, the officials, the administrators and volunteers – overwhelmingly are people who have played the game themselves as children.

Beyond the goal of producing the next generation of top athletes and Olympic medal winners, sport in Australia also has an essential role to play in keeping all Australians fit and healthy.

Almost five million Australians are currently overweight, and a further two and a half million are obese.

These numbers are increasing and Access Economics estimates that if rates continue to increase at historical rates, there could be as many as 7.2 million obese Australians by 2025 (28.9 per cent of the population).

The rise of preventable lifestyle diseases like being overweight and obesity, heart disease, and Type II diabetes poses both a major risk to the long-term health of Australians and a frontline economic challenge.

SPORT helps to develop and maintain good physical and mental health.

Investing in local sport and sporting infrastructure is therefore more than just about putting money into grandstands, playing fields and footballs.

It's a critical investment in the health and wellbeing of Australians of all ages.

I will be announcing soon the members of an independent panel of experts who will conduct an extensive review of sport and physical activity in Australia. The review will cover grassroots and community-level sport up to the elite system.

As well as examining the growing international challenge to Australian sporting excellence, the review will also look at scientific advances and emerging international sporting trends.

Meanwhile, win, lose or draw, like every other Australian, I will be cheering on the performance of all our athletes at the Beijing Olympics.

Go Australia!

Kate Ellis is the Federal MP (Labor) for Adelaide and Minister for Youth and Sport



FUNDING GOALS: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and wife Therese Rein meet the Opals after their win over the Belarus basketball team in Beijing yesterday. **Picture:** Colleen Petch