



Australian Government  
Australian Sports Commission



AIS

# Winning Well: Addressing Abuse in Sport and Achieving Cultural Change

Dymphna Lowrey and Natalie Menzies

Contemporary Restorative Practice Conference

Thursday 21 November 2024

# Agenda

01. | Awareness | Context

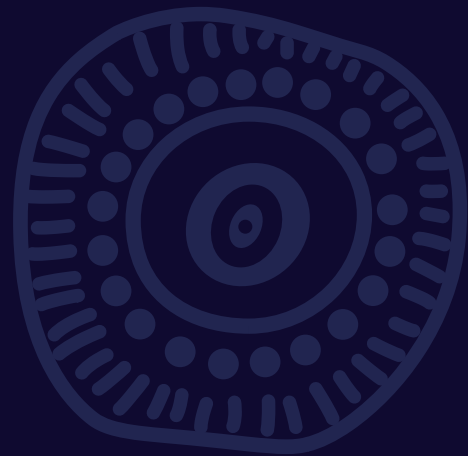
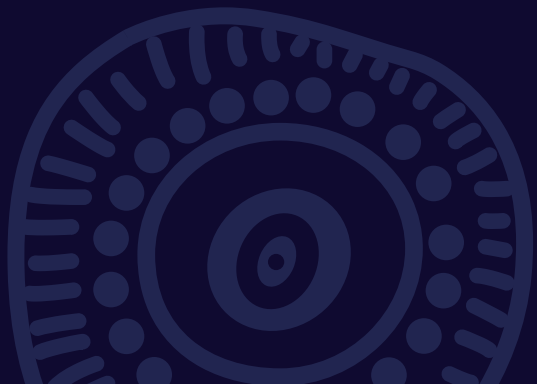
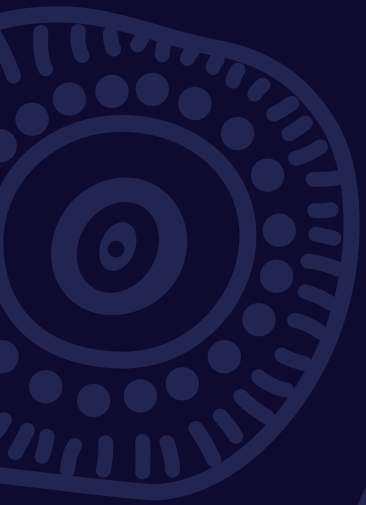
02. | Practice | Program insights

03. | Transformation | Impact

---

# Awareness

## Sporting context





## Defining Winning Well

**20  
32+**

AUSTRALIA'S  
HIGH PERFORMANCE  
SPORT STRATEGY

**OUR VISION**

We win well to  
inspire Australians

A large teal rectangular graphic. In the top left corner is the '2032+' logo, with '20' and '32' in dark teal and a yellow plus sign. In the top right corner is the text 'AUSTRALIA'S HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT STRATEGY' in dark teal. Below this, the words 'OUR VISION' are written in yellow. The main body of the graphic contains the text 'We win well to inspire Australians' in white.

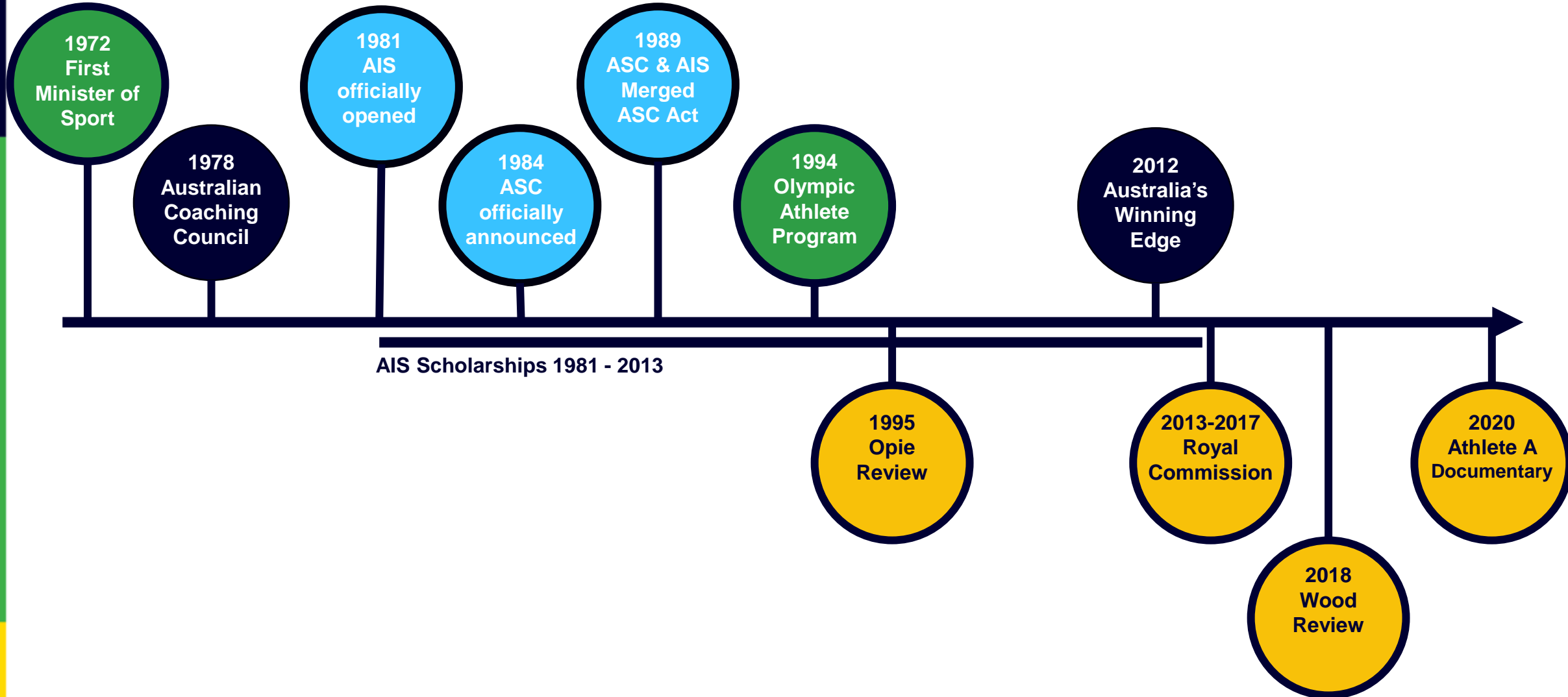
**20  
32+**

AUSTRALIA'S  
HIGH PERFORMANCE  
SPORT STRATEGY

A smaller dark teal rectangular graphic. It features the '2032+' logo in white and yellow in the top left. In the bottom left corner, the text 'AUSTRALIA'S HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT STRATEGY' is written in white.



# ASC Context

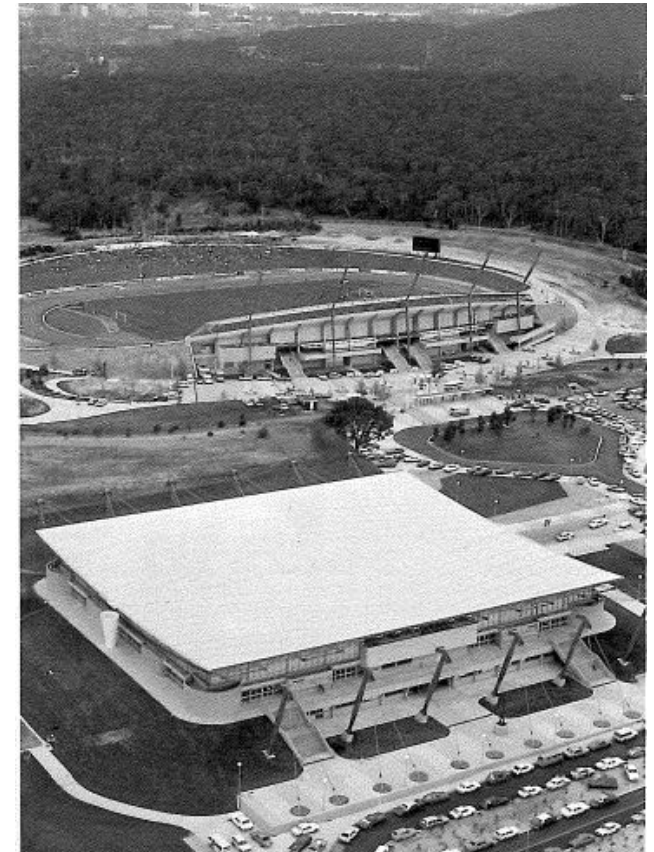


# History of the AIS

1981 – AIS opened by PM on Australia Day 1981 at the National Training Centre

Established by federal government to provide athletes with:

1. High level of coaching and educational opportunities
2. World class facilities, equipment, sport science and medicine
3. Competition domestic and international to achieve superior performance





# Context - Key Reviews

**Report of the Independent Inquiry Into**

**Women's Artistic Gymnastics at the Australian Institute of Sport**

Hayden Opie

**November 1995**

*Historical Document*

 **Royal Commission**  
into Institutional Responses  
to Child Sexual Abuse

 **REPORT OF CASE STUDY NO. 39**  
The response of certain football (soccer), cricket and tennis organisations to allegations of child sexual abuse  
OCTOBER 2016

 **REPORT OF CASE STUDY NO. 15**  
Response of swimming institutions, the Queensland and NSW Offices of the DPP and the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian to allegations of child sexual abuse by swimming coaches  
NOVEMBER 2015

 **FINAL REPORT**  
Sport, recreation, arts, culture, community and hobby groups  
VOLUME 14



2020 – 2022

# Inside The Australian Gymnastics Abuse Disgrace

Bullied, body-shamed, broken by Alexandra Carlton



An outpouring of allegations from Australian gymnasts has exposed a culture of systemic abuse in the Olympic sport. After decades of neglect, athletes all over the world are demanding to be heard.



SPORTS | GERMANY

## 'He dropped me on purpose:' German gymnasts open up on abuse

Jonathan Crane 12/17/2020

Two former national team gymnasts have opened up to DW to share their experiences of bullying and mistreatment in the sport. They say the problems in Germany are wider than previously reported.

## Canadian gymnasts slam inaction by federal sports minister after toxic culture reports



Gymnasts For Change Canada pen open letter to Pascale St-Onge

Yuri Coghe · CBC Sports · Posted: Oct 26, 2022 7:37 AM EDT | Last Updated: October 27, 2022

## Dutch gymnastics federation halts training over abuse probe

By MIKE CORDER and SAM PETREQUIN July 30, 2020



Click to copy

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The Dutch gymnastics federation suspended its women's top training program Wednesday with immediate effect while it carries out an investigation into allegations of intimidation and abuse.





ANALYSIS SPORT

## As more allegations of abuse arise, Australian sport must be judged without fear or favour

By national sport reporter David Mark  
Posted Fri 8 Oct 2021 at 10:34am, updated Fri 8 Oct 2021 at 10:56am



Two-time Olympic silver medalist Madeline Groves continues to be a voice for those in the Australian swimming community who have been affected by its toxic culture. (Getty: Tom Pennington)

## Oregon State women's volleyball players describe abusive team environment under coach Mark Barnard



By EDDIE PELLIS (AP National Writer)  
Corvallis, Ore. July 31, 2020 4:41 a.m.

Athletes and others with ties to the program told The Associated Press that the head volleyball coach at Oregon State University runs an abusive program that has seen 11 players quit or transfer since 2016 and two team members contemplate suicide, with one attempting an overdose.

In interviews with the AP and complaints made to the university, they said that fifth-year head coach Mark Barnard pits players against each other in team meetings, threatens to revoke scholarships for struggling players and pushes team members past health warnings in practice as punishment.

ANALYSIS SPORT

## Lisa De Vanna's allegations highlight tensions in Australia's complex football culture

By Samantha Lewis  
Posted Tue 19 Oct 2021 at 9:38am, updated Tue 19 Oct 2021 at 10:42am



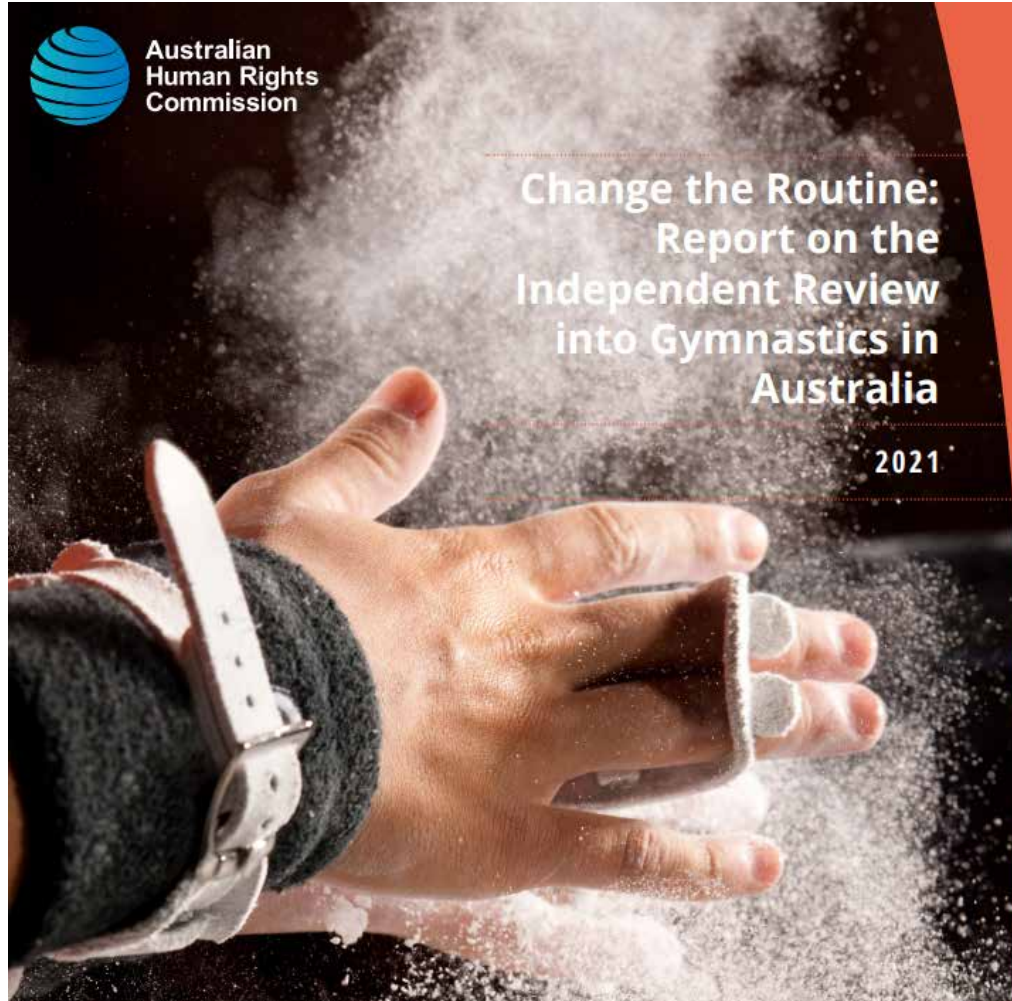
Retired Matildas player Lisa De Vanna has made allegations of abuse and harassment in A

## Former Hockeyroo Lily Brazel claims mental health concerns not taken seriously, will front Hockey Australia independent inquiry

By Tracey Holmes  
Posted Thu 17 Dec 2020 at 12:25pm, updated Fri 18 Dec 2020 at 1:32am



Lily Brazel says she faces mental health struggles during her career with the Hockeyroos.



An independent investigation commissioned by Sport England and UK Sport following allegations of mistreatment within the sport of gymnastics

# The Whyte Review

June 2022

Anne Whyte QC



## Conclusions

### What is the nature and scale of the transgressive behavior in gymnastics?

- The former athletes look back on their entire gymnastics career; the current gymnastics athletes were interviewed about their last sporting year. Transgressive behavior occurs in gymnastics, especially the former athletes report the constant living among threatening and threats of humiliation, insults, giving negative criticism, making a fool of someone in front of a group, yelling, manipulation, intimidation, isolation, scolding, force, blackmail, control, threatening, continuing to practice with injuries, inciting – unhealthy – loss of weight and speaking about an overall culture of fear.

# Australian Sports Commission apology



07 MAY 2021

The following statement is from the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) Board:

The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) Board offers our apology and ongoing support to former Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) athletes treated inappropriately in the past.

We know incidents and practices occurred that are not acceptable. For this, we are truly sorry.

We admire the courage of people who have come forward to share their stories. We assure you, we are listening and you have been heard. We have begun reaching out personally to athletes to offer our support.

The AIS ran athlete scholarship programs for various sports from 1981 to 2012. Thousands of athletes have been part of the AIS story and we know most will remember their time fondly. Unfortunately, that is not everyone's experience.

We owe it to every athlete who has been part of the AIS, to feel supported and to get help if, and when, they need it.

This week we have established a confidential and independent support service, [AIS Be Heard](https://www.ais.gov.au/AISBe-Heard). It is available to any former AIS athletes and staff, across all sports, to share their experiences and seek the appropriate support services. Details are available at [www.ais.gov.au/AISBe-Heard](https://www.ais.gov.au/AISBe-Heard)

This will link to our other support services and resources, including the AIS Mental Health Referral Network which provides confidential psychological support, at no cost for past and present high-performance athletes and staff. Details are available at <https://www.ais.gov.au/mhrn>

We thank the Australian Human Rights Commission and Gymnastics Australia for undertaking the review presented on Monday, no doubt a painful process but one which can bring positive outcomes for sport more broadly.

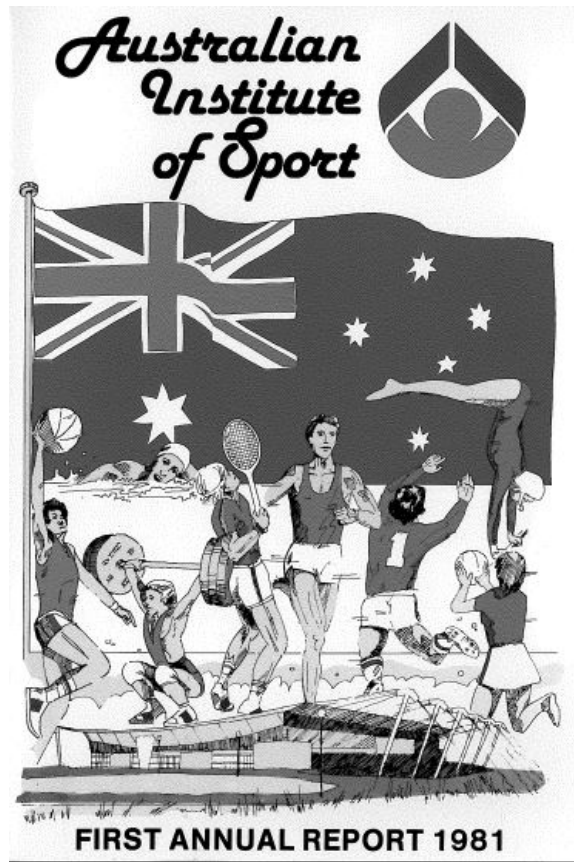
Today, we acknowledge our past so we can continue to lead Australian sport into the future.

The ASC is committed to working with our partners in the Australian sporting community to address unacceptable practices of the past, and to ensure they have no place in Australian sport in the future.

We will continue to develop and deliver programs and resources to support the health and wellbeing of athletes, coaches and support staff across the high performance sport sector.



# Addressing our past



## ASC Restorative Program – established July 2022

- Grateful for the generosity and guidance of Restorative Practice experts in shaping and implementing our Program
- Scholarships from 1981 – 2013 with over 9,000 athletes in more than 40 sports
- Acknowledges abuse of AIS scholarship athletes
- Work to a “reasonable likelihood” threshold
- Undisputed harm
- Does not restrict other options available to people (National Redress Scheme, civil action, complaints, reporting to law enforcement)



# ASC Restorative Program Outline

Supporting former AIS scholarship athletes who experienced harm from inappropriate practices and abuse.

## Eligibility

- AIS scholarship holders from 1981 – 2013
- Connection with the AIS

## Components

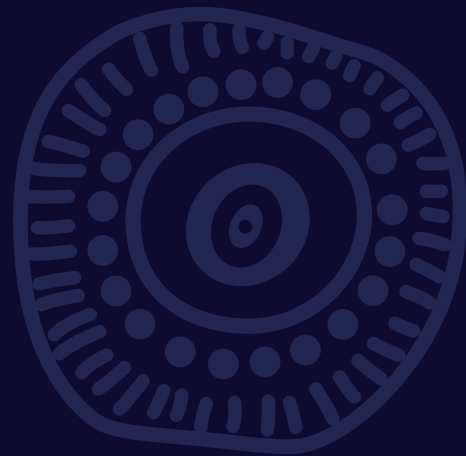
Three core elements accessible by eligible individuals:

1. Access to counselling and wellbeing services, *and/or* *therapeutic outcomes*
2. A financial payment, *and/or* *acknowledgement – recognition and acceptance of experience*
3. Participation in a restorative engagement *setting relations right*

---

# Practice

## Program insights





# Restorative Engagement

working to set relations right

- Work to address the complex social harms caused to individuals and groups while in the care of an institution where a duty to individual wellbeing was breached.
- Insights inform Institutional responsibility, accountability and reform.
- A consistently applied, evidenced based process – inclusive of principles of trauma informed practice when working with participants
  - undisputed harm
  - voluntary
  - confidential
  - a carefully prepared and facilitated meeting or other indirect format
  - follow up and debriefing



# Restorative Program

restorative engagement matters

- A small number of individual matters completed: 6
- A larger group matter comprising 19 participants & an NSO
- Number of matters in process: 4
- Complexities in this context – ASC committed
- Adapted Mediation process

**What have we observed so far?**





## Win at all costs

The win at all costs approach enabled an environment and style of coaching, akin to coercive power which largely went unchecked and unchallenged.

- Top-down communication
- Fear, intimidation, threats, punishment, isolation, surveillance
- Aim to compel behaviour over influencing behaviour
- Physical and verbal abuse and in some cases sexual abuse
- Inappropriate weight management practices
- Over training as punishment
- Forced to train on injuries and against medical advice
- Isolation from and little meaningful communication with family
- Limited or no support on exiting – transition
- Program oversight (reporting, monitoring)



# Adaption of behaviour/thinking - athletes

*This what it takes to achieve my goal*

- Dangerous weight management practices
- Disordered eating
- Suppress emotional responses
- Keep quiet
- Train harder
- Perfectionism
- Self-blame for failure to achieve
- Loss of trust
- Avoiding treatment for injuries to avoid further punishment
- Frightened to reveal self
- Avoiding conflict



# Impact - Athletes

## What athletes have described

- Having to hide the reality of the elite sporting culture from family - for fear of losing the sport, relationships and bringing shame.
- Learning to hide pain – and in the process, suppress the related basic emotions (affects) of distress and fear.
- Managing ongoing serious issues with physical and psychological health.
- Focussing on an external appearance of perfection, while experiencing severe internal ill-health (mental & physical).
- Unable to articulate experiences – failure.
- Loss of important family and social relationships.
- Inability to form and maintain ‘warm’ relationships with others.
- Burden of carrying the shame – physical manifestations of this.



# Motivations for participation

## Relieve the distress

- To be heard in a context that matters.
- Need for family to fully understand the regret, shame and guilt associated with that time.
- Desire to see change in practice.
- To improve sport.
- To see if the process would help me forgive myself.
- Seek responsibility and accountability.
- Wanting family to know what happened and that the ASC are sorry for that.
- A need to make sense of my time as an athlete at the AIS.



## Motivations for participation in RE

- Participate in sport again without fear.
- Engage in/watch sport and the Olympics.
- Reveal the financial threats and controls over athletes by coaches for scholarships and funding.
- Wanting the experience of adverse physical responses when encountering coaches/people from that time to ease.
- To be able to engage in sport – contribute – children want to try what I did – need assurances its changed and is safe.



## Outcomes and insights for athletes'

- A sense of relief at having a context/framework/language for what happened.
- Better understand the ongoing impact of harmful coaching techniques and the culture.
- Feeling validated that what I experienced was wrong and what I have carried as a result is “normal”.
- Distinguishing that the people associated with the sport did this to me, not the sport.
- Feeling a physical sense of relief – sense of carrying heaviness gone.
- Able to talk about this and be Okay –safety.
- Resolve the contradiction of loving the sport and loathing its coaching culture.
- Address the physical, psychological, and social conflict resulting from this irreconcilable contradiction, and seek to heal the harm caused by coping mechanisms that persist but are now overwhelmingly counterproductive.
- Make sense of my time here.



## Outcomes and insights for athletes'

Have been able to learn a new language to understand what happened - has been empowering.

This restorative program is the first time I have been able to talk about what happened to me in a safe way.

I never felt I could talk openly with people as I carried a lot of shame and guilt, I was also trying to protect my family.

I am very proud that the AIS/ASC has created a program that allows me and other athletes to share their story with confidence in knowing we will be heard and acknowledged, I hope this will help to lift some of the heaviness and shame and help provide healing.



# Outcomes and insights – ASC Leadership

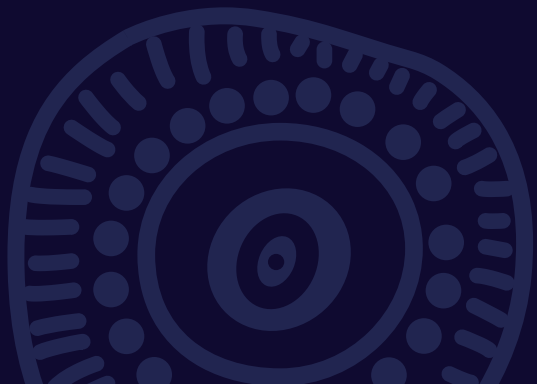
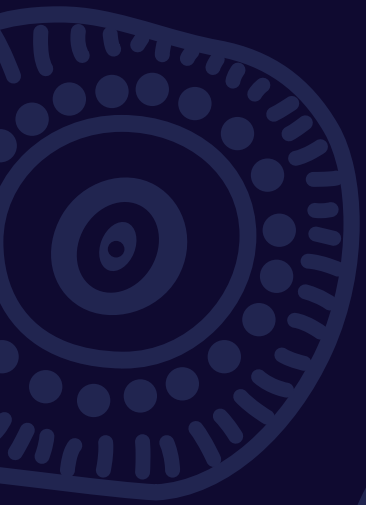
## Feedback

- Need the Australian Sporting community at all levels to address past failures and improve governance structures and pathways for players to report and seek appropriate assistance.
- Lead on cultural reform – challenge inappropriate and harmful practices, governance and leadership.
- Important to provide a context for athletes to speak to their experiences, be heard and responded to.
- Demonstrate that we are clear about player wellbeing and sporting excellence are not mutually exclusive.
- Ensure that professional coaches understand their obligations in relation to athlete wellbeing.
- That athletes' voices must be part of reform.



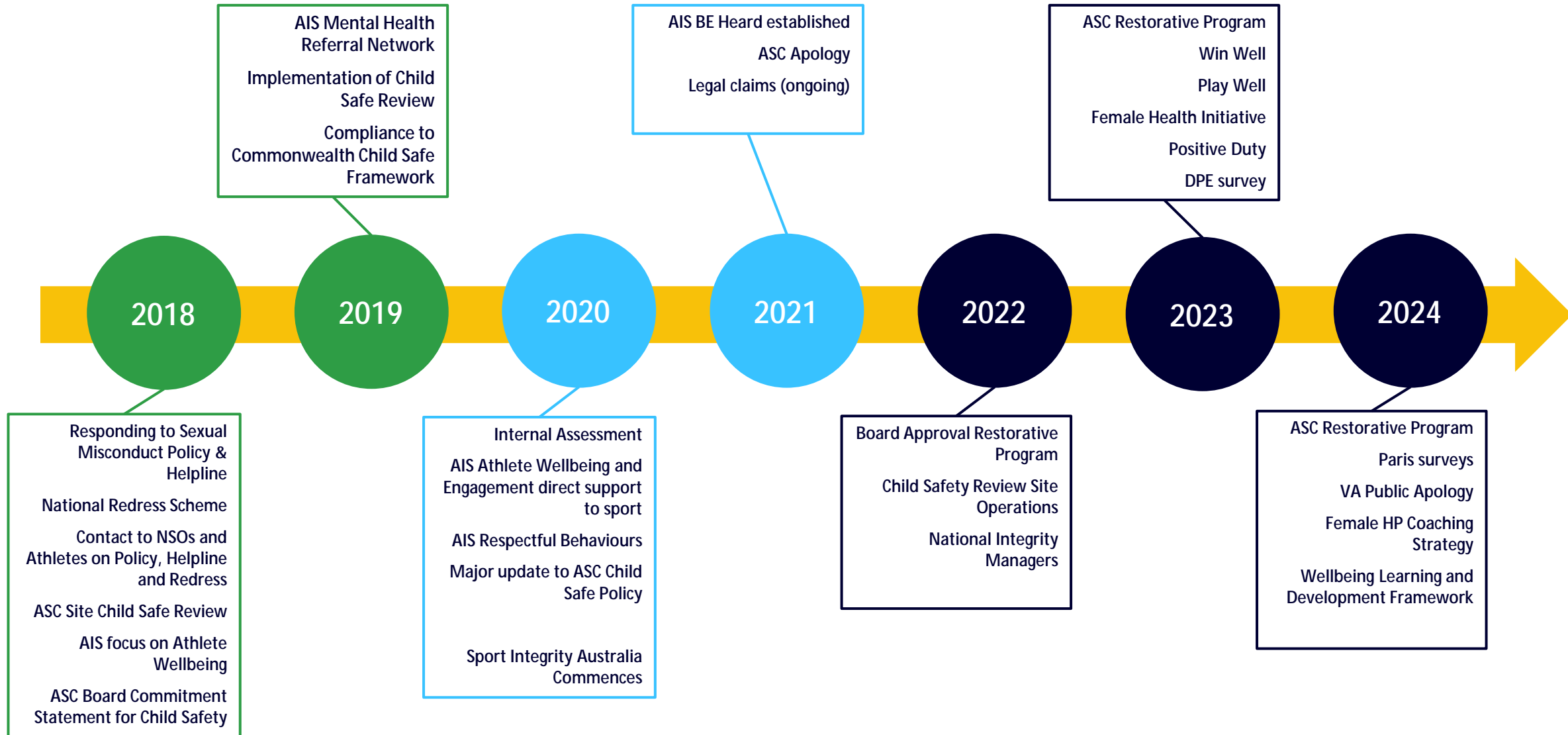
---

# Transformation Impact





# ASC from 2018 - 2024



# Win Well Pledge

We commit to being an organisation that strives to win well, where how we win is just as important as when we win.

We commit to the holistic development of our athletes and our staff, recognising wellbeing as the foundation of sustainable success.

We commit to leading sport with integrity, where we are accountable for the culture we foster and the decisions we make.

We commit to acknowledging and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their cultures, and to walk together as we embed their knowledge and experience into our organisation and build a greater sense of belonging and connection to communities and country.

We commit to a culture of challenge and care so our athletes and staff can perform at their best and reach their potential.

We commit to creating safe and thriving environments for our people to fail so they can learn, grow and succeed.

We commit to being custodians of sport and building a legacy where sport is more inclusive and representative of the diversity of Australian communities.

**Integrity +  
belonging +  
challenge +  
care**

**Sustained success**

**51**

**Sporting Organisations  
have committed to the  
Win Well Pledge**





# Leadership



**We commit to leading sport with integrity, where we are accountable for the culture we foster and the decisions we make.**

**Minister for Sport – The Hon. Anika Wells MP**

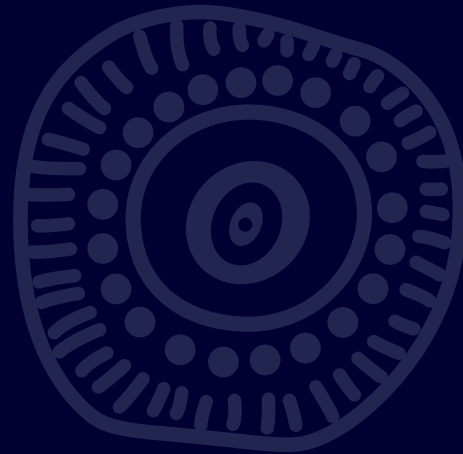
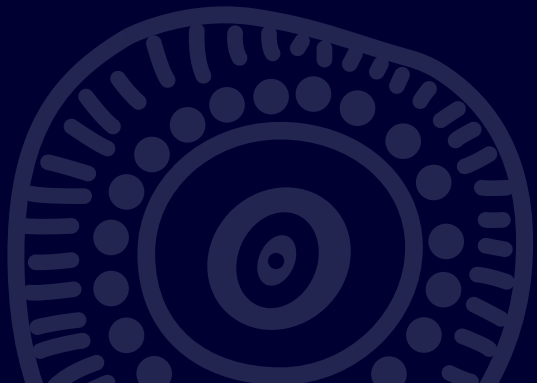
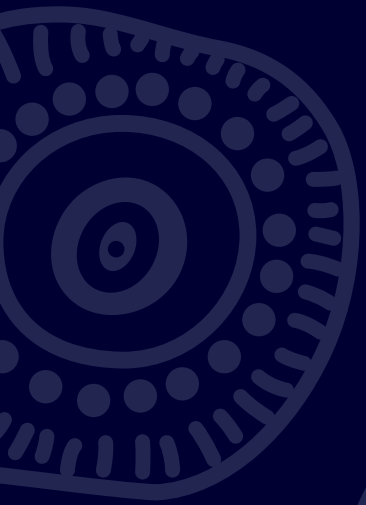
**ASC Chair – Kate Jenkins AO and Board**

**ASC CEO – Kieren Perkins OAM and Executive (including Bianca Broadhurst OLY)**

- **Support**
- **Meaningful engagement**
- **Care**
- **Integrity**
- **Trust**

---

**Questions | Comments | Reflections**



---

## Contacts

### **Dymphna Lowrey**

Restorative Program Advisor

Facilitator

Email: [dymphna.lowrey@ausport.gov.au](mailto:dymphna.lowrey@ausport.gov.au)

### **Natalie Menzies**

Restorative Program Director

Director Safeguarding and Integrity

Email: [natalie.menzies@ausport.gov.au](mailto:natalie.menzies@ausport.gov.au)

---

**Thankyou**

