

IWG WOMENS CONFERENCE; WOMEN'S SPORT AND THE MEDIA

ADDRESS BY JUSTIN HOLDFORTH

HEAD OF ABC SPORT AND EVENTS

Good morning.

It's an absolute pleasure to be here.

And frankly, I think this is an ideal place to discuss the advancement of women in sport in the 21st century.

We hear it often.....Australia is sports mad.

We play it.

We follow it.

We worship sporting achievement.

And many of our most beloved sports stars are women.

For more than 12 years it's been my good fortune to play a role in the promotion of women's sport on Australia's public broadcaster, the ABC.

We have covered netball, basketball, hockey, squash, gymnastics, pool, swimming, diving, cricket, rugby, tennis, and even lawn bowls.

It's a big list.

In fact, while we have backed women's sport for decades,

it's over the past five years the ABC has really committed itself to making women's sport a cornerstone of what we do in television sports broadcasting.

The ABC sport schedule during the summer months is now dominated by women's sport...

over 100 hours of live, women's sport coverage across the nation.

And to give you a flavour, let me start with short introduction to some of the women's sport broadcast on ABC TV over the last 5 years.

(PLAY VIDEO)

Powerful stuff.

(INTRO)

This morning, I want to take you through our ABC approach to the promotion of women in sport and how we play a role in kick starting a women's sport.....

and to highlight the path that women's sport can take via public broadcasting to commercial media and into the mainstream.

I want to cover the importance of strong working relationships with women's sporting organisations,

and the growing promotion of women within the sports media world.

And, following Professor Bruce's observations, I want to briefly consider the role and potential of new media forms.

First the ABC.

Like many public broadcasters around the world,

we have the luxury, and often the necessity, of experimenting in our programming.

The commercial networks in general are risk averse.

They want proven formats, tried and true successes.

And they can afford to buy the rights to the big global events - like the Olympics.

But the ABC can and must take the risks,
and even tolerate some failures.

More often, I'm pleased to say we have had successes.

A few years ago we put together a sports comedy show called The Fat.

It does sound unlikely doesn't it?

But it worked.

One of the three core team members was an outspoken woman's sports journalist.

After several successful seasons, The Fat was bought by a commercial network and all three presenters became mainstream personalities.

Another example.... bowls!

Lawn bowls was never regarded as a spectator sport – perhaps not even as a sport!

But with our ageing Australian population, lawn bowls has become more popular and better organised than ever.

We've built a large, passionate and regular audience

and we think there is a possibility that this audience will grow further over time.

So we know from experience that starting small can lead to big things.

We see ourselves as a testing ground to develop new ideas, formats and yes, audiences for sporting codes.

The most outstanding example of this, and one I want to discuss in some detail, is the women's sport of netball.

Netball is huge in Australia,
played by hundreds of thousands of women and girls.

It was a big transition to take this much loved participant sport and develop a media audience, but we did.

The ABC's commitment to women's sport was one of three vital factors in this transition.

The second factor was the really strong structures, organisation and leadership of the game itself.

Australian netball has been run by women, for women and they know how to run their organisation well.

This meant the game could move to the third essential ingredient, a strong viable national competition with great skills, good teams and organisational stability.

All these elements meant we, as the broadcaster, could build a viable viewing audience for Australian netball over time.

I must say that, over the years, the audience did wax and wane but the product never left our screens.

The product always remained visible.

Now we are seeing Australian netball move to the next phase – a commercially viable, regular international competition.

Australian netball has recently established a Trans-Tasman competition with that other strong netball nation, New Zealand.

Now this move is really smart,
not just in terms of taking netball to the next level,
but also because rugby is really the only other substantial competing force in the New Zealand viewing market.

This means that significant television rights fees were sourced from New Zealand.

A powerful Trans-Tasman brand was created

I may have been personally disappointed,

but in truth I was delighted for the netball world when the strength of this new competition meant that netball was taken up by commercial Network Ten here in Australia and its specialist sports channel ONE HD.

This decision by Ten is still not without some commercial risk,

and they should be congratulated for the commitment they have shown so far.

This has to be considered a very big and positive step for women's sport in this country.

We lost netball,

but today the ABC is a big backer of two other women's sports:

Basketball, with the Women's National Basketball League or WNBL;
Football (soccer) with the W-League;

For us it's always a real challenge as much as an exciting opportunity.

With any sporting competition, we, the broadcaster, must find the visual language to convey the skills of the athletes and immerse the audience in the drama of the competition.

The other essential is to have a connection to a strong sporting organisation,

one with the talent pipeline and structural strength to mount effective competitions.

Let me start with basketball.

The ABC has a very long and established relationship with women's basketball.

We believe it's the longest association of any competition with a broadcaster that this country has seen.

ABC TV broadcasts more than 50 hours of live national coverage of the WNBL.

In 2010 we reached a total audience of 2.1 million people across the final 10 episodes.

The figures are ok, but we'd like to be doing better and we should be.

The fact is the Australian women's team are the current world champions.

Australia has the greatest female basketball player of all time in Lauren Jackson.

and the entertainment factor of the game is high.

Basketball Australia has been doing a fantastic job

and is working closely with us in trying to make the product better for television.

In particular, we've been working on making the venues attractive for television and getting crowds to the television games.

Atmosphere is essential for a powerful representation of the game of television.

We're confident that things will grow.

Now if we look at football...

ABC TV broadcasts around 30 hours of live national coverage each year of the fledgling national competition the W League.

This competition is only 2 years old.

The challenge for the W-League is that, during the Australian summer months, competition is fierce.

Australians are glued to our national game, cricket and our summer pastime, tennis.

But more to the point, it's also the European winter and the English premier League and other major European football competitions are in full swing.

Then there's international football...

plus the men's national competition in Australia the "A League".

But on the plus side is the huge growth of women's participation in football,

Football Federation Australia has also taken the step of appointing a Head of Women's Football.

This is extremely progressive and it makes the working relationship between us all the stronger.

The W League clubs are affiliated with the men's A League clubs which creates stronger brands.

And even the major stars of the men's game like Lucas Neill and Tim Cahill have pitched in to help promote the women's game.

We currently broadcasting the Australian women's team the Matildas competing in the Asian Women's Cup: The World Cup Qualification tournament. (have a look 5pm ABC 1 this afternoon)

All of Australia's matches will be live or close to live nationally.

This is a big moment for us in exposing and promoting women's football to a broader audience.

so I think it's a matter of patience and building the audience.

Bending it like Beckham won't happen overnight

Another women's sport which is proving hugely popular with TV audiences is golf.

In 2006 the Australian national championship for Women was basically dead.

Golf Australia and ABC Television combined to resurrect this tournament.

For the next three years we built the product.

The ABC's coverage of the Women's Australian Open in 2009 reached 2.8 million people over the four days,

with 1.27 million of them being women or 43% of the audience.

We were delighted with these figures.

This event was by any standard a ratings success.

I've said we need to be patient about developing audiences,

but I also believe there are some practical steps that can be taken to build the profile of women in sport.

Let me run through them.

1) Get more women into sports media.

The sport media world has been and still is dominated by men.

We are working to change that.

We have two executive producers at ABC Sport - and both of them are women.

But there's more to do.

When we increased our focus on women's sport,

we discovered that finding women sport broadcasters to commentate or report on our women's sport was nearly impossible.

Three years ago we created a position for a female sports broadcaster intern.

This was a twelve month engagement designed to produce female sport broadcasters who could leave the ABC and be part of the mainstream sport media.

It's been incredibly successful.

We have two young women now out in the workplace and a third ready to spread her wings in a few months time.

2) Access the right timeslots

I admit this is a personal hobbyhorse!

ABC TV is still struggling in an old school model for sport scheduling, with Saturday afternoon the traditional place for sport.

In the summer time, in particular, I believe this is difficult.

The audience is not there on Saturdays anymore.

People are busy.

Young people are playing sport all morning and afternoon, and Mum and Dad are ferrying their kids around.

Those who aren't playing organised sport are either at the beach or utilising their precious and ever diminishing leisure time in some other way.

That means the audience tends to be an older demographic.

This is not a problem in itself, of course,

but definitely an issue for sponsors because over 55s aren't the big spenders.

Sponsors are always looking to younger demographics because they are more potentially lucrative.

I don't have a perfect solution to this problem. As a public broadcaster it's about audiences for me, not sponsors, but the sporting organisations depend on them.

I do think we need to find new ways to program women's sport in the summer months to maximise TV audiences.

3) The Sports need to Find loyal sponsors who are there for the right reasons

At the elite level, of course, there are your Nikes and Coca Colas, and the backing of these huge global businesses will be the dream of individual athletes, teams and competitions with their eyes on the big dollars.

But it seems to me that the development of women's sport does not necessarily depend on these elite sponsors, with their focus purely on advertising dollars.

Women's health is a major issue in developing countries and obesity, for men and women, is a major issue in developed ones.

Around the world there is a growing trend for big corporates, from banks to airlines to food companies, to ally themselves with causes that reflect their commitment to corporate social responsibility.

Women's sport undeniably ticks the boxes..

and I think the opportunity is there to build long term partnerships with sponsors who are there for the right reasons.

And it's desperately important that sponsors stay with their chosen sports.

This stability provides the pipeline for players moving from amateur to semi or full professional status.

This in turn lifts the quality and makes the television product more appealing.

This may eventually lead to rights fees being paid enabling stronger clubs, greater marketing and bigger crowds.

And so the cycle goes on creating the virtuous circle of success.

I see one of the many worthy roles of this conference as bringing this opportunity to the attention of potential sponsors.

4) Be smart with new media but don't abandon the old

You won't be surprised to hear ME say that there is still no substitute for TV exposure.

Women's sport must continue to fight for its place.

Television and especially free-to-air television is still the by far the most pervasive and influential form of mass media.

I would hate to see women's sport ceding that vital ground.

Regardless of the not perfect timeslot and the modest audience figures, our W League match still rates higher than any individual A League (men's) match on Subscription TV.

Time shifted viewing is also now a tool to broaden reach.

The ABC iView service, our catch up TV, now has more than a million views per month and is growing quickly.

The ABC iView service will carry our women's sport as an online on demand service for at least 14 days after the broadcast of each match.

Soon, all new television sets will soon be internet enabled.

This is an enormous shift in how an audience can consume content.

It is true that Sport is one genre where time shifted viewing is less relevant.

People do generally want the live event experience.

However, if women's sport is not going to be seen in the prime time television slots, providing the opportunity for the audience to watch when they want is vitally important.

New media and social media offer interesting opportunities but can only ever be part of the solution

U-tube for example is great for some highlights or quirky moments but it is a complimentary service to your main experience.

Facebook, My space and Twitter are similarly complementary.

But they're valuable, especially for women, in building networks and generating chat about the particular property.

They're important in that they create dialogue around the sport and the personalities.

But they must be vigilantly maintained

and they must have a clear objective whether it be to get crowds to venues or viewers to the television.

At the risk on endorsing a commercial product, personally I do think....

The arrival of Wii should not be ignored.

This is the first sports gaming device that actually gets people off the couch.

Women are increasingly engaging in the gaming sector.

Wii tennis or golf may well be the first exposure for young girls to those sports.

All sports should be conscious of this and look to exploit it.

Bloggers are also now important.

Get them to the games.

Get them talking about your sport.

Women's sport does struggle to be seen and heard in the general news area whether print or broadcast. Even in the ABC.

Sports must look to actively cultivate sports editors about the quality of the sport competition itself.

This must be a constant and relentless pursuit.

Sports must actively court the magazine sector help create the star factor.

It's amazing how many television appearances occur after a magazine article about someone.

Bring people inside the tent.

And to conclude;

At the moment it seems tough.

It seems that the female sport star to gain recognition purely on their sporting merit must be 10 times as successful as their male counterpart.

Luckily they often are.

Cathy Freeman, Margaret Court, Lauren Jackson, Karrie Webb, Layne Beachley, Louise Sauvage. Household Australian names.

Why?

Because they were and are incredible champions.

Not once or twice but time and time again.

Jessica Watson may prove to be the most powerful role model for young women in this country ever.

Whether you think her voyage was irresponsible or reckless,

the fact is she displayed many of the traits we hope women's sport will inspire in young women....

an active positive lifestyle,

self esteem...independence...and a sense of empowerment.

I hope what I have showed is that there are pathways through.

Many sports take time.

There are also many men's sports seriously in need of media exposure.

Even established sports looking to enter new markets find it tough.

So there's no cause for despondency.

Much has been achieved.

And there's still a lot to do,

but there's a lot to look forward to as well.

...

Now could I leave with a short promo of what we are doing on air at the moment.

Thank you.