



Mr Greg Nance

CEO

Surf Lifesaving Australia

29-Nov-2014

Dear Greg,

**For the Attention of President Graham Ford and the National Board of SLSA**

As a very long time contributing lifesaver, I believe I have earned the right to again make comment on the current state of Surf Lifesaving in Australia. Some of you will have seen my earlier attempt to open up real discussion on a range of topics, but from what I can see, if anything is moving, it is at a snail's pace and will arrive just after the last person has shut the gate.

As Board members and senior staff of the National Association, you are in the ideal position to leave SLS in better shape than when you started. Without trying to be too dramatic, I am very concerned with the current state of play, because from where I'm sitting, our sport has some real problems. Now I understand I will already have some of you in a defensive position, but everywhere we want to look, something needs fixing and the membership isn't seeing any "White Knights" charging around with a solution. Those from the business world will understand that when a brand starts to wane, you have to react very quickly to either revamp the brand, or let it go. Most things have a use-by life cycle, and at times major surgery is required to rebirth a product and that is where I see SLS at present, badly in need of a complete overhaul.

As the National Board and Executive you are the guardian and representative of the owners of this organisation - the membership - with the power to make a real difference. We shouldn't need to be reminded that SLS is a volunteer organisation dependant on recruitment and retention. That being the case, we have allowed our processes to become way too difficult and involved, with the consequence that many potential members walk away and current members are not continuing.

**Nippers:**

I am sick of hearing that membership is in good shape and then have the teller insert the numbers from Nippers to support the claim. This level of membership is basically doing one thing right from a lifesaving position, and that is making kids aware of the surf and teaching them some early safety survival skills. However, this same level of teaching is now also being undertaken by the Surfing World via the Surfgrons program, so we no longer even have sole ownership of this segment. But please can we stop trying to include these age groups into the ranks of Lifesavers when we talk numbers. Our capable active Lifesavers start at or above the age of 15, not 13/14 or younger.





Anecdotally it would appear that we are retaining only about 10% of kids transitioning through nippers, after all the resources that have been thrown at them. From what I see, the drop off even starts after primary school, with not as many continuing on into the 13/14 bracket, but this is just an observation. I haven't found anybody who will tell me how many of these (say) 10% of nipper kids are still with us as actual senior lifesavers after 2 and 5 years. By all means keep the kids involved and learning some surf skills, but if all we are doing is ensuring that something like 90% of the youth who originally come to us have had enough of being in a surf club after 6 to 8 years of nippers and are walking away, something isn't right and we have failed. What are we really doing to understand and change this situation?

### **The breakup of roles between Lifesaving and Competition:**

Why on earth are we allowing the Lifesaving arm of SLSA, which has an important role to play within its own portfolio, exert such influence in the competition area? Lifesaving should be about understanding the difficulties the modern surf club encounters with recruitment and retention, and rather than crawling all over the members with yet more barriers, it should be looking at ways to make it easier. All learning should be available on line and wherever possible, training should be on the job and not isolated hour after hour at high dollar and personal cost to our volunteers. Lifesaving has plenty of work to do to remove the barriers to membership, but should have no role at all in determining how clubs run their business, or in placing restrictions over competitors. Why have we allowed Lifesaving to dictate how many patrol hours a competitor must undertake, what hoops the competitor has to jump through via its input into many of our sport policies that impinge into the competition arena? Why are we struggling to attract new officials to the sport? Look at the total numbers and then look at the workload the few we have are undertaking at events. Plus the courses they have to attend, all using up valuable personal time, and you have answered the question as to why this is another endangered species.

The managers of Surf Sport & Lifesaving nationally, do I believe understand the issues, and to be fair are taking steps along the way to address some of the issues. The saying "too little too late" comes to mind with how as a whole of sport we have reacted to the changing needs of the membership. What we are currently doing should have been recognised 10 year ago and the softly, softly approach of "tip toeing" around certain people in the hope that we may be able to change some things over time, simply is no longer relevant to the complexities of the problem. We need a sledge hammer approach from you, the Board of SLSA, to tear down the wall. Nothing short of a total overhaul at every level will work, and to simply put another plug in the dyke would be totally the wrong approach.

Surf Sport must be encouraged to be more proactive in our competition arena to understand what changes are required and to drive them through. We have way too many hands involved in the types of events we run and who is allowed to control them. The most valuable asset we have for our







competitors is our carnival system and by any measure as a general rule these events are dying. They are obviously wrong in design and delivery, but yet we do nothing to take control. With great respect to the people that run these events at club and official level, in most cases these people are a big part of the problem. It can simply be summed up as those in decision making positions not understanding, not listening and not wanting to change. We need a system to recognise all these things, understand who the best officials and event organisers are and push them to the top in an endeavour to reignite our sport. Events that are elite by nature should be carefully looked at to understand what effect they have on the general competition. We can show anecdotal evidence that these types of events are having a real and damaging effect on the sport. That isn't to say they mightn't have a place, but that place must be recognised and managed. It is past time we empowered an active operational arm with direction over all our elite end events. This body would secure sponsorship direct its flow and be part of producing the top end of our competitive exposure.

## National Management

Who really manages the Association at a National level? Is it the National Board and the National Office, or is it the various States by stealth through their management structure? How can we possibly call ourselves a National Peak Body, but not have the power to make final and binding decisions on all the players in the game. Why as a peak body do you constantly need to be going back to the States for direction on what they will or won't support, and worse, allow them to make their own decisions of interpretation when you have settled a policy position? The majority of the National Board members are also State Presidents and this places each in a position of direct conflict when it comes to making a National decision. You either have to manage this situation or change it, but our Board shouldn't be in any conflict at all with the National direction or decision making process through the possibility of having a State decide to go in another direction. In a nutshell we are over-governed with some rules and policies that are nonsense, and at the root of why some people either don't join our great movement or are walking away. By all means communicate and seek input from many areas, not just State Centres, but reach further into the membership to be sure you are hearing the right message.

In general I am suggesting that much of the feedback you receive from some office holders in the States etc is of a personal nature not tested on the membership. At many levels the 180,000 lifesavers in Australia are having their opinion represented by individuals who just happen to have been given the privilege of title. The general membership has no mechanism to have a say, because the SLS system isn't geared for it to happen. . Clubs are managing 100% of the membership and 95% of the day to day business of surf lifesaving clubs, but proportionally have the smallest say and influence on direction or issues.

Your membership watches all this stuff and just shakes its collective head and all the time, while we pontificate on not wanting to upset someone's power space, the competitors are walking away from





this sport in unhealthy numbers. If anybody thinks we can run a peak surf rescue operation without fit, well trained, mentally tough, surf skilled members, then they are delusional. Equally, any that don't agree that the vast majority of these fit, capable members aren't being trained through their involvement with competition, is out of touch. Unless we move today to right the many woes that currently undermine and control our sport, our competitors and officials will continue to decline.

My time on the ASRL is nearly up, but for one more time as its President, I plead with you all to listen to the grass roots of this sport and urgently put in place the necessary think-tank of willing participants to start finding solutions. Forget involving those that support the status quo, unless they have the ability to come to the table with an open mind to be part of the solutions. It is those holding on to the past, with their "traffic cop" mentality that have us in the position we currently sit in, because of their intransigence to listen, understand or change. Change is the easiest thing in the world to achieve, all we need is the desire to make things better, then change can easily be the result.

Our world is moving along very quickly and we need to move with it. All the statistics are available to tell us what our youth want from us and the sport, so let's not continue to be dragged along kicking and screaming in the hope that because we are the iconic Aussie SLS brand, we will be the exception to the rule and everyone will live happy ever after.

The challenge to you, the National Board, if you see merit in what is being suggested here is to move on all these issues and move now, not next year or over a five year plan - that time has already been wasted. By inserting a good dose of desire and providing the right people with the foresight to rethink every aspect of our sport, and with the power to make unchallenged changes, we could have a solid framework of what the future SLS organisation will look like before the start of next season.

Hopefully, enough of you share my concern for the future of this great institution to accept the challenge to immediately grab the initiative. Let's put an overarching think-tank in place and let's get started to make things better for the next generation of surf lifesaver.

Yours in Surf Lifesaving

Bert Hunt

President ASRL

