

# Plunging

# into politics

## Should sports stars dive in?

When you consider what makes a successful politician, three things stand out: to succeed, a politician must be reasonably popular, they should have a fairly high profile, and most important of all, they have to be credible.

If that's basically what it takes, there's a select band of Australians who have all the right qualifications in spades – Australia's top sports people.

Most of our best sportsmen and women boast the sort of profile and popularity a politician would kill for, and it seems everything a sports star utters, no matter how banal, finds its way into the media.

It's surprising then that so few of our top athletes have translated their public standing into a political career.

There are some notable exceptions, among them cycling great Sir Hubert Opperman who represented the seat of Corio in the House of Representatives between 1949 and 1967, and held various portfolios in the Menzies Government.

There's Ric Charlesworth who was selected in five Australian Olympic hockey teams between 1972 and 1988, serving as Member for Perth between 1983 and 1993.

Australia's greatest ever swimmer, Dawn Fraser, represented the New South Wales State seat of Balmain for three years from 1988.

And various footballers have entered State and Territory parliaments: former Canberra Raiders star Paul Osborne is currently a member of the ACT Legislative Assembly and Justin Madden, a former ruckman with AFL team Carlton, is Minister for Sport in Victoria.

Just recently, former Australian rugby league captain and current Canberra Raiders coach Mal Meninga flagged a possible career in politics, as did Olympic gold medallist Cathy Freeman.

In the Federal Parliament, both the Sport and Tourism Minister, Jackie Kelly, and Shadow Sports Minister, Senator Kate Lundy, have rowed at senior representative level.

In her early years, Senator Lundy represented the ACT in both netball and basketball before taking up rowing at age 25. She's since represented the ACT at a number of national masters regattas where she's won a clutch of gold medals.

Ms Kelly was part of Australia's elite rowing program. She was in line for selection for the Australian rowing team to the Seoul Olympics in 1988 before Rowing Australia opted not to send a women's team to Seoul.

Ms Kelly says prominent sports people may be discouraged from entering politics by the fact that the reputation of those who enter Parliament is eventually sullied to a degree.

"Whatever standing you carry into politics," she says, "it's gone by the time you retire. You'll always be tarnished because of some of the decisions you took, or the controversies you were involved in. Take my predecessor, Ros Kelly. For all her time as Sports Minister, what's she known for? The white board affair!"

The Minister says that popular sports people have a range of other career options they can pursue after they hang up their

boots. "Some translate their public standing into lucrative sponsorship deals, or a career as a commentator," she says.

Jackie Kelly says sitting politicians are lucky that more elite sports people don't attempt to win seats in Parliament. "They'd do very well," she says, "at least initially. However, when they came to put themselves up for a second term, they'd be assessed just like every other politician."

The Member for the ACT seat of Fraser, Bob McMullan, has never represented his country in sport, but the Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs is a self-confessed sports nut. He also knows what political parties are looking for in their candidates, having served as an ALP State and National Secretary before entering Parliament.

Mr McMullan says that while a high-profile athlete might seem the ideal candidate for political office, there are many examples of high-profile and popular sports people who failed at the polls.

He points to Jack Dyer, better known to Australian Football fans as 'Captain Blood', the most feared ruckman ever to play the game. "Dyer had a few goes at getting elected for the Labor Party in Victoria," says McMullan. "But he never succeeded. Our Federal political system is driven by people choosing the party they want, and individual candidates don't count for much. There's also the fact that Australians rightly say: 'Yes, I think he was a terrific footballer, but would that make him a good Member of Parliament?'"

Ms Kelly's answer to that is that many of Australia's elite athletes do have just the right experience for a political career. "Sport is a great training ground for politics, as you'd know if you've ever been part of a sporting club when the president gets rolled," she says.

"There's more politics in sporting organisations than you see in Parliament House, and it's murkier and somehow more Machiavellian," says Ms Kelly. "In politics, you know someone belongs to a particular party so they're bound to a party line. However, in sport you think you've got someone's vote, then suddenly it evaporates."

If more prominent sports people decided on a political career, and succeeded in getting into Parliament, which of their old sporting skills would apply in their new role?

For one thing, they'd be broadly familiar with the principles of political strategy.

"There are fundamentals of strategy that are consistent across most areas of human endeavour," says Bob McMullan. "The tactics you develop in sport and those you develop in politics are of course entirely different, but broadly the ideas are the same: you assess your strengths and your opponent's weaknesses. You might apply a strength on your side against a weakness on the other side. Or you might use your strength to counter one of your opposition's strengths."

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Taking the strategic parallels between sport and politics further, Minister Kelly says that, as with a team captain, it's the political leader who sets a party's strategy.

"The leader, like the captain, sets up plays for future success," she says. "The leader is the master tactician. They call the right plays and you draw strength from them in the same way a sporting team looks to its captain. It's their job to keep the team together and when the team's down, it's their job to bring you back for another contest."

Bob McMullan agrees: "What you look for from your leader is a sense of direction," he says. "However, a leader must also show a willingness to take hard decisions. Anybody can make the easy yards, but to stand up when it's hard and say 'Yes. That's where we're going', it's that sort of performance under pressure that people look for in their leaders, whether it's sport, politics or anything else."

Another element of the political life that the professional athlete would appreciate is the tribal loyalty that the political contest brings out in the party faithful.

However, according to Bob McMullan, tribalism in both sport and politics is breaking down. "Children don't necessarily go on to share their parents' sporting or political allegiances, and the reasons for the change are basically the same," he says.

McMullan says sport has undergone what he calls a commodification, where teams have become franchises and players merely bargaining chips to be traded. "It's hard to be passionate about a corporation," he says. "In Canberra, everyone loved the Raiders rugby league team when it won a couple of premierships in the 1980s. It was very important to the city of Canberra.

"However, they lost a lot of support with the commodification that Super League brought to the game. No-one has the same emotional attachment to a commodity and so the traditional allegiance to the team has broken down."

McMullan says that in recent years there's been a similar breakdown in the tribal allegiance usually associated with people's

political loyalties. "Opinion polls tell us that, when asked why they vote in a certain way, the number of people who say 'Because it's the way I always do', is declining.

"I think that's a good thing for democracy," says McMullan. "It means people are making decisions on the merits of the parties in the lead up to an election, though it can make life uncomfortable for Members who previously occupied what were considered safe seats.

"As education standards have increased, people are now more likely to question institutions. That's true about churches. It's true about sporting clubs and it's true for political parties. It's right that these things should be questioned."

Jackie Kelly sees the maintenance of a sense of tribalism as crucial to the success of a political party. "A party's performance is directly related to how tribal it is, how it sticks together, how coordinated it is and how its members support each other," she says.

Ms Kelly says the tribal emotions on display when your party wins an election are the same as when your team wins the grand final. "Your joy is not just for yourself," she says, "but for all your supporters behind the scenes."

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Kate Lundy (left) and Jackie Kelly find time for rowing despite their busy parliamentary schedules.



Ric Charlesworth with members of Australia's Olympic gold medal winning women's hockey team. Photo: Newspix

## Been there, d

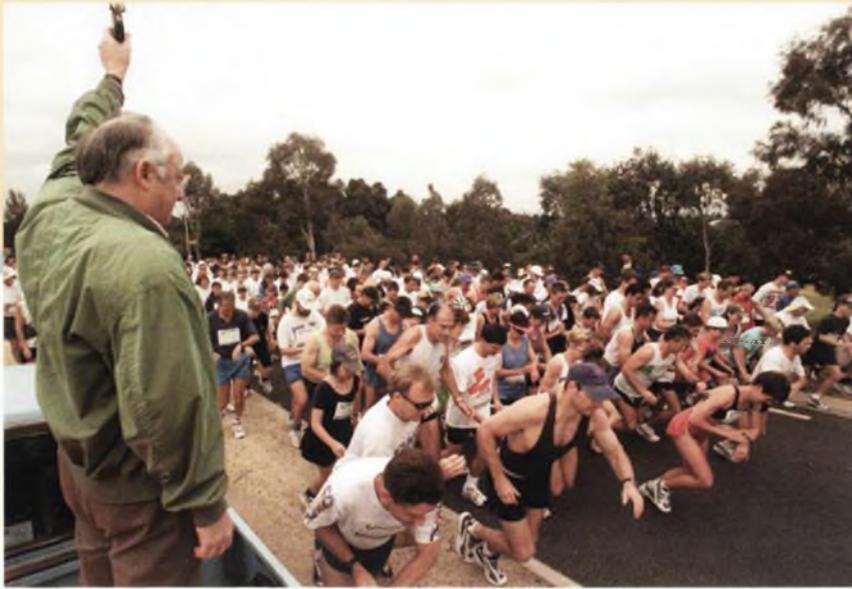
Eight years after leaving Parliament behind, Australian supercoach Ric Charlesworth still expresses some frustration at what he experienced in politics.

Charlesworth is one of the best hockey players and coaches Australia has produced. He was also the Member for Perth in the House of Representatives for 10 years from 1983.

Charlesworth played 234 games for Australia, including five Olympics, and was captain of the national team for seven years. He retired as a player after the 1988 Seoul Olympics. In recent years, he's coached the Australian women's hockey team to gold medals at both the Atlanta and Sydney Olympics.

Charlesworth is a giant of Australian sport. He played Sheffield Shield for WA for eight years. He was also a general practitioner. Off-field he's generous with his time and very open. Medicine, like politics, is a profession that calls for a deft personal touch and Charlesworth has that.

His touch with the hockey stick is also something. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* says the hallmark of the short,



Bob McMullan combining his passion for sport with his responsibilities as Federal Member for Fraser.

As for the direct impact of the rules of sport on the conduct of the political process, Bob McMullan points to one notable example, the 'sin bin' which operates in the House of Representatives.

The Member for Cunningham, Stephen Martin, is a former Speaker of the House and was once a first-grade rugby league referee. "When he was Speaker, Stephen said that a Member who became unruly shouldn't be banned from the House for a day or more," says McMullan. "He thought it would be better if they were sent out of the chamber for a little while to cool off, in the same way unruly footballers are sent to the sin bin. It's an initiative that's worked very well."

## Whether you're in the chamber, or in the stadium, you're barracking for your team.

Though she's never been sin binned, Jackie Kelly concedes that she is sometimes cautioned by the Speaker for rowdy behaviour. "I liken the House in Question Time to the sporting field," she says. "If the other team's supporters get up and yell really hard, then your supporters have to yell hard as well.

"That often means you end up with a raucous chamber, but it's like when you're at the Olympics and the Americans start yelling 'U-S-A

U-S-A'. The Australians know they've got to come over the top of them with the Aussie chant," says Ms Kelly. "Whether you're in the chamber, or in the stadium, you're barracking for your team. You're trying to stop the other side, trying to put them off their game, distract them. It's faking, it's play acting, but it's necessary."

Despite the gladiatorial nature of both politics and sport, it's interesting that sport can serve as a great unifier in politics. A couple of years ago Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley were seen exchanging notes during Question Time.

It turned out that the two leaders were keeping each other up to date on the score in a nail biting Test match between the Australian cricket team and Pakistan which was being played that day in Tasmania.

And while sport may not be as important to the electorate as the economic outcomes a government can deliver, the fortunes of our national sporting teams have a big impact on the national mood.

Bob McMullan says the sense of national well-being that's prompted by the success of an Australian sporting team is a big part of the reason why governments spend a lot of money to help our elite athletes succeed.

"And some of that money goes into the pockets of very high income earners," says McMullan. "If it happened in any other area of life there would be concern, but I think it's a proper way to spend public money because we all get great benefit."

Article by Peter Cotton, a freelance journalist from Canberra.

## ne that . . . won't say never again

sturdily built inside right was his "outstanding stick work and a mastery of individual skills: the body swerve, the dribble, the feint, an ability to beat opponents on either side of his body".

"On-field," says the *Oxford Companion*, "Charlesworth was noted for his determination, aggression and high work rate."

On the field, and in coaching, Charlesworth is a hard task-master, frustrated by anything but the best. It's why, after eight years, he's still frustrated at never being elevated to the Ministry under PM Bob Hawke.

Charlesworth was elected to the House the year Bob Hawke became Prime Minister. During his first five years in Parliament, he continued to play for Australia and was content to remain a hockey-playing backbencher. "I saw it as my training period in the Parliament," he says. "Sometime after I gave playing away, I thought it was reasonable that I aspire to make it into the Ministry."

However, the selection process for Ministers falls far short of best practice, selection on merit, the way it happens in sport. In politics, says Charlesworth, Ministers often get the nod according to their

State, their gender, and their willingness to support factional positions. "I'd rather have a group of selectors choosing (the Ministry)," he says.

Charlesworth concedes that bad timing played a part in his failure to make the Ministry: "A lot of quality Labor people entered Parliament at the 1980 election and became Ministers after 1983," he says. "They were still Ministers when I left 10 years later.

"Also, there's a time in your life when a political career is more appropriate, when your children have left home and you still have the energy and enthusiasm to be very productive, like a John Button, a Neil Blewett or a Peter Walsh," says Charlesworth. "I had young children I wasn't seeing, and in retrospect, I think I was too young. But in politics, you take the chance when it comes along."

Charlesworth says politics often involves the opposite of team work. "There are lots of ambitious people for whom the ends justify the means," he says. "In my time, it was nothing for some people to background a journalist about something that would embarrass their own government."

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