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Swimming: Australia's gold medal factory under threat

By **JESSICA HALLORAN**, SENIOR SPORTS WRITER

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The gold medal factory of Australia's Olympic swim team is under threat.

In the past 20 years, Queensland has produced 42 swimmers who have won 117 Olympic medals including 40 gold — but the sport is at a “crossroads” with hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding being slashed from the grassroots, says Queensland Swimming CEO Kevin Hasemann.

“Does it take another Montreal Olympics, where swimming won one bronze medal? Does it need to wither into a sporting crisis, where there is a generation or two of swimmers lost, before someone acts?” Hasemann said.

Hasemann told The Australian funding cuts foreshadowed by the Australian Sports Commission could be crushing for an entire generation of kids.

Kids such as Jaiden Marshall and Mali Schwarz, who were training with coach Michaela Pattinson at Brisbane's St Joseph's Nudgee College on Wednesday.

“It doesn't make sense to invest over \$40 million in high-performance swimming between Olympic Games while providing negligible funding for the development of junior swimmers,” Hasemann said. “I can't fathom the strategy behind this shortsighted approach.

“The likelihood that the ASC will reduce or discontinue the small amount it provides to junior sport is at odds with Australia's bid for the 2032 Olympic Games (in southeast Queensland.)

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The average age of swimming finalists now stands at 23 for women and 24 for men. This means that the current age of swimmers likely to medal in 2032 is around 11 or 12, and those kids are already in our sport.”

The Weekend Australian revealed that Swimming Australia chief executive Leigh Russell has told state federation bosses to prepare for “some, if not significant, change” in ASC’s “participation funding” and the cessation of Swimming Australia funding for sport development, making it \$1 million on the line.

While those at state level face losing around \$200,000 each — money to keep or get kids swimming — the executive spend at Swimming Australia has never been higher.

In 2017, Swimming Australia spent \$1.98 million on its seven key management personnel. In 2018, the total remuneration for 10 executives was increased to \$2.4m after then CEO Mark Anderson resigned as chief executive and was replaced by Russell, according to their published financial year report. In 2019, it has increased to nearly \$2.6m for 12 executives.

In 2008, the total compensation for key management personnel was \$554,038.

Hasemann, who has worked for Swimming Queensland for 18 years, says 95 per cent of the body’s swimmers are aged 17 and under and any amount of money directed their way counts.

“At the junior level you can make a dollar go a very long way,” he said.

“For me, \$100,000 is a lot of money around junior development; \$200,000 can do a hell of a lot. We are quite cheap to run, but what they are signalling is there will be less but the amount that is invested is very small anyway. If you go onto the grants section of the Australian Sports Commission website — spot the stuff that is there about club sport — there’s nothing. The actual definition of sport is about competition. But where they are directing money these days, that’s not sport, it’s about the social, health agenda.

“The focus is blurred. When you want to get exceptional results, you need exceptional focus. Otherwise you can lose your way. If you click on the website you start to ask: Is this actually the Australian Sports Commission? It looks like some kind of health website?

“Failure to act now to address the paucity of funding for the development of junior athletes will be harmful for all Olympic sports, which are at the crossroads. And by the time the full brunt of

this insidious issue is felt, the senior national sports policymakers responsible will have moved on and will escape accountability.”

Hasemann said there had been an exodus of top swimming coaches and sports scientists to international competitors over the past decade or so.

“Is there any wonder we are now seeing other countries emerge as forces on the world swimming stage,” he said.

“The international swimming landscape has changed a lot in recent years, with a growing number of countries producing Olympic medallists. As a country with a very small population, the only way we can meet this challenge is by investing more in our talent in and out of the pool.

“We are no longer the smartest in the world, there’s been a brain drain from Australia. If you were in a business, you would no longer be forecasting record results. You’d be expecting the opposite because of the reduced inputs.

“Swimming Queensland focuses on supporting and developing coaches across the state, so they’re equipped to instil in our junior swimmers the skills and attributes they’ll need to undertake the long journey to Olympic success. This core activity includes clinics for swimmers and coaches and providing access to strong competition. With less funding, SQ will have to cut into those critical services, and the ramifications in the longer term for Australian swimming are obvious.”

When Swimming Australia president John Bertrand took over in 2013, he and then CEO Mark Anderson set a bold target of Australia becoming “world No 1” in swimming in 2020.

“Now we are in a position, where we are being told they can’t provide any money for our grassroots development, and the Australian Sports Commission has foreshadowed cuts,” Hasemann said. “All this begs the question: what’s the new downsized goal for swimming post-Tokyo?”

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Jessica Halloran is an award-winning sports writer and author. She has been covering sport for nearly two decades and has reported from Olympic Games, world swimming and athletics championships, the rugby World... [Read more](#)