Dan Smith, DG of Sport Canada



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Sport Canada is principally oriented towards excellence in amateur sport at the high-performance level. Certain observers believe that this is not the best approach and that a greater emphasis on developing athletes is required. How do you respond to this?

Sport Canada's mission is to support the achievement of high-performance excellence and the development of the Canadian sport system to strengthen the unique contribution that sport makes to Canadian identity, culture and society.

The sport system in Canada is a network of inter-related and interdependent public and private organizations, agencies, associations and institutions. Each partner plays an important role. With the funding pressures faced by the Government in the early nineties, an effort was made to ensure that the Government's limited resources were allocated where the federal government had more exclusive responsibility and could have the greatest impact at the high performance level, the level of national teams.

Although Sport Canada focuses much of its direct support to high-performance athletes and coaches, we also contribute to the developmental level through programs such as the Canada Games, the Domestic Sport Program, the National Coaching Certification Program, and some of the New Funding for Sport initiatives. As for Sport Canada's on-going efforts to increase corporate support for sport, it is our expectation that those efforts ultimately benefit the entire sport system.

Sport Canada is part of the Canadian Identity Sector in the Department of Canadian Heritage. What is the relationship between heritage, identity, and sport?

The mission of Canadian Heritage is Strengthening and Celebrating Canada. Sport Canada's programs and policies closely support this mission, particularly through three major thrusts: enhancing pride in Canada, encouraging participation in and contribution to Canadian society, and contributing to Canada's economic growth and prosperity.

A recent Ekos survey found that Canadians rank athletes as third most important in contributing to their sense of belonging to Canada — higher even than seeing the Canadian flag. Statistics Canada reports that over nine and half million Canadians are involved in organized sport at some level and that twenty-four per cent of Canadians are involved as spectators at amateur sport events. The direct and indirect impact of the sports sector on the Canadian economy is almost $7.7 billion with direct employment of over 200,000 jobs.

All of these factors show the tremendous impact sport continues to have on Canadians and how closely entwined it is with our sense of identity and our heritage.

What were some of the conclusions that the Government arrived at in its response to the Sub-Committee Report on the Study of Sport in Canada?

The Sub-Committee was successful in focusing public attention on sport. It featured participation by a broad spectrum of interests. In its response to the Committee's report, the Government has committed to act on 53 of the 69 recommendations. For instance, we are launching discussions on the most effective way to implement the principles underlying the idea of a sport marketing advisory board. This is an initiative that was also recommended at the National Conference on Sport and the Corporate Sector which took place in Ottawa last year. This conference was hosted by the Government of Canada together with the Conference Board of Canada.

The Government also intends to organize a "Millennium Sport Symposium" next year. As well, we are undertaking a review of the Fitness and Amateur Sport Act to determine its appropriateness as a framework for the next century.

With regard to professional sports, the Government of Canada, through the responsible departments, is continuing to examine the issue.

Sport has an important influence on social cohesion, economic development, foreign affairs, social development and health. Some observers find that the objectives of social cohesion, in particular the promotion of national unity and fostering of Canadian identity, has taken on too much importance. How do you respond to this?

There are a great many benefits that result from sport including economic, international, social, and health

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benefits. In addition, sport is a tremendous vehicle for bringing together people from diverse backgrounds in the pursuit of common objectives. Sport teaches and reflects values such as teamwork, perseverance, dedication, and the pursuit of excellence.

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Some critics say that athletes do not receive sufficient support from the federal government. What is the position of Sport Canada on this question?

The Government of Canada remains committed to amateur sport. In fact, last year the government committed an additional $50 million to sport over five years. This funding is targeted directly to support Canadian athletes and coaches.

Last year, the Sport Canada contributions budget was $56.2 million. Of that amount, the government provided $8.3 million dollars in direct financial assistance to approximately 1,050 national calibre athletes in 45 sports. As well, we are continuing to support Canadian athletes through a number of other athlete-focused programs and policies. These include funding for national sport and multi-sport multi-service organizations, programming for athletes with a disability, and support for Major Games and world championships.

Over the last five years we have also created a network of seven National Sport Centres across the country. These have been developed by the Government in partnership with the Canadian Olympic Association and the Coaching Association of Canada at the national level and in conjunction with provincial governments and other partners at the local level. These Centres are specifically intended to provide our best athletes with the support services required for them to compete with the very best in the world.

All of these initiatives are directly beneficial to our athletes.

In some countries, the private sector is very involved in the support of athletes and sport organizations. In return, they receive financial benefits from their support. Is this a model the Government encourages?

The corporate sector in Canada already plays a very significant role in the Canadian sport system. This support includes sponsorship of individual athletes, national sport organizations, national championships, international single-sport events and Major Games. One need only look at the recent success of the Canada Games in Corner Brook and the Pan American Games in Winnipeg to see the important partnership role the corporate sector plays in supporting sport in Canada.

However, while corporate support to Canada's National Sport Organizations has increased by 119 per cent since 1988, approximately 85 per cent of that support is directed to only six sports. Last December, in an effort to explore ways to encourage the corporate sector to provide more financial support to amateur sport, the Government hosted a conference on sport and the corporate sector. We are currently following up on the recommendations arising from that conference and are continuing to work closely with the sport community and the corporate sector to encourage these kinds of important partnerships.

The infrastructure required by amateur sport is essential from an economic as well as a social standpoint. Still there is some disagreement over the need to build new infrastructure. What is Sport Canada's position on this question?

As you point out, infrastructure, such as the building and maintenance of international-calibre training facilities, is essential to a strong and healthy Canadian sport system.

Most of the major sport facilities currently in place in Canada, and used by our national team athletes, have been built by universities and municipalities.

Government financing of sport facilities is mainly restricted to that required for the hosting of major Games in Canada and the Canada Games. Indeed, one of the major benefits of hosting these types of events is the legacy in facilities that they provide for our athletes. The 15 communities that have hosted the Canada Games have each been left with facilities for the benefit of athletes in their communities and surrounding regions. Regarding major games, Calgary has developed into a world-class training area for high-performance winter sports in the 10 years since the 1988 Winter Olympic Games. Victoria's hosting of the 1994 Commonwealth Games has yielded a legacy in facilities as well as programs which is managed by the National Sport Centre — Victoria. Likewise, Winnipeg's legacy from the recent Pan American Games includes a significant number of new and upgraded sport facilities.

Major sporting events, such as the hosting of Major Games in Canada, continue to be a priority for Government. Many Canadians question the legitimacy of the expenses involved in participating in big sporting events. Does the federal government, through Sport Canada, intend to continue to support them? How does the Government justify these expenses in the current economic climate?

The Government of Canada will continue to support the hosting of Major Games and other sport events in Canada because there are a great many benefits involved in doing so. Canadian communities are eager to host such events because of the economic benefits they bring to both the community and the surrounding region. Some of these benefits include job creation, regional development, increased tourism, and new and improved infrastructure. They also leave the community with a legacy of experienced volunteers.

Hosting big sporting events also provides many benefits to the sport system. As discussed in the earlier question relating to facility development, we have learned over the last 25 years of hosting sport events that we can ensure a facility and program legacy that will benefit athletes and coaches at all levels once the games are finished. Once again, the National Sport Centres are an example of the legacy that is made possible through hosting.

With respect to sport system development, hosting allows us to showcase our Canadian athletes at home and is an opportunity like no other for individual sports to receive increased exposure, popularity, and an increased level of participation.

These kinds of events also provide important social benefits. They increase awareness of fitness and health, they contribute to citizen and youth participation, and they provide Canadians with an opportunity to contribute to the expression of Canadian identity. As well, hosting international sporting events provides Canada with an opportunity to showcase itself to the rest of the world.

Athletes are very often ambassadors for Canada and heroes for young Canadians. Still the repeated scandals involving drugs in sport indicate there may be a problem. Are new initiatives required to deal with this issue?

First, I would like to point out that doping incidents involving Canadian athletes are exceptions to the rule and that the vast majority of Canadian athletes compete fairly and drug-free. The Government continues to strongly promote and support drug-free sport in Canada and to encourage competition through fair and ethical means. Canada remains a world leader in the fight against doping in sport. To ensure Canada remains at the forefront of drug-free sport, the Government of Canada provides almost $2 million in funding annually to the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, the independent organization that is responsible for administering Canada's drug-free sport program. The fact that we occasionally catch an athlete cheating is an indication that Canada's drug-free sport program, and its random testing procedures, are continuing to work as they should.

However, we must continue to be vigilant in the fight against doping in sport. Recent incidents, at home and abroad, have revealed the need to further examine the discrepancies that currently exist between the policies of professional leagues and amateur sport systems when it comes to the use of performance-enhancing drugs.

What does the recent creation of the new Secretary of State for Amateur Sport position mean for the Canadian sport system? What does the future hold for amateur sport in Canada?

The creation of the Secretary of State position is a tangible sign of the Government's ongoing commitment to amateur sport. It is something the sport community has been calling for and I believe it is a strong signal about the Government`s recognition of sport as an important Canadian priority.

I am very optimistic about the future of amateur sport in Canada. The recent success of the Pan American Games in Winnipeg, coupled with the momentum generated by the Sub-Committee Report on Sport in Canada, and the excitement that will be generated by the upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games in Sydney next year are all signs that the future is bright.

As we head towards the new millennium, I see the Government of Canada continuing to work in partnership with the sport community, with other federal departments and levels of government, and with the corporate sector to continue to find ways of enhancing the Canadian sport system. ■

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