

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 280



# Transcript – Heather Disher dishes on gender equality on sports boards

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Heather Disher about gender equality on sports boards.

Helga Svendsen 0:06

Before we start the podcast today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me, I am on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present. And I'd also like to acknowledge any First Nations people that might be listening today. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, skies, culture and country. I support voice, treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres, Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same .

Helga Svendsen 0:41

Now let me introduce Heather. Heather is chair of Pony Club Australia, and is on the board of the Geelong Animal Welfare Society and Alchemy Outsourcing. She's previously been on the boards of more than a dozen SME private company boards locally and internationally. Way too many to mention. A multi passionate entrepreneur, Heather leads two businesses, Alchemy Outsourcing, specialising in virtual assistant services and Disher Advisory Synergy, offering governance and advisory services. With a global perspective, Heather empowers boards and CEOs, delivering tailored strategies that drive operational efficiency and business growth. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast. Heather.

Heather Disher 1:26

Thank you, Helga. What a great, fantastic introduction. And I love that acknowledgement of country. Absolutely beautiful, really wonderful, fully supportive of that.

Helga Svendsen 1:36

Which country are you on today?

Heather Disher 1:38

I'm on Kulin nation land. So, yeah, very similar to yours. It expands. It's a very large parcel of country. And I was out running this morning. I trail run with my dog. And when the indigenous persons talk about their connection to country and land, I totally get that. Just being out with nature, it's just so incredible. So full support to all Indigenous persons all around our nation, and their continued support and their acknowledgement of and support, or acknowledgement and support of the land that we currently live on, it's amazing.

Helga Svendsen 2:13

So Heather, it is awesome to have you here, and I really am looking forward to our conversation about gender equality in sports and some of the recent changes. However, as always, before we dive into that topic, I want to dig a little bit deeper about you. So tell me, what was your earliest experience of governance?

Heather Disher 2:32

Oh, my earliest experience. So before I kind of get into the earliest experience of governance, I was bullied all through school so quite severely. I've just recently written a chapter in a co author book about it. But from that, I sort of internalized and became a bit of a nothing as quiet as a mouse could be, and didn't want to participate or be seen in any particular way. As I transitioned through that. And there were a number of elements that the number of things that sort of happened, and one big moment where I decided, no, I was going to step into life, and I was going to be what I could be, and to make sure that others didn't go through what I went through.

Heather Disher 3:15

So I decided that I would be a leader. So from the age of sort of 15-16 I'm going to lead the world. This, this young girl with this, this horrible baggage, you're going to lead the world. So I was looking at leaders. I was looking at how businesses were run, how things were done, the how, the why. So I was very interested in all of that. And throughout my career, I've done enough, so many different things in so many different industries. And during, just before the 2000 and the Y2K when the world was going to implode, I was working with an organisation on a global team, and I was leading the global team with a technology solution that was customized or bespoke for the largest companies in the world to be able to search their intranet.

Heather Disher 3:59

To do that, I was working with boards. So I was being invited to speak to boards, as I said, of the biggest companies in the world, I was very privileged to have a voice at that time. There were no other women in the room other than secretaries, and they were called secretaries back then. But these people were making decisions. They were creating a culture. They were sending down strategic plans about how they wanted the business to run and what it would look like into the future, and still being a how and a why and what's sort of happening. I sort of looked at that said, I need to be on a board. I need to be in that space and to be leading and making decisions to support others.

Heather Disher 4:41

So as my career sort of continued on, I then took a role some years later, about three or four years later, with a family run business. And look, such an experience of it. Oh, my goodness, a disaster. I was placed there to be the weight that tipped the scale towards one particular family member. So if you want the definition of dysfunction, that was it.

Heather Disher 5:05

So I was finally on a board, I was finally going to be leading, could make decisions, support, have a say, create a future, and I couldn't do any of that board. So I had to work very hard to unravel the dysfunction and then bring them into a position where we could make decisions based off good governance. So it was kind of, it's a long winded answer, but, and it was a long journey towards getting to a board and operating and having some experience with some good governance.

Helga Svendsen 5:37

Oh, my goodness, there is so much in there. Heather, first up. I'm amazed that at 15 and 16 you were thinking about how businesses run. I'm not sure that's what I was thinking. That's a 15 or 16 year old. So that's pretty amazing. And that experience in the family business, it's family businesses are fascinating. I think it is the politics of it really, and how it runs. So...

Heather Disher 6:00

I still do a lot of business with family businesses, and I really like what they're incredible entities, but the governance, the board of a family business has a secondary layer of governance behind it, and then sometimes it has a third layer. So and these are the family members that are inputting or influencing positively, not necessarily negative, because when you sit down at the dinner table, someone that's on the board is talking to their partner, their children, and that influence is coming through that doesn't happen in any other environment. So they are really unique and need to be

supported, I feel, so that they can operate and understand the conflicts of interest and the biases that they have and use them to leverage it. Yeah, but my first one was not...

Helga Svendsen 6:47

Not that. Well, look, the governance war stories are often those that give us the best experience that we can use into the future. So you've had that baptism by fire, which then allows you to be able to succeed in the boardroom later on, and in business and in all of the amazing things that you do. Oh, it's exhausting already.

Helga Svendsen 7:12

Well, let's turn to another area, which is no doubt also exhausting for many people, gender equality on sports boards. So there's been some recent changes about this, so maybe talk us through the recent changes and what they might mean. So let's start with that.

Heather Disher 7:28

The recent change this year being very recent, as in the last month or so, it was announced, and it's been a number of years in the making. The Australian Government, together with state governments and sporting institutes, so the Australian Sports Commission and so forth have actually worked together. Now that in itself, is very positive, that we have federal and state governments agreeing to a policy that says by the first of July 2027 all national sporting organisations, and there is a national sporting organisations with disabilities that receive funding through Sport Australia and the and the Sports Commission need to show a board that is 50/50 so 50% Male, 50% female.

Heather Disher 8:18

Now that is a really fantastic step. In my view, it would be nice to go 40/40/20, because we're not as simple as man woman, but we're getting some traction here. So 50% of all of the boards in this category need to be women and or gender diverse. That also includes the chair. So the chair, 50% across that includes the chair, which is really interesting.

Heather Disher 8:45

That's a very good... I like that they've included the chair because previous gender and board diversities have never included the chair. That number is a sort of a separate number. They also have gone one step further, and they've said that 50% of specified subcommittees, so subcommittees that report directly to the board also have to apply the 50/50, gender rule. So if they want to receive their funding from the Sports Commission, they need to comply by the first of July 2027 so this was a

huge announcement. Now this doesn't mean the flip side to this means that, you know, like your big codes, your Olympian level kind of organisations, they're not included because they're not national sporting organisations.

Helga Svendsen 9:36

For the uninitiated, then what is a national sport organisation and what is not?

Heather Disher 9:41

A national sporting organisation is an organisation that's recognized by Sport Australia and fits under their funding model and contributes to Sport Australia and a Sports Commission program. So there are various funding models, there are various governance requirements. There are a number of different requirements that you need to meet, and different criteria, and they're quite extensive and quite different for each organisation.

Heather Disher 10:06

So you basically get a label of national sporting organisation. From that your states then become a state sporting organisation, and that enables them to get funding from this state. So you have a national body that supports the states, and you have your state sporting organisation, then you have your clubs and members. So the majority of sports in Australia fall under a national sporting organisation, and that's for disability as well. So it's an NSO National Sporting Organisation, or an NSoD National Sporting organisation with Disability.

Helga Svendsen 10:38

So what are some of the NSOs, I say, getting in on the lingo. And what are some sporting organisations that I, as the uninitiated, might think would be an NSO, that is not just so I've got some context around this.

Heather Disher 10:51

Okay, so anything that's Olympic is not an NSO. So a lot of the high performance is outside. So AFL is not an NSO. Rugby league is not an NSO.

Heather Disher 11:04

Swimming Australia is an NSO, but the Olympic, the high level is in a separate category. So high performance moves into a separate category. I think, you know, like Pony Club Australia is an NSO, Equestrian Australia is an NSO.

Heather Disher 11:18

The majority of sports, except for those really big televised... so Basketball Australia is an NSO, but some of the competitions outside of that are not. So, Netball Australia is an NSO, soccer Australia, but A League is not. A League soccer or football is not so they're not NSOs, but Soccer Australia is so if you think about anything that gets highly televised, it's not an NSO so big money, big money in that area of sport.

Helga Svendsen 11:51

So the NSOs, they by the first of July 2027, have to have 50/50, boards, 50/50, men and women or gender diverse, I agree 40/40/20 would be so much easier, but whatever, it's progress, so we'll run with that. Right? Yep. And fascinating about board chairs? Gosh, that's going to be interesting, because I imagine what will happen is they'll all point at each other and say, well, they have to do it, they have to do it because you're looking at it as a whole, right? Like, let's say there's 100 NSOs, 50 of them need to be led by women, but all of them'll all point at each other, won't they?

Heather Disher 12:28

Yeah, there's hundreds of NSOs. There's hundreds of them. But the interesting thing is, just over 60% of all NSOs currently can form and part of the reason is that a national sporting organisation is generally run by volunteers. Nobody's paid, yes, right? Because it's not big commercial sport.

Heather Disher 12:48

So when it comes to low paid or volunteer work, who in society contributes? Women are the highest contributors. I mean, you know, we're the carers and the supporters of so many elements of the home and outside the home. So sports no different. So sit around about 60 odd national organisations are already complying, but that's not the case in the states.

Heather Disher 13:10

So the states have a completely different and they all the states are very different. So one of the things that it will be very interesting is that this supports an NSO to continue to push and lead and educate the state's sporting organisation, because they now have to be accountable as well.

Heather Disher 13:30

So they're separately accountable to their relevant governments, which is, this is where it kind of gets a little bit crazy when you sort of think this is, you know, overall, this is a brilliant opportunity for the people across sport and for organisations, not just sport, but for commercial organisations all over to look at an industry, a very big industry, when you consider that more than 98% of Australia's population does some sort of sport or physical activity.

Helga Svendsen 14:00

So this will have a, I would think, a huge impact on boards across Australia, because sporting organisations are, you know, so often I hear from people when they're talking about governance, they're like, oh, inverted commas, I haven't been on the board, you know, sure I was on the local footy club or the local netball club, or whatever it may be. And this will presumably trickle down to all levels, so it'll have a huge impact on governance overall.

Heather Disher 14:25

it will.

Helga Svendsen 14:26

So Heather, I'd be interested in hearing how this is playing out in practice at Pony Club Australia. Like we know that this change has not happened in a vacuum. There has been talk about gender equality in sports organisations for a number of years. So this is not just out of the blue, so maybe tell us about the pony club Australia story and how it's playing out in practice.

Heather Disher 14:47

Yeah so Pony Club Australia is a board that was set up. Our Constitution is set up in like a federated structure, which is not the most common anymore, and you certainly wouldn't go forward and create a federated structure.

Heather Disher 15:01

What that means is that the states, the key stakeholders and players as a state sporting organisation to the National Sporting Organisation, can elect persons for the board.

Heather Disher 15:12

Now, when you have somebody submitting individuals that they would like on the board, it becomes very difficult then for Pony Club Australia to then say, we have to have a balance of gender equality, and the state says, yes, but this is the person that we'd like to represent us.

Heather Disher 15:27

So you have some difficulties. So we have a board of eight, five of which are elected, and three are appointed, and I am one of the appointed. Having three appointed enables us to go to market for a gap in our skills matrix. So we use a skills matrix, and I highly recommend everybody uses a skills matrix, but that's a whole other topic. But we use the skills matrix and we hire or appoint directors with a particular skill set that will, you know, level up the skills and the deliverables that the board can create.

Heather Disher 16:02

So we do have some flexibility in terms of we can actually go to market and look for a particular gender or a particular individual with lived experience.

Heather Disher 16:13

Pony Club Australia has...., I've been chair for five years, and we have, right from the very get-go, when I started, nearly six years ago, started to adjust our communication when we go out for recruitment, even through our states, to say we're looking for these types of individuals, and we are open to Indigenous persons. We are open to persons with disability. We are open to all lived experience persons. So we encourage a number of people to apply.

Heather Disher 16:42

We're also trying to encourage, and many sporting boards would be the same, trying to encourage younger people so that you've got a diverse range of age as well, because you want sort of diversity in age also.

Heather Disher 16:55

So we have for the last five odd years, been working very hard to attract and to bring diverse individuals to our board, having said that we're a sport, unlike many others, who are predominantly female led so we have more females members than we do male, which means that our representation is heavily weighted towards women. So we have a stronger female presence on our board than male.

Heather Disher 17:25

We have just recently, or in the last just over last year, hired a new CEO, and we traditionally, prior, we had a female CEO who was fantastic, and we now have a male CEO. So we're trying to kind of balance out some of the perspectives of our audience and the wider community in multiple ways.

Heather Disher 17:45

So from Pony Club Australia's point of view, we have some limitations about how we can move and where we can go in this space, but we've been working towards that. How that plays out when you have targets attached to it means that we have to show justification that we tried in multiple ways, and tried reasonably and under good governance principles to find diverse individuals, and we speak about diverse rather than just gender, because you want a whole diversity range, so we can show, and have been showing, and have been reporting.

Heather Disher 18:20

For some years that we have been participating in this space already, because it was something that I you know, that I'm very feel strongly about 40/40/20, and yes, the government, thank you for the 5050, that's way better than what we had, which was nothing, nothing so. But then what happens at the state level is the states now have to start showing how they recruit and how they succeed and what kind of programs they have, and that is really big for the state.

Heather Disher 18:49

So as a national sporting organisation, we are set up at a very high level of governance. And within Sport Australia, we're a gold standard board, which is really great, because we punch way above our weight.

Heather Disher 19:01

So encouraging the states and to support the states, because every state requires something different. So all of the states have got their own minimum requirements, maximum requirements, so they're all doing what they need to do. Luckily, for a national it's easier, because we have, you know, our compliance is a lot heavier, but the states have something different, so we can start to support the states in what they need to deliver.

Heather Disher 19:24

One of the states in particular had some difficulty, where already this year, the government said, we won't fund you because you don't have enough diversity, gender diversity on your board. And they panicked, because they're like, well, what do we do we can't get... and it was actually too many women and not enough male representation, but still gender equality. So they reached out to us and said, what do we do if we're not going to get our funding? The state is refusing our funding based on this.

Heather Disher 19:53

Now that state doesn't need to really officially do that until 2027 but they're already starting to do it the other states are not. So we had to then jump in really quickly and support that state and put forward a case to the government to say, this is why they cannot reach that criteria. At the moment, Now, that case is still sort of pending with the state because they don't know what to do.

Heather Disher 20:19

So each of the states are going to have their individual problems. So if you're on a sporting board in a state, or you're on a committee in a state, you're going to have to look at, what are the state requirements, and then reach out to the NSO and say, what are the NSO requirements? And how do we come to a level playing field that we can actually operate in? So for us, it's quite difficult to manage and support, because if you're a state sporting organisation and the government says we're not going to give you any money out of the blue, it has really big ramifications.

Heather Disher 20:50

So, so if they can plan for it, and they know that it's going to happen in 2027 then that's okay. Some states are doing the 40/40/20 some states are doing the just show that you're doing what you can. And some states are simply like this particular state, which is actually Tasmania. Nope, we're not funding you. And then when you come back with a but this is what we're doing to try and support that decision of 50/50 they don't know what to do. So everybody's sort of learning at the moment, including the government, the state governments, and the, you know, nationals, like, what is it going

to look like? And then what happens if an NSO is not funded? Then they lose their status. So then if they're no longer an NSO, there's no SSO. So there's no state sporting organisation, if the NSO doesn't exist. So it's, I think there's some really big some really big thing. There are really big outcomes that are going to come from this that are messy, and we have no information on how that's going to work. So NSOs need to step up really prominently and help the state sporting organisation to do what they can to reach that 50/50, and for those that are very heavily male focused, there'll be some really big, really big decisions they need to make. Because why are women not interested? Right? We've got half the population of Australia. It's pretty much 50/50 but it's not as simple as, oh, let's get some women on the board. It's not quite that easy.

Helga Svendsen 22:17

Or vice versa. You know, as you say, there's some that are dominated by women as well. So it's, how do you get 50/50? Oh, it's going to be so interesting. And as I say, you know, we're not going to wait till 2027, for this to kick off. And I'm sure sporting organisations are not waiting, and they're not that's what I'm hearing from you, that they're all getting started. The state governments are getting started. It is going to be so interesting to watch how this plays out. Heather, we might have to get you back in a year or two to check in on progress of this as well.

Helga Svendsen 22:49

Take on Board community, if you're involved in sports organisations and you're not aware of this, maybe make yourself aware and Take on Board community if governing a sports organisation needs something of interest to you, now might be an interesting time to look these things up and have a look at maybe, if you're women and gender diverse, look at those male dominated ones, and see where you can lend your governance skills there and vice versa, men out there listening, maybe look at the women dominated boards and organisations and see where you can help out in some of that as well.

Heather Disher 23:21

I would also add that women as generally, just as we tend to look at a job description and kind of go, oh, well, we can deliver 70% of that, so we won't apply, whereas a guy, traditionally looks and goes, oh, I can do 30% I'm in. But I would say to you, the 70% the 50% whatever it is, if you are interested apply, because when you get into a national sporting organisation or a state sporting organisation, there's training that you can access, that is free, that the Sports Commission provide access to governance training. They run training. They run this fantastic program called game plan for clubs. And this is all about governance, because governance across sport, not so good in some areas, not so so they're lifting the government. So you get training that you would never get in another industry, and it does cross over, because governance is governance no matter where you deliver it, it's the same, but having a, you know, a sporting slant on it makes it easier to digest and easier to implement.

Helga Svendsen 24:22

That is such a good tip. Okay. Oh, Heather. So much in this. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Heather Disher 24:31

Oh, I would love for people to start having a conversation about this and be excited by it. I mean, sure, it's taken us decades to get to this stage, but let's not look at what of how long it's taken. Let's look at where we're at now, where we're going. And this is a great opportunity for sport, but also for every other industry, because sport touches pretty much everyone in multiple industries. So the key thing is talk about it, and talk about it in a transparent way.

Heather Disher 24:58

If you're on a board and you need to look for women to reach this quota. Be transparent. I would say to people, be transparent. Tell them, during the job ad, don't go for tokenism. Just tell them we have an imbalance, and we'd really like to balance it out. We'd really looking for two or three women. We're really you can actually be transparent. So have conversations, be transparent.

Heather Disher 25:25

And the other thing that I would say is just apply if it interests you. It's lived experience. When you're looking at good governance, good governance comes from your lived experience. It's a whole of person that you contribute. You're contributing culture to the strategic plan and the direction of the business. Don't let a seemingly lack of a particular skill stop you. Reach out to the boards and say, I'd love to contribute, and this is what I can give, and this is what I can bring. And reach out to other women that are on boards, particularly on the sporting boards and say, how can I position myself or I really like this sport? What are the intricacies that will get me into the conversation? Reach out to me. I'm happy to have a chat with anyone about how they're going.

Heather Disher 26:13

So that would be my key takeaways. Keep talking about it. If you're on a board, be transparent about what you need. You can be transparent and then apply. Just apply. You've got nothing to lose getting on a board. You know, sometimes it's, you know, you hear these stories. I was actually listening to a story of someone recently at an event, and they said they applied to 100 different boards, but they got 1, it's a job. So, you know, I don't know whether you need to apply 100 to get one, but I think that that was very passionate individual. But you know, you it's not a apply for one, two or three, and then you get one. So keep applying. Keep applying. Don't give up.

Helga Svendsen 26:50

Exactly. It's a perseverance game. I think a lot of it, yeah, okay. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Heather Disher 26:59

I think one of the one of the biggest resources in terms of boards is this community. So Take on Board. Use utilize this community. Connect with governance on boards, and with you know, other women that are on board, sporting boards, or other organisations like Women on Boards. If you're particularly interested in sporting boards and Sport Australia, their website, which connects you to the Institute of Sport and Sports Commission, absolutely and then reach out to other people, like go to the sport that you love or that you have a passion for. Go to their website. Look at who's on the board. Who do you know? Do you know someone? Reach out to them, or do you know someone that knows someone? Use your LinkedIn connections or your Facebook connections, to connect you with someone.

Heather Disher 27:43

Just keep looking at who you can connect with, because this is how we're going to change the world, is by trying different things and reaching out to people. But also, you know, reach out to people that are on sporting boards. Reach out to myself, reach out to any of Pony Club Australia board, they will happily receive, you know, be open to having a chat with you. It's because it's sport, it's community, because, like, the biggest communities in the world is sporting community. So we've got an international reach in Pony Club Australia. So if you're a pony clubber, you're a pony clubber through multiple different countries, and you can rely on that network and connection. So other sports will be the same.

Helga Svendsen 28:19

Yeah. Fantastic. Oh, Heather, thank you. Thank you just for the energy that you bring to this. Thank you for reaching out to me to make this podcast happen. I'm so glad we did, and like I say, I look forward to checking in in another year or two, just to hear how this is playing out in practice. So thank you for sharing your wisdom and your energy with the Take on Board community today.

Heather Disher 28:42

Thank you so much. And go sports boards, let's show them how it's done.

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