



SPORT'S UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Four shifts that change the conversation with government, funders and communities.

By Anna Walker

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I came into sport because of what it did for me. The belonging that arrived before I'd earned it - just by showing up, pulling on a uniform, becoming part of a team. The confidence born from discovering I was capable of more than I knew. The friendships forged in weekend carnivals and collective effort. The leadership I didn't recognise as such, until years later. I wanted more people to have the experience sport had given me.

Then I spent the first part of my career counting registrations.

When I talk to sport administrators, I hear the same story told a different way. They light up when they describe the participant using sport as rehabilitation after a stroke. The child who was excluded from school and found their place on the football pitch. The teenage girl who walked into a club with no confidence and walked out two years later as a captain. These are the reasons people come to work in sport. They are the stories told at volunteer thank-you nights and annual award ceremonies.

Confidence. Connection. Health. Resilience. This is what sport, done well, delivers in spades.

But these outcomes aren't just meaningful to us personally. They're the same outcomes governments are spending billions trying to solve. Health system pressure. Preventable chronic disease. Social isolation. Declining mental health.

Sport contributes to every one of those outcomes, every day. Its direct impact on these outcomes is well documented. But sport doesn't consistently present itself this way.

Our annual reports, strategic plans and acquittal documents tell our story differently. In membership numbers, facility utilisation, competition results and volunteering rates. This is how we measure - and define - success in sport. Meanwhile, sport remains chronically underfunded.

We are answering a question nobody asked.

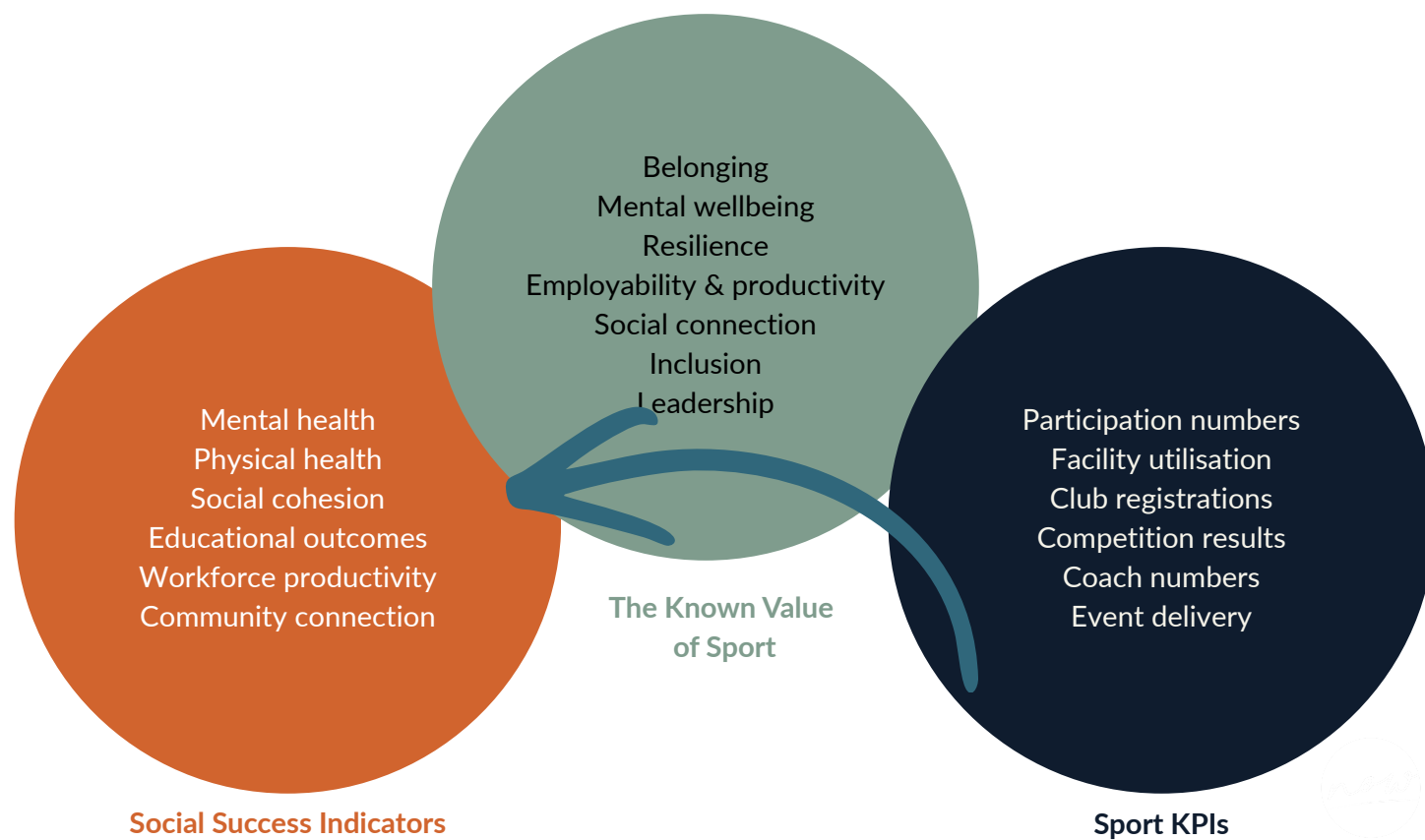
Sport as social infrastructure.

Governments have always understood sport as physical infrastructure. Ovals, pools, courts, stadiums. These appear in capital budgets, in community development plans, in urban design frameworks. But sport is not just physical infrastructure, it is a sector. A sector competes for discretionary resources. Makes a case for its own importance.

Right now, the concrete is valued; the social solution sport offers, is not. It's never been systemically evidenced in the language that budget decisions are made in. This makes it vulnerable to budget cuts in tough times, and limits its growth potential.

The four shifts in this document are about building the evidence, the governance and the narrative that reposition sport as vital social infrastructure - and make that case undeniable.

Organisations that make these shifts do not just communicate better. They attract different funders, influence different policy conversations, and build the kind of evidence base that makes their case for investment almost irresistible.



The Disconnect

Consider three sets of priorities side by side.

The first two circles overlap almost entirely. Sport is already delivering what the left circle demands. The evidence is well-established and growing.

The third column barely touches either of them.

That gap - between the value sport creates and the value the sector reports - is where the opportunity lives.

Close it, and the funding conversation changes. The policy conversation changes. The public perception of sport changes.

These **four shifts** are how you close it.



Shift One Measure What Matters

You cannot tell a different story if you are tracking the same things.

Registration numbers tell funders how many people showed up. They say nothing about what happened to those people - how they felt, what they gained, whether they came back, and why they left. They simply tell us about entry.

The sector has long treated recruitment as its primary growth lever. But up to 70% of young people leave organised sport by their mid teens. If the entry point is the only thing we're optimising for, we are designing for a system that loses most of the people it attracts - and has no language to explain why.

If retention, wellbeing and social impact are not embedded as tracked metrics, they will remain secondary priorities - regardless of how much you believe in them.

When organisations start measuring what actually drives *sustained* participation, two things shift simultaneously. Internally, the design questions change - what gets built, what gets resourced, what success looks like at board level. Externally, the conversation with government changes too. A measurement framework that maps to outcomes governments are already committed to - mental health, social cohesion, preventative health, inclusion - opens doors that participation numbers alone never will.



Shift Two Pivot Your Governance

Measurement alone does not produce change. Plenty of organisations have commissioned research, run wellbeing surveys and published impact reports - and then watched those documents sit on a shelf while decision-making carried on exactly as before.

The reason is structural. What gets measured only changes behaviour when it is connected to accountability. And accountability only changes behaviour when it's embedded in governance - in what the board tracks, what leadership is held responsible for, and what gets resourced.

Systems optimise for what they measure. But they only change when the people with authority are accountable for what is being measured.

Pivoting your governance means working across three connected dimensions. They do not need to happen in sequence. In practice, movement on one tends to create momentum in the others.

Build the mandate to act on new insights.

The organisations making progress on this are expanding what they are capable of - not by becoming experts in everything, but by developing the skills to engage wider audiences, mobilise new perspectives, and factor lived experience into sport's design. This is not about replacing existing expertise. It is about making sure the insights flowing in from a broader community have somewhere to land inside the organisation, and someone with the authority to act on them.

Refresh the strategy around human experience and community impact.

The traditional sport participation framework was built for a different era and a different set of expectations. Refreshing it does not mean abandoning what works.

It means asking honestly whether the current strategic architecture is capable of delivering the broader outcomes sport is now being asked – and funded – to produce. The organisations doing this well are finding that a strategy built around human experience and community impact does not compete with performance. It builds the conditions that performance depends on.

Align your resources to your ambitions - and reconsider who they serve.

A strategy that positions sport as vital social infrastructure needs a budget that reflects that ambition.

Sport has long operated with an implicit two-pot model: investment in participation on one side, elite performance on the other, putting the two in competition for scarce resources.

Sustained participation and elite performance are not competing priorities. When more young people stay in sport longer, the talent pool deepens. Better elite outcomes follow. So do stronger community outcomes, broader social impact, and a more compelling case for cross-portfolio government investment.

The organisations beginning to see this are moving away from scarcity thinking - where resources are concentrated on a pipeline promoting early selection of high potential - toward abundance thinking, where investment in the conditions that keep people in sport is understood as the foundation that elite performance, community impact and sustainable funding all depend on.

On why early selection works against abundance thinking, see our article ["Are we failing our kids in sport? The hidden harm of talent bias - and how to fix it."](#)





Shift Three

Elevate Social Impact by Design

The most powerful sport programs are not the ones that get people playing. They're the ones that change something about the people who play.

The shift from designing programs that deliver sport, to designing programs that use sport to deliver specific human outcomes, begins with three design principles.

Safety is the foundation, not a footnote.

The evidence is unambiguous: sport without intentional design can be a space where harm, discrimination and exclusion thrive. But the inverse is equally true. Sport designed with safety, belonging and psychological security as primary design criteria tends to produce the wellbeing, connection and resilience outcomes we are trying to evidence. When those outcomes are then deliberately amplified through design, the impact compounds.

Sport is adaptable. Treat it as a living product, not a fixed one.

Outside the elite pathway, organised sport is losing people – particularly during adolescence, and disproportionately among girls, culturally diverse communities and people with disability. The formats, structures and competitive models that defined sport in a previous era are increasingly misaligned with what diverse communities actually want and need. The organisations making progress on this are involving the people they most want to reach – not just those already engaged, but those walking away and those who never considered joining – in the design process itself. The insights from those conversations consistently reveal things that insider design processes miss entirely.

Design explicitly for the outcome you want to produce.

If the outcome is mental health, the design questions are unique. If it's belonging, female empowerment or social connection, they're different. Different outcomes require a different set of design choices – about environment, competition structure, the role of the coach, what happens before and after the sport itself. The organisations doing this well are not adding wellbeing as a layer on top of existing program design but starting with the human outcome and working backward to the sport experience that produces it.

What this looks like in practice varies considerably by context. Three examples from current work:

Designing from community priorities outward - AFL Community Connect Toolkit (AFL with Koori Heritage Trust and Multicultural Australia)

The Community Connect Toolkit, currently in development for release to AFL staff, starts from a different question to most participation programs. Rather than asking how to get multicultural and First Nations communities into AFL, it asks what matters most to these communities, and how AFL can be useful to that. Staff are trained not just in cultural competency as a module, but in a design process that begins with community priorities – connection, belonging, cultural identity, self-determination – and builds the program around what they find. The outcome being tracked is not registration numbers alone. It is whether communities experience genuine connection and belonging through their engagement with the sport.

Designing a sport around health and inclusion from the ground up – Walking Football 4 Health Victoria

Walking Football 4 Health Victoria did not retrofit social impact onto an existing sport format. It started there. Founded in 2024, the format – no running, no contact, no balls above waist height – was designed from its founding principles around preventative health and disability inclusion. It partners with Diabetes Victoria, Men's Health Forum and Mental Health Victoria. The sport exists because a gap existed between what community sport was delivering and what a significant portion of the population actually needed. It is now expanding across Victoria, building an evidence base that positions it directly in health, disability and community wellbeing funding conversations – not sport participation budgets.

Designing for inclusion at the point of delivery – Levelling the Deck (SWIM Coaches & Teachers Australia)

Levelling the Deck was designed to make swimming welcoming and safe for everyone, regardless of background, ability, sexuality or gender. The design insight was that inclusion or exclusion happens primarily at the point of delivery – in the culture a coach creates, the language they use, and the environment they build. So the program works at the level of coach practice, not just program access. It targets belonging and safety as primary outcomes, and is aligned to the UN Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality and reduced inequality. The result is a program that speaks directly to equity funders, community health bodies and social cohesion portfolios – not just the traditional aquatics funding landscape.

The common thread across these three is not the sport, and it is not the population. It is the intentionality of the design. Each program starts with a human outcome and works backward to the sport format, the coach practice, or the community engagement model that delivers it. Each one generates a different kind of evidence - and opens a different kind of funding conversation - to a program designed primarily around participation numbers.

They also tend to produce stronger retention rates. When people feel that a program was designed for them, not just made accessible to them, they come back.



Shift Four

Tell A Different Story

The collective pivots of these four shifts build a vastly different sporting narrative.

The opportunity is to talk less about sport and more about the problems it solves.

Consider the current communication landscape in sport. The vast majority of public-facing content, from peak bodies, from national federations, from state organisations, is built around competitive outcomes. Elite results, athlete profiles, medal tallies, selection announcements. That content has an audience. But the narrative is not talking about sport's greatest benefits. Whilst it is entertaining, inspiration does not drive sustained growth in participation. And this elite narrative is almost entirely irrelevant to the funders, policymakers and community investors who control the resources that could genuinely transform sport's reach and sustainability.

The organisations making progress are learning to lead with the problem, not the solution. They are not starting with sport. They are starting with mental health. With social isolation. With female leadership pipelines. With community cohesion in regions where trust in institutions has collapsed. And they are showing – with evidence – how sport addresses those challenges at scale, at relatively low cost, with communities who are already engaged.

Sport does not need to be positioned as important. It needs to be positioned as useful - to the problems that society is already trying to solve.

The Compounding Effect

These four shifts are interdependent. Changing measurement without shifting governance produces reports that nobody acts upon. Redesigning programs without tracking their outcomes produces activity without evidence or sustainability. Telling a new story without the data to back it up builds an anecdote, not a business case.

But when they work together, when measurement, governance, design, and narrative are aligned around a shared understanding of sport's social value, the compounding effect is significant. Organisations that have made these shifts report not just better funding conversations but different ones. They are no longer competing for the same thin slice of the sport participation budget. They're making a case for investment from health portfolios, education departments, social cohesion funds, and community infrastructure budgets that have never previously seen sport as relevant to their work.

That's what it means to realise sport's untapped potential, not to grow the sector, to grow sport's role in the world.

Where does your organisation sit?

The Participant-Led Systems article expands on the broader framework behind this thinking and explores why participation systems often struggle to achieve the outcomes they seek. Read more [here](#).

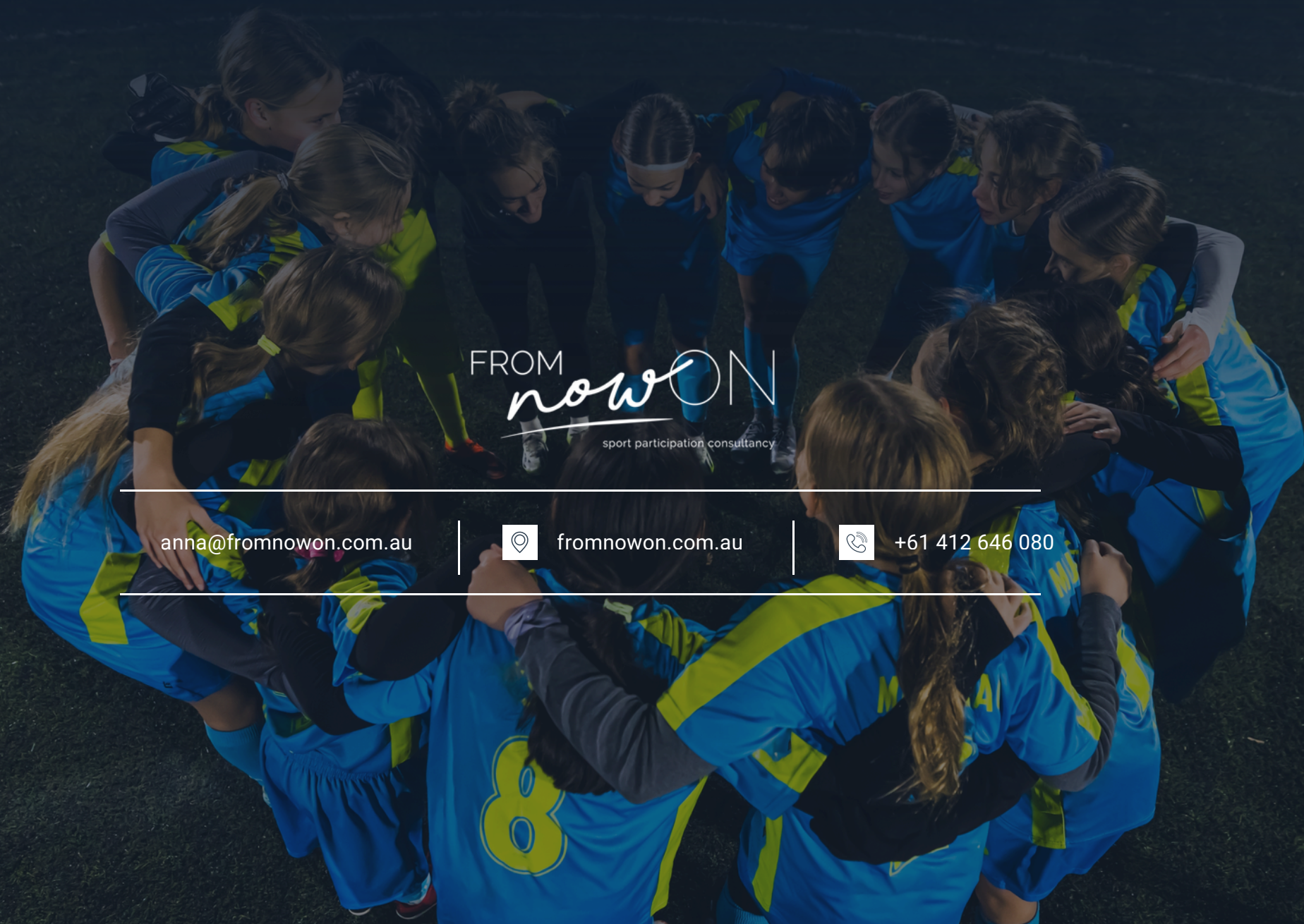
If you'd like a conversation about what these shifts might look like for your organisation, get in touch at anna@fromnowon.com.au to book a free 30-minute diagnostic conversation.

About the Author

Anna Walker is Founder and Director of From Now On, a sport participation consultancy working at the intersection of participation, inclusion, data and impact. With more than 25 years' experience across National Sporting Organisations, government agencies and community sport systems in Australia and internationally, Anna brings a rare combination of system-level thinking, deep respect for the realities of clubs and volunteers, and an ability to translate lived experience into executive and board-ready insight.

Anna's career has spanned strategy development, program design and policy advice across more than 40 sports in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands and England. This perspective - shaped by frontline conversations with participation leaders and firsthand observation of how early decisions in sport systems shape who feels welcome and who quietly opts out - informs her current work helping sport organisations design systems that value participation as much as performance, retention as much as recruitment, and experience as much as access.

She established From Now On to address a challenge she witnessed repeatedly across different contexts: sport systems designed for outcomes they were never structured to deliver. The Participant-Led Systems framework emerged from this work - combining international evidence, organisational theory and practical partnerships with organisations and leaders to test how systems change translates into sustained participation growth.



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