



Insights from *Guided Conversations*
with regional sporting clubs,
associations and leagues

JULY 2020 REPORT

Acknowledgment of country

Regional Sport Victoria proudly acknowledges Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past and present. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's first peoples and that this country was never ceded.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to Regional and Rural Victorian life and how this enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards the equality of outcomes and ensuring an equal voice.



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Executive Summary

This report provides insights into the perspectives, challenges and issues facing regional community sport in Victoria during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the months of (late) April, May, June and early July, Regional Sports Assemblies (RSAs) undertook one on one 'Guided Conversations' with their local sporting clubs, associations, and leagues, and this data was recorded systematically across the network.

Results of this comprehensive data set demonstrate that while concerns for respondents changed over time, throughout the entire period one thing remained constant – that the **physical, social, and mental wellbeing of members and communities was of paramount importance to regional Victorians.**

For this very reason, this report has been separated into two distinct sections. The first section, titled ***Phase 1: Immediate Responses to a Global Pandemic*** refers to the data set which was captured between April 30th and May 30th. The second section of this report, titled ***Phase 2: Future Focused*** refers to those conversations which took part between June 1st and July 12th.

This secondary data set also includes insights from related sectors within the industry, including State Sporting Associations (SSAs) and Local Government Authorities (LGAs). **This distinct analysis presents an opportunity to assess community attitudes and behaviour over time and in relation to policy announcements and changing circumstances.**

It is important to note that this data is primarily qualitative in nature, and that the rich conversations which have taken place provide deep insights into the state of community sport in regional Victoria and should be analysed in conjunction with complementary quantitative data sets.

Regional Sport Victoria

Sport makes an important contribution to the physical, psychological, and social wellbeing of Australians. Rural and regional Victorians are less healthy overall than their metropolitan counterparts, however, they are more likely to participate in organised sport than those who live in metropolitan areas. Therefore, any delays or prohibitions of organised sport, it can be argued, are most acutely felt by regional Victorians.

¹ Eime, R, Harvey, J & Charity, M 2016, Sport Participation Rates – Victoria 2015, Federation University, Victoria University.

In many rural and regional Victorian communities the sporting club is an integral part of the social fabric of the local community.

Regional Sport Victoria (RSV) is the peak body that provides advocacy and leadership for nine **Regional Sports Assemblies (RSA)** across the state of Victoria. The organisation has a network of an estimated 6,500 community-based sport and active recreation clubs and groups across regional Victoria, with 43 staff employed by RSAs across the state.

Profile of the Data

From April 30th 2020, all RSAs were undertaking one to one 'Guided Conversations' with those clubs, associations and leagues, which fell within their catchment areas. These conversations took anywhere from 15 minutes, to up to an hour. As of July 12th 2020,

- **511 conversations** had taken place
- **All 48 regional LGAs** were represented
- **41 different sports** and physical activities were represented amongst the data set (see appendix of sports listed)
- 78% of conversations took place with either the President or Secretary
- 51% of the clubs surveyed had at least 100 members (based on 2019 club numbers)
- 18% of the clubs surveyed had more than 300 members (based on 2019 club numbers)

Phase 1: Immediate Responses to a Global Pandemic

The circumstances of Autumn 2020

On 23 March 2020, the Premier of Victoria declared a State of Emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Victorians were instructed "*if you can stay at home, **you must stay at home***" and all community sport ceased from this point. Traditional summer sports were unable to finish their seasons, while winter sports were to cease pre-season training immediately. Walking groups, yoga classes and other social sport and recreation activities were suspended indefinitely. All RSA participation programming was also put on hold.

Professional sporting codes were not exempt from this response. After only one round played, the AFL committed to a 'lock down'. Broadcast deals were null and void, and 75% of the workforce were stood down without pay. Other SSAs were forced into similar scenarios, with regional, on the ground staff quickly stood down. The regional sporting eco-system had been decimated.

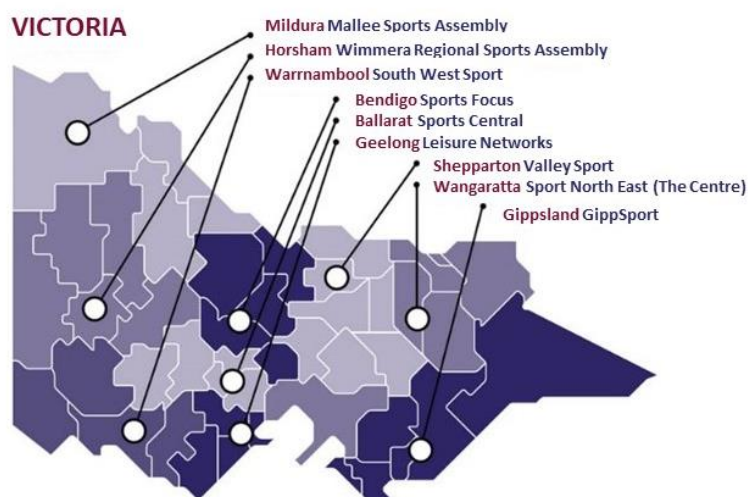
The approach taken by RSAs

It was becoming clear that sport would be **more dependent than ever on the commitment of volunteers** over the coming months, and even years. As local clubs, associations, and leagues negotiated the various financial and logistical hurdles to get back to training and playing during the pandemic, volunteers were front and centre of this re-emergence.

Many of the RSAs identified early on that their local clubs would be struggling. Not only was the season in crisis, but bills continued to arrive, with no clear idea of what a return to community sport in 2020 would look like or if it could happen at all. In mid-April, Sports Focus (Bendigo based RSA, servicing the Loddon Campaspe region) staff began systematically contacting their local clubs, associations, and leagues, to check in and have one to one ‘Guided Conversations’.

While staff were gathering information about each club’s current challenges and areas where support would be required, what became clear was that **the struggles extended beyond sport**. Many of the clubs had not been in contact with anyone from within their industry or broader networks and so naturally, people started to express their emotions and vent their frustrations.

RSV identified that this project needed to be part of the broader Networks COVID-19 Conceptual Framework (figure 1), developed by Valley Sport (Shepparton based RSA servicing the Goulburn Valley region). This mountain of work had the ability to inform not only the support provided by RSAs, but also SSAs, Councils, State Government, and the sector at large. **To prepare the workforce for such potentially emotionally triggering conversations, ‘Accidental Counsellor’ training was delivered to staff across the network.** A conversation guide along with a data collection process via SurveyMonkey was then designed, to ensure consistency of approach and uniform data collection across all RSA’s.



Regional Sports Assemblies (RSAs)

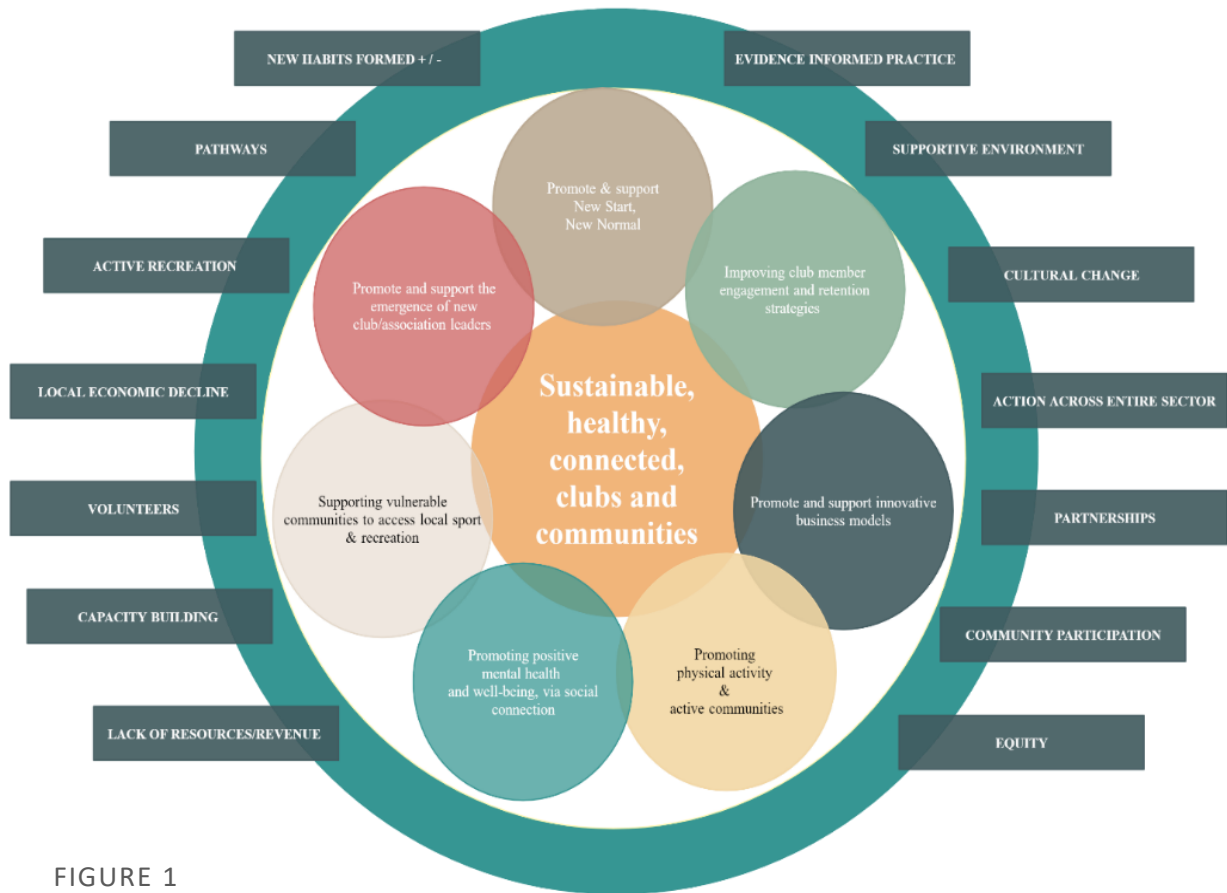


FIGURE 1
RSV COVID-19 Response Conceptual Framework

What did we hear? – Immediate Responses

Immediate concerns

Almost all clubs, associations, and leagues surveyed listed the **health concerns of their members and their communities** as topping the list of immediate concerns. There was a trend for this concern to feature less prominently as numbers of active COVID-19 cases started to reduce, however, it continued to be represented in some shape or form during all conversations. This demonstrated that for the respondents, the focus was ‘people first’ and sport second.

Most respondents listed the **uncertainty around timelines being lifted**, a portion were unsure whether they would be able to commence competition in the current season, and the flow on impact that this would have on the club, association, or league. Several also listed the **limits surrounding crowd numbers**, which due to financial impacts (lack of gate sales, canteen sales, etc. to support game-day operational costs) this would be a defining factor as to whether a 2020 season would commence.

However, as timelines from the State Government were announced, this concern shifted from uncertainty surrounding season dates to **concern regarding fulfilling the requirements to return to play/training.**

As the President of one club put it:

“The major concern for the club is trying to adapt and update our policies and procedures dependant on the current guideline and procedures. The Club do not want to spend a significant amount of time developing new club protocols and procedures if they are going to change/alter based on any developing restrictions/guidelines.”

Many of the respondents mentioned that they felt fortunate that **the cases of COVID-19 in Australia were comparatively low** compared with other parts of the world, and that **they did not want to jeopardise this.**

As one club President noted:

“We as a community are feeling so grateful. We only have had one person with COVID 19 and compared to the rest of the world we are feeling so fortunate. We are happy to not play or train for the remainder of 2020 and to stay safe and healthy. If you look at the rest of the world, training and playing our sport is the least of our concerns. We are so lucky to live where we live.”

While many were looking forward to resuming activity, it is important to note that this perspective was not shared by all. For example, some expressed feeling pressure to return to sport and as one respondent mentioned:

“There is pressure on volunteers - especially the COVID-19 safety officer/s... It seems like State Sporting Associations are putting protocols in place.... But then there is the cost of sanitiser/gloves/cleaning etc. There is also some nervousness around coverage of insurance.... I’m not comfortable with only one person being COVID Safe Officer.”

This was a sentiment many echoed – the feeling that a great deal of **responsibility was being put onto volunteers** and that as a club, they did not have the capacity to shoulder such a burden. This strongly correlates with the first concern listed – the health and wellbeing concerns of their members and their communities. One club President describes it by saying:” *We’re feeling pressure to restart and feeling nervous about the repercussions, if something went wrong. It feels like [our SSA] went too early.”*

Many respondents also listed the flow-on **financial impacts** as an immediate concern. There were concerns about losing sponsors, however, only a small number of clubs mentioned that this had already occurred. Many respondents mentioned that membership was impacted, and that should a 2020 season not occur, it would put significant strain on the club's finances. A number of clubs mentioned their inability to fundraise and hold events, and that this would either have, or has already had, a major impact on the club's bottom line. A lack of match day crowds, gate takings, canteen sales and the overall impacts of a shortened season also contributed to this. One respondent accurately sums up these concerns:

"We're worried about our sponsors and whether or not we'll lose any because of how businesses are struggling. If we lose any, it'll impact our club finances and we'll have to try and cover that loss which may lead to an increase memberships fees, but we still have to be mindful that people may not be able to afford it. We may have to reduce the number of events or the amount that we offer at each event. We're also really not sure about what's going to happen. And we just don't know what it will look like so we need to know how we can manage an event safely under the government guidelines. We don't want there to be a second wave."

Finally, a majority of clubs, associations and leagues mentioned the fact that they were focusing on simply still existing on the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic and that they were acutely aware that they existed to serve their local communities. One Gippsland based club referred to the **confounding factors of the recent bushfires** stating:

"After the bushfires in East Gippsland, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I am most concerned about our members and their wellbeing. It has certainly been a tough year to date for our local communities and we want to get people back socialising and being physically active again. Of course we want to adhere to all the rules, and being an indoor centre, we need to make sure that we provide the safe environment that is required for participation to get back up and running again, when we are permitted."

Impact to date on clubs

While many of the 'Guided Conversations' focused on the concerns and anxieties which club volunteers were acutely feeling, some were able to elaborate on the impact that COVID-19 restrictions had had on their club's to date, and the actions they were taking to remedy this.

While most clubs were volunteer run and led, one social sport and active recreation provider identified it had closed their venue and stood down 32 staff members. Where clubs, associations or leagues did have a paid administrator, this continued to be a trend. While many of these clubs and leagues have been eligible for *Job Keeper* payments, there is concern in the sector regarding the financial impact when this payment is ceased.

Some mentioned that they were **engaging their members and supporters virtually**, and that this sustained connection was important for their member's mental health. These online engagement methods were predominantly conducted via social media, in the form of "group chats", however other tools were used, such as Zoom Communications to host virtual training sessions.

Only a small portion of respondents had used the downtime to **review policies and procedures** and 'to get their house in order'. One club President best articulated it by stating *"It's been difficult to plan for anything, because you need to be ready at a moment's notice, so we've just been sitting and waiting to hear about what is next."* The feeling that clubs were in a '**holding pattern**' was a common occurrence.

However, this was not true of all clubs. One club Secretary was able to demonstrate a plethora of **proactive activities** the club had undertaken during the shutdown period:

"The club is keeping engaged through virtual means and the players are partaking in "informal" training methods to keep physically active. The senior netballers and footballers have private group chats where they have been touching base with each other. The committee is partaking in regular 'Zoom' meetings and are preparing for the 2021 season. The club has utilised this time to focus on the administrative side of the club. The club has purchased the "TIDY-HQ" program and are busy setting that up for the next season. ...The club is also continuing their usual fundraiser "Pie Drive" doing so by completing contactless drop offs."

What about the 'current restrictions'?

By far the most common comment from any conversation which took place after the 20th of May highlighted the current restrictions and the return to play guidelines.

Many respondents expressed concern regarding their **capacity to fulfill the requirements** in their sport's 'Return To Play' guidelines, while some had full confidence in their sports ability to provide a safe environment within the guidelines provided.

Conversely, several respondents surveyed mentioned that despite the restrictions being eased, they would not be returning:

“Half of clubs in the league have said they aren't going back to training with the current restrictions of 10 people. The league has conducted a survey of their clubs and asked if they would be keen to hold a half season, if given the chance. When the survey was initially held, most clubs said “yes” to a half season - now most have changed their mind and said “no”, it wouldn't be worth it. The league is currently in contact with the state government, asking to get an insight into future easing of restrictions guidelines. Furthermore, restrictions would need to allow for a maximum of 500 people in an outdoor area for the season to go ahead.”

At the time of writing, at least half a dozen Football & Netball Leagues **had cancelled their 2020 season** due to limits on crowd numbers and inability to provide player payments, while several Leagues were actively considering the option. Whilst the income derived from crowds was a key factor for cancelling competitions, some respondents mentioned that playing without a crowd in itself would be the defining factor and that *“without the community, it wouldn't be the same.”*

RSAs were endeavouring to contact all clubs associated with a league which has decided to forgo the 2020 season, to determine whether what support, if any, could be provided during the off season.

Support required from the sector

By far the most referenced aspect of support required was assistance with **sourcing grants to ensure they can stay afloat**. In fact, when asked an open question ‘was there anything else you would like to add?’ assistance with grants was the number one response.

Clubs, associations, and leagues, also identified a **forum for sharing best practice** for retention strategies, noting that they were expecting a decrease in both membership and volunteers because of COVID-19. As one President put it:

“The biggest concern is that some of the older volunteers may not want to return to the sport as they have enjoyed their time off. The club has heard from several older volunteers that they are enjoying their time at home. The club is also finding it more difficult to keep those people engaged and in contact with the club.”

Finally, it cannot be understated the frustration which volunteers felt regarding the expectations placed upon them. As one club put it:

“We need everyone to recognise the importance of community clubs and sport. However, we also need to recognise that the majority of clubs are not financially sustainable in the longer term based on past practices and finances. We really need to go back to what community sport and clubs are all about – providing a safe and enjoyable place to come and stay and play and/or watch sport for all ages and all backgrounds. This should be a concern for the sector.”

This highlights a key opportunity for Regional Sports Assemblies to support clubs, associations and leagues to build **‘new’ competition formats, governance structures and social sport models** which highlight the reason for community sport existing – to serve the needs of the community.

Phase 2: Future Focused

On May 24th, the Premier of Victoria released a statement and associated press conference with a clear message.

“The whole way through this pandemic, our advice to Victorians has remained the same: “stay at home”. Now, as we begin to settle into a new normal, our message is “stay safe.”

This message was accompanied by lower numbers of COVID-19 cases, next to no community transmissions and high rates of testing. It coincided with the relaxation of restrictions in several areas related to recreation, including outdoor playgrounds and swimming pools. Relaxation of restrictions for organised sport were also flagged at this point, with non-contact training to resume on June 1st. SSAs began modifying their ‘Return to Play’ guidelines, while LGAs were thrust into compiling and /or reviewing COVID-19 safety plans. Sport and Recreation Victoria (SRV) were reviewing Short Term Survival Grants, while many winter sports had already made the difficult choice of cancelling their 2020 season entirely.

In a holding pattern

Many Clubs mentioned they felt as though they were in the middle of a holding pattern and were unsure of whether they would be able to have a 2020 season. As one respondent put it *“we are concerned that our 2020 season will be delayed or cancelled. With the Victorian case numbers rising, we don’t see how we can move towards a re-opening of sport.”*

The word ‘uncertain’ was prominent in conversations during this time and extended beyond the conversation’s focus (community sport) with many respondents lamenting on the situation in Victoria more broadly. As one respondent articulated *“**We are uncertain of the future.** We are uncertain if tournaments can go ahead. We are uncertain if we will retain our members. We are uncertain if we will retain sponsors. There is so much we just don’t know.”*

There was also uncertainty regarding the length of seasons, with some codes commenting that while there was a possibility of competitions extending into December, this would then have an adverse impact on other codes or indeed 2021 seasons.

Access to facilities and COVID-19 Safety Officers

The second phase of data collection saw numerous clubs refer to a lack of access to facilities. Many clubs were reliant on school facilities or other community groups, and a number of these organisations were choosing to not open their doors, at this point in time. *“**We have nowhere to train.** We had been using a school gym, but for the short term we have locked out of this facility. Equipment we have is for indoor use. We have limited availability of outdoor skate wheels, as these are costly to buy.”*

The requirement of a COVID Safety Officer was also a concern for many regional clubs, many of whom are currently struggling to engage and retain volunteers. As one respondent put it *“the club have not had anyone volunteer to become a COVID Compliance Officer and members are waning in interest.”*

This was a common occurrence and conversations suggested that motivation amongst volunteers had waned over time, with responsibility landing with a handful of individuals. Compounding pressures in both the club environment and throughout other areas of life were now beginning to have an adverse impact on those individuals who were interviewed.

Physical and mental well-being is paramount

By and large, the mental wellbeing of members was still paramount to any decisions being made by a regional club. Some reported that their members had stated they would not return until a vaccine had been discovered, or that Australia had totally eradicated the virus. Countless clubs reported that **they did not feel they could adequately keep their members safe**, if they decided to resume activity, despite restrictions being contained to metropolitan Melbourne.

Insights from the industry

After the release of RSV's interim report, a number of SSAs reported that they were also in contact with their clubs and that RSV's findings were consistent with their own investigations. SSAs reported that much of their energy was focused on developing, adapting, and communicating 'Return to Play' guidelines and encouraging clubs to apply for the 'Community Sport Sector COVID-19 Short Term Survival Package' funding.

The CEO of one SSA **expressed the frustration clubs were feeling regarding additional restrictions.**

"The reality is that... there is no flexibility for us to apply a lower standard to clubs, just because they feel the conditions are onerous for their particular circumstance."

The same CEO also **expressed frustration with the lack of funding applications from clubs** within their sport. It is important to note here that a number of clubs simply don't know what financial impact COVID-19 will have on their budgets, as Victoria is still feeling the impacts of restrictions. Almost, if not half, the clubs are in between seasons and may not feel the financial impacts for several months to come. Therefore, it is critical that we do not confuse a lack of funding grant applications with a lack of real need.

LGA's have also had similar conversations with clubs within their catchment and were concentrating on a mix of short-term and long-term support. Strategies included providing fee relief to clubs, managing the opening and closing of facilities, and activating their outdoor community spaces. A number of regional councils took this opportunity to focus on their active recreation strategies, and others brought forward capital works projects, such as cycling and walking tracks.

Summary

Most RSA staff within the network have expressed how important it is to stay connected with their local sporting groups during such a difficult, dynamic, and emotional time. Whilst this project was initially designed to inform the work of the RSAs and provide insights for the wider sport sector, the act of reaching out and displaying empathy has enabled RSA staff to **strengthen the relationship** they have with local sporting groups, which has been an added benefit of the project thus far.

Broadly speaking, **respondents were looking forward to resuming activity, but, were feeling overwhelmed** trying to understand the additional requirements placed on them.

Acknowledging the primary concern for these regional sporting leagues, associations and clubs was the health of their members, a majority stated that **a lack of volunteers** meant that fulfilling their sports 'Return to Play' guidelines would be extremely difficult.

Finally, most clubs identified **the financial impacts of COVID-19 restrictions as a further factor of immediate and ongoing concern**, indicating that support in applying for grants was an immediate need, however, this did not always translate into applications for funding grants. Again, a lack of applications should not be confused with a lack of real need and this requires further investigation from SRV.

Recommendations – What to do next

RSV recommends that the State Government consider supporting the development and delivery of the following community-first initiatives

1. Support RSV in the continual monitoring of club health through follow-up “Guided Conversations” in 6- and 12-month intervals. Results obtained can be used to compare and provide a unique before, during, and after pandemic data set, that will document the social impact of a major pandemic through the lens of community sport.
2. Significant investment in mental health initiatives – enabling RSAs to access government funding to support community led mental health initiatives, which include a sport and/or active recreation component.
3. Significant investment into innovative active recreation, specifically targeting young people who will have had a ‘gap’ in their sports participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and where re-engagement is critical to lifelong health outcomes.
4. Investigate support mechanisms and time saving measures for community sport volunteers, enabling them to focus on the core business of providing welcoming, inclusive, and healthy sporting environments for regional Victorians, rather than heavy compliance and administrative tasks.
5. Develop COVID Safety Officer training for volunteers.

RSV is uniquely positioned to enable the Victorian Government and supporting bodies to design and deliver the above recommendations, to ensure that community sport and active recreation can continue to thrive in regional Victoria.

Appendix

Sports included (in order of number of conversations)

Australian Rules Football	Rowing
Cricket	Mountain Biking
Bowls (indoor and lawn)	Squash
Soccer	Walking / bush walking
Tennis	Flying Disc
Golf	Fire Brigade competitions
Netball	BMX
Hockey	Boxing
Horse Riding	Rugby League
Table Tennis	Canoeing
Baseball	Cycling
Basketball	Dancing
Gymnastic	Fishing
Shooting	Martial Arts
Running	Motor Sports
Volleyball	Orienteering
Athletics	Swimming
Calisthenic	Rugby Union
Yachting	Roller sports
Badminton	Triathlon / Biathlon
Croquet	