




Speech By
Peter Russo
MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

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QUEENSLAND ACADEMY OF SPORT BILL

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (7.36 pm): I rise to speak to the Queensland Academy of Sport Bill 2025. As a proud Queenslander and someone deeply committed to the future of sport in this state, I want to make it clear from the outset that I support the objectives of this bill. I believe in the value of high-performance sport, in the potential of our athletes and in the role a world-class academy can play in realising that potential. The State Development, Infrastructure and Works Committee in its report No. 6 made two key recommendations: the first being that the bill be passed; and the second being that the bill be amended to require that board members collectively have qualifications, skills or competencies in both Olympic and Paralympic sport.

The committee's work included a public hearing, featuring respected voices such as Kieren Perkins OAM; Glynis Nunn OAM, OLY; Sporting Wheelies; and Queenslanders with Disability Network; as well as the receipt of 10 written submissions from the community. As Kieren Perkins OAM said—

Being really clear on the breadth of skills required across the board, that board needs to have governance, it needs to have risk management, it needs to have financial services, it needs to have legal and it needs to understand how to work with government ... but also have high-performance sporting understanding ...

That is the standard we should be setting for the board.

The Queensland opposition supports the intent to transform the Queensland Academy of Sport into a statutory body. I understand the rationale. I understand the importance of ensuring the academy operates with greater agility, efficiency and flexibility, particularly as we prepare for one of the most significant events in our state's history—the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

I acknowledge the hard work of those involved in bringing this bill to the parliament and appreciate the government's commitment to strengthening Queensland's sporting future. Let me be clear: support for the bill's intent is not the same as support for the bill in its current form. As someone who has listened closely to athletes, coaches, parents, experts and advocates, I must voice some serious concerns—concerns that are echoed by stakeholders right across Queensland. Let me address these key concerns in turn.

The first is transparency and accountability. At the heart of the bill lies a troubling lack of transparency. As drafted, the bill grants the minister extraordinary powers, specifically the power to personally appoint all board members, with no requirements that these individuals have any experience in sports governance, athlete welfare or high-performance sport.

The proposed board will enjoy sweeping autonomy, setting its own agenda, managing its own finances and operating with limited public reporting or scrutiny. While the minister retains a power of direction, that alone does not provide the level of independent oversight the public expects, especially when it comes to spending public money and safeguarding athlete wellbeing. If this bill is to inspire trust, then it must include clear provisions for transparency, public reporting and independent accountability.

Let me be blunt: high-performance sport is not always safe. The system has at times failed athletes, particularly children. We have heard harrowing stories of abuse, neglect and institutional silence. We must accept the truth: these are not just stories of the past. They remain present risks, especially in systems that lack strong oversight and safeguards.

At the public hearings we heard from researchers and child protection advocates who raised the alarm. This bill as currently written does not meet the standards set out in the Child Safe Organisations Act 2024. That is not just a technical oversight; it is a real risk. If we are serious about protecting the children who may one day represent Queensland and Australia on the world stage—children who might be in kindergarten today—we must legislate for that protection now. The bill must include: enforceable child safety standards; independent complaints mechanisms; mandatory training and reporting obligations; and clear lines of oversight and accountability. This is not optional. It is our duty to every child and every parent who places their trust in our sport system.

Another critical gap in the bill is the lack of enforceable provisions to promote equity and inclusion, particularly for women in sport and athletes with disability. Let's speak plainly. Women's sport in Australia receives just 10 per cent of the funding allocated to men's sport. That is despite record participation, record viewership and world-class success. Former Olympian Glynis Nunn was asked—

When supporting women in the regions and women throughout Queensland, would you like to see something baked in that would give them some greater protections?

She replied—

Absolutely. When we run programs for girls—with netball, for example, and other sports—we try to put forward the basis that, as a female, we are challenged with more pressures, medical issues and so forth that we have to deal with, and we try to face those and talk to the girls about those.

I could not agree more. This is our opportunity to embed gender equity into the DNA of Queensland's sporting future. That means: mandated gender balance on the board; dedicated funding streams for women's high-performance and pathway programs; and public reporting on gender equity outcomes.

Now let's talk about para-sport. In Paris, our Paralympians outperformed their able-bodied peers three to one on the medal tally, yet they receive just 15 per cent of national high-performance funding and less than 10 per cent for pathway programs. These are not just statistics; they represent real structural barriers and a stark failure to invest in extraordinary talent. As Dane Cross, CEO of Sporting Wheelies, said, 'Representation at the table matters.' He is right. That is why I support a designated board seat for someone with lived experience in para-sport or disability inclusion—not as a token gesture, but as a requirement of good governance.

It is also discouraging to see that the bill fails to address the specific needs of regional athletes. While there are broad references to Queensland athletes, there is not a single mention of those in regional areas or the unique challenges they face. Queensland, being the nation's second-largest state—which is larger than many countries—has vast regions where athletes encounter significant barriers to access, participation and funding which are simply not experienced by their metropolitan counterparts. These challenges must be recognised and addressed. Therefore, I believe this bill should include specific provisions that acknowledge and support our regional athletes.

This bill sets the framework for how the academy will operate for decades to come. It will shape the lives, careers and futures of thousands of athletes from every corner of Queensland. While I support its intent, I cannot support its current structure. Let us take this moment to get it right—to strengthen transparency, protect children and legislate for equity and inclusion. Let us build a Queensland Academy of Sport that reflects the values of modern sport: fairness, safety, excellence and opportunity for all.

During consideration in detail the following amendments will be moved by the opposition: requiring the board to establish a child and athlete's safety committee to ensure athletes, particularly child athletes, are protected from abuse and harm; requiring the safety committee to develop a child-friendly complaints mechanism and a charter of athletes' rights; requiring that at least one position on the board be filled by a person with lived experience of disability; adding an extra function of the board, requiring it to establish partnerships with disability sports organisations to maximise participation, performance and strategic investment in para-sports; and requiring the board include in its annual report the amount of funding it directs each year to women's sports and para-sports and to outline the activities it has undertaken to support women's sports, para-sports and regional athletes and events.