



the goodfight?

By
Paula
Gleeson

Bad blood, old enemies, egos, mis-management and infighting ... Taekwondo takes the gold as Australia's most shambolic Olympic sport – and caught in the middle of this debacle is one of Australia's most "decorated" Olympians ...

FOR MOST OF US, Lauren Burns' courageous gold medal at the Sydney Olympics was a spectacular introduction to the sport of taekwondo, encouraging thousands of youngsters to sign up to play. It was the ideal way to spark a sporting boom – but by 2007 the sport was on its back: taekwondo's governing body, Taekwondo Australia (TA), had been stripped of all funding by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and lost its membership with the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) and the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF). Overnight, it looked like Australian taekwondo wouldn't have a single player at the Beijing Olympics.

Taekwondo Australia's former CEO, Kate Eggar, knows what went wrong: "As a national sporting organisation, we were lacking in many things, mostly to do with the membership and voting structure, but also how the high performance program was being run."

Lydia Zakkas, a club coach, saw the debacle first-hand. "The crunch came when one of my athletes came to me and said they'd been terminated off the funding program without a reason. I wrote to the Sports Commission [the government department responsible for taxpayer funding] and said, 'Hang on, you're giving these guys a million dollars to run a program, and you've got my athletes signing contracts that say if they don't like you, you're out, even though you're performing? Oh, and by the way, the medals that you are winning overseas? We're going to use them to prove how well we're doing, but you are off the team ...' I said to the ASC, 'Keep your money, you know why? Because your money's not helping us.' There were zero checks and balances ... So we were writing, writing, and the ASC finally did something about it."

Fiona de Jong, Director of Sport at the Australian Olympic Committee, was watching. "We were advised that a number of the key facilities and services were being compromised; there was a risk the athletes for Beijing weren't being properly prepared."

So Taekwondo Australia's funding was pulled and with it its membership with the AOC and the World Taekwondo Federation. The WTF handed the reins of the sport over to the AOC – but the AOC was not in the business of running a sport in Australia, so it was agreed that the Oceania Taekwondo Union (OTU), the regional governing body, would be granted provisional membership by the WTF in order to hold selection events for the Olympics and other international tournaments. For a while there, it actually looked as if taekwondo was in good hands until the AOC could make a decision about TA's future, but that decision would have to wait until after the Beijing Olympics.

Then things went pear-shaped.

The Oceania Taekwondo Union is effectively ruled by two Australians, Phil Coles and John Kotsifas. Coles' name is associated with one of the biggest scandals in recent Australian Olympic history (see breakout); he's been an IOC member since 1982, is a life member of the Australian Olympic Committee – and was now president of the Oceania TU. Just months after the OTU was given provisional membership as our national federation in 2007, he was elected vice-president of the World Taekwondo Federation. Virtually ostracised from Australian sport since those scandals in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics, taekwondo looked to be his ticket back into the powerful world sporting circles that had once been his domain – before his very public humiliation.

Kotsifas, a Melbourne lawyer, had been involved with the sport in Australia – including the running of the TA high performance program before it lost its funding – and was now secretary-general of the Oceania body.

The OTU's solution was to set up an interim association by another name; they called it Sports Taekwondo Australia (STA). Its inaugural president was Coles, and its secretary-general was Kotsifas. The OTU claimed that the establishment of STA was for legal and practical reasons; they

stated in their announcement to the taekwondo community that: "It [STA] is merely a selection event-organising committee of the OTU. It does not seek to replace Taekwondo Australia."

In good faith, the taekwondo community supported this interim organisation until the AOC could make a decision about TA. Sports Taekwondo Australia confirmed on their website: "The primary role for STA will be to conduct selection events until such time as the AOC has resolved the issue of recognition for the sport of taekwondo in Australia."

Meanwhile, Taekwondo Australia set about



Taekwondo has taken plenty of kicks since Lauren Burns' gold at the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

a restructure. It reframed its constitution and made itself a company limited by guarantee. Suddenly, there was the much called-for transparency in the sport and its operations. Now TA just had to prove themselves to the AOC to have their membership reinstated, and with that, its membership with the WTF and funding from the ASC.

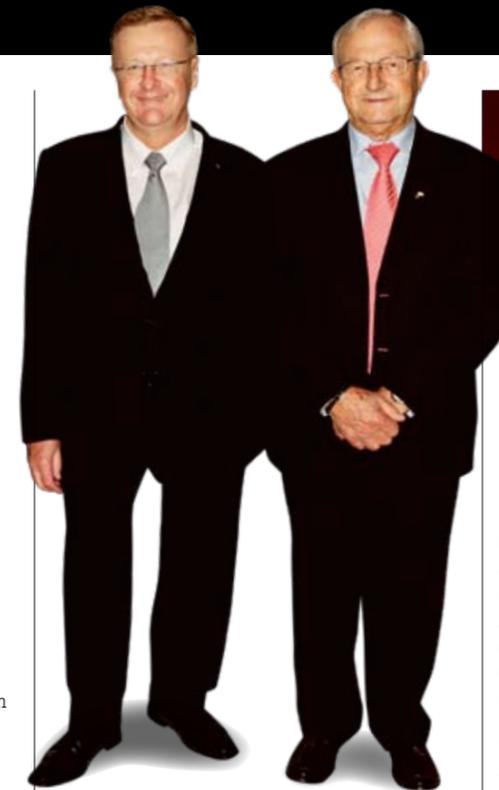
Yet when it came time for the AOC to review TA's readmittance, there was a new problem – STA now claimed that it was the best organisation to take over as the national federation of taekwondo in Australia. The AOC now had two entities competing for control of the sport.

The AOC's Fiona de Jong says about that time, "We are not in the business of evaluating who is and who isn't the entity that should run the sport. The sport should really determine that, and the ASC is one entity that also has a voice in who they recognise, so we went to an independent process."

The AOC appointed a Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) arbitrator, Justice McHugh, to look at the problem: his suggestion was mediation. So the AOC, TA and STA met and agreed to a number of resolutions; they decided they would come back together to meet again after working on those agreed suggestions. But one of them did a complete backflip on this agreement.

"STA backed away from some of the things they said they'd be interested in pursuing at the first mediation, and so we were back to ground zero. The parties couldn't agree [because] STA was not prepared to proceed in that manner," says a diplomatic De Jong.

With the mediation now broken down, it was suggested the two parties go to CAS and have their dispute resolved there. The WTF (of which Phil Coles was vice-president, remember) had also decided to step in and conduct their own mediation, but it was TA that couldn't agree at this meeting. They were unhappy that a renewed entity would have the name "Sports Taekwondo Australia" and that



Phil Coles had a falling out with his Olympic colleagues, particularly John Coates.

knowledge that the AOC is going to reinstate TA, WTF then proceeds to admit STA as a full member of the WTF."

WHY WOULD the world body select an interim entity as its full member against the advice of the Australian

Olympic Committee and the Australian government? The WTF's own Rules and Regulations state: "The National Taekwondo Associations applying for the membership of the WTF are required to present designated applications and documents to the WTF together with a letter of recognition from the pertinent National Olympic Committee (NOC), or, in its absence, its highest national sport authority." As the AOC's Fiona De Jong points out: "I believe the WTF were in breach of their own rules."

Inside Sport put this question to John Kotsifas. His response? "Or in the absence of it [recognition from the NOC] the highest governing authority ... That happens to be the OTU ... So that is the basic legal principle that the WTF have followed."

Inside Sport asked Phil Coles the same question. "STA had the AOC's blessing in the beginning, and then for no apparent reason – well, reasons I am unfamiliar with – that all changed when AOC recognised TA instead of STA."

Why did STA go from being an interim organisation to competing for the title of the national federation? John Kotsifas, from STA, tells us: "What became apparent was a groundswell amongst athletes, clubs and instructors who actually wanted STA to remain ... STA cannot emerge or ▶

COLES' LORE A SHORT HISTORY

In February this year, the NSW Institute of Sport issued a press release marking an achievement "not often seen by the international sporting community". Phil Coles AM, the Institute's chairman, would attend his 21st consecutive summer and winter Olympics when he rolled up to the 2010 Vancouver Games.

It was an odd boast to be made on behalf of a man once severely reprimanded by the International Olympic Committee for his freeloading ways – indeed it appeared as if he might be claiming some kind of world record, possibly the only person on the planet who hadn't missed a gig in 50 years!

The release included a lengthy resume: "Beginning at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games where he

competed as a canoe sprint athlete, Phil Coles began an Olympic journey that continues to this day. He competed at the 1964 Tokyo and 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games before switching to a coaching and managerial role at the 1972 Munich Olympics. In 1976 he was assistant general manager of the Australian Olympic team, and in 1980 he was bestowed the honour of leading the Moscow Olympic team as the chef de mission. Phil Coles became an IOC member in 1982 and since that time has attended every summer and winter



Olympic Games, a remarkable achievement."

The NSW Institute of Sport would apparently have us admire him for his uninterrupted record of taking expenses-paid trips to the greatest sporting shows on Earth. Sounds tough, wot? But what *didn't* appear in the press release was any recalling of events in 1998-99, a year out from the Sydney Olympics, when Coles was dumped from all roles in their organisation. Now, why was that again?

That would have something to do with the Salt Lake City corruption scandal of 1998, and the revelations that Coles had availed himself of the generous "hospitality" of his hosts on numerous ski trips to sample the Salt Lake powder. And oh, yes, there was the acceptance of the \$10,000 necklace gifted to his partner by the Athens bid

team. And – the clincher – the matter of the secret dossier put together by Coles on his IOC colleagues – featuring extensive notes on their likes and dislikes, complete with candid and often unflattering character assessments – that found its way into the possession of the Salt Lake bidders.

It was an international scandal – Coles was found guilty by the IOC of "serious negligence" and was pressured into distancing himself from his "home" Olympics by resigning all positions. The former Torch Relay chairman even had his leg running along the sands of Bondi Beach taken off him, for fear of the bad PR it would generate. Freeloading Phil was in disgrace – but he most certainly did NOT go quietly: he had to be prised out of his positions, leading to a massive falling out between Coles and his other Australian Olympic colleagues, particularly AOC president John Coates.

PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

survive or be established unless there are members. The fact that we do have members suggests that we have an element of athletes, instructors and clubs out there that does support what STA does."

How many members, clubs and states is he talking about? Kotsifas does not know the answer off the top of his head – and has since declined *Inside Sport's* requests for these figures. In fact, it's unclear how STA engaged with the taekwondo community to suggest itself as a rival national body. It's also curious – and devastating for the sport – that the athletes competing for benchmark events are currently at an all-time low now that STA is in charge of these events. Only 20 athletes (compared to an average of 150-200 athletes from other selection events) competed for the World Cup team in June of this year; STA even had to cancel its NSW Open in July due to insufficient numbers, whereas TA, a month later, had its most successful NSW Open in the last seven years with 806 competitors. Clearly, the taekwondo fraternity at large rejects STA.

Why then did the world body support STA and not TA? For the answer to this question, there was only one person to ask: Phil Coles, WTF vice-president, Oceania

a piece of text that had appeared on TA's website until it was removed: "[Extract] It is the taxpayer that funds through grants the NSO for each sport that is recognised. The Australian taxpayer does not accept directions from a single person in Korea when determining how government funds are to be spent. This is a decision for the Australian authorities and them alone. Whilst President Choue [WTF] may wish to continue to support a position to assist his ally, Mr Coles, that is of no relevance to the Australian bodies that will ultimately determine this dispute."

These words are enough to topple an entire organisation and consign a sport to the status of basketcase in Australia?

Was it true that Coles had made a stand at a WTF council meeting and threatened to resign as vice-president if anyone voted for recognition of Taekwondo Australia?

"Once upon a time I threatened to resign," Coles confirmed.

Does TA stand any chance of recognition with the WTF? "Not to my knowledge," said Coles. "WTF had no hesitation

preferred not to be named) about what they thought of STA's motto, "Athletes First". Response: "Athletes first to pay for the STA's airfares and hotel and everything else they like to do when they are overseas."

Another athlete said they were happy that STA had emerged: "As frustrating as it is to be at a stalemate, it is refreshing to be working with an organisation like TA, now that the bad people from STA have gone. It is refreshing to be working with coaches who want the best for you, can provide proper training programs and can show the way and help you get there."

Olympian Ryan Carneli actually sits on the athletes' commission for STA. Was he



Phil Coles carried the Torch for a leg in Sydney, but was forced to resign other positions after his "serious negligence".

"If one or two individuals disappeared, I'm sure it could all be resolved." – Phil Coles.

president, and inaugural STA president ...

Many accusations have been circulating about Coles' role in supporting STA's membership with the WTF and his sudden interest in all things taekwondo. Given his colourful past, it was not hard to make assumptions about him before talking to him, yet this reporter found him a passionate man who professed to care very deeply for the sport and its athletes, and who gives the impression that he genuinely feels he has made the right decision.

IS: "Why did STA get such support in its infancy from the world governing body?"

Coles: "I support STA ... because of the exchange of correspondence and the accusations and the defamation that has been carried out, obviously the athletes of TA I don't have a problem with, and I don't have a problem with some of the officials of TA. If one or two individuals [from TA] disappeared, I'm sure it could all be resolved."

It was surprising to hear that Coles' sole reason for choosing STA was because he had issues with one or two individuals on the TA board. IS: "Can the WTF properly judge an entire organisation based on the behaviour of a few individuals?"

Coles: "I think you are right there. I think the attacks are coming from top officials."

Inside Sport was curious about these personal attacks. Coles responded by citing

in recommending STA as their official body because of their behaviour."

IF STA was an exemplary sporting body and Taekwondo Australia was still in shambles, they might have a case. It is *not* the case.

Sports Taekwondo Australia is (wrongly) suggesting to athletes that theirs is the only pathway to representing Australia at the London Olympic Games in 2012. In fact, the athletes at the moment have *no* pathway to the Olympics. If they want to go to international benchmark events, they can only do so through the sanctioning of STA, but there is no funding; not only would they have to fund themselves, but also the STA support staff. Presently, if an athlete wins at a selection tournament, they are paying anywhere between \$4000 and \$6000 for the privilege. As STA has not provided any financial records since they became incorporated in 2008, it is unclear where the entry fee and membership money is going and if any of that money is finding its way back to the athletes. *Inside Sport's* request to see the financial records of STA was not answered. *Inside Sport* asked one elite athlete (who

concerned that there might not be an Australian team in London 2012?

"No, I'm not concerned. There'll be a team for the 2012 Olympics. As STA is now the WTF-recognised member, STA has the right to nominate athletes to the AOC and it is up to the AOC to approve the athletes. I don't believe they will reject the athletes after STA's Olympic selection process, as STA is the **ONLY** recognised national body of the OTU and WTF."

John Kotsifas agrees there's no concern for the 2012 Olympics: "Athletes will be going to the Olympics. *Of course* they will be. The Olympic selection process from STA's point of view is starting next month ... They will attend the world qualification event, which has nothing to ▶

do with the AOC. They will attend the regional event, which has nothing to do with the AOC, and at the end of the day, STA will select two male and two female athletes and they will be presented to the AOC in a normal way, like any other sport. It is then a matter for the AOC. I would be surprised if the AOC don't then select them."

Yet Phil Coles disagrees: "Unless this thing can be mended, there will be no athletes going to the Olympic Games."

So what does the AOC say? Fiona De Jong: "By what authority are they going to have athletes in London? It is the National Olympic Committee that has the authority to determine the Australian Olympic

or bullying people into competing at a Olympic Games."

SO **HERE'S** the debacle in a nutshell. The AOC and the ASC want to recognise TA as taekwondo's national federation, but TA needs membership with the world governing body for that to happen. The world body has recognised STA, without the recognition of the AOC or ASC. So there is no pathway to the Olympic Games and no funding in the sport.

The AOC want TA and STA to go to CAS; they have agreed to accept whatever entity is recognised. Yet the world body, and in turn STA, don't see the need and refuse to do so; in their mind, the issue of our national federation is resolved, and it's STA.

The issue STA and the world body now have is with the AOC; curiously, they have requested that they go with the AOC to CAS to resolve this! "We are having discussions with the AOC," says John Kotsifas. "At the end of the day, it matters not if we have AOC membership at this time. We want it, we are entitled to it under the AOC rules, we are entitled to it under the IF rules and the IOC rules ...

charter? Fiona de Jong explains: "We can't ignore an independent advisory opinion; we can't ignore the opinions of the ASC ... We need to be satisfied that there is one national federation that is governing the sport in Australia. Where we are sitting, there are two claiming to be operating the sport in Australia ... We don't have a conflict with STA. They are not a member: they are someone who has applied to have membership that we have not agreed to."

Phil Coles gives the world body's perspective: "No international body would ever go to CAS for them to resolve a decision about which governing body should be chosen. The AOC has disagreed with WTF's decision in supporting STA ..." Coles also says that as John Coates is the vice-president of CAS, and is involved in the background, there is a question about the ability of CAS to be independent in such a dispute.

SO **IS THIS** what it all comes down to? Phil Coles throwing his weight around to settle some old scores? Another chapter in his rivalry with John Coates after their famous falling out? Is the demise of taekwondo all Phil Coles' doing?

Coles: "Oh, I have been accused of that, yeah. But I took no part in it at all. I was in at the ground floor when STA was formed so it could look after the athletes, but when that was done, I stepped aside and I can't have any part of STA."

Yet it begs the question: without Phil Coles' support, would STA and its office-

The biggest losers in taekwondo's power struggle are the athletes.



So this is what it all comes down to? Phil Coles throwing his weight around to settle old scores?

If the AOC don't want to comply with that for whatever reason, it is a matter for them. All that does is deny Australian athletes funding.

"We don't need the AOC to operate internationally, we need the affiliation with the WTF, which we have and will always have ... The IOC charter says the AOC must introduce – MUST INTRODUCE – as its member the member of the international federation, and the AOC has not done that ...

"You know, the AOC doesn't really care. Obviously it would be concerned if we weren't at the Olympics, but at the end of the day, it wouldn't make much difference [to them] because we are a large sporting nation with many successful sports. We are talking about four athletes ... The AOC's position is not justifiable: under their rules, they are bound to admit STA as their member, yet they've not done that."

Has the AOC failed to follow their own

holders, who were all original members of the failed high performance program in TA's previous incarnation, have any standing in Australia today?

The AOC's comment: "The OTU were never given authority to set up another national federation in Australia. The WTF gave the authority for the OTU to enter Australian athletes into international events, which is an important distinction. Sports Taekwondo Australia has taken that inch and run ten kilometres with it."

Of course, the real losers in all of this are the athletes. With both sides intransigent, no athletes will receive any funding – and certainly won't be heading to London in 2012. As Phil Coles himself says: "Taekwondo has been given a death sentence in Australia." No doubt. But who is the executioner? n

Just as this edition went to press, both parties were summoned to a meeting in Beijing by the IOC to resolve the problem. Sources held little hope this would happen.

team members. I am personally responsible for overseeing the entry of every athlete into an Australian team ... I can only accept athletes who are members of the national federation ... They are seeking to nominate athletes for selection who are not eligible to be nominated. Those athletes won't be allowed to go."

Could it be any clearer? Yet STA is already publishing their Olympic point system events, misleading athletes into thinking they must compete at these events to be eligible. De Jong: "That is exactly my concern with all of this ... We can't help those athletes under the arrangement that STA is proposing ... I don't think it sets a good precedent for sports in Australia to be backdoor-entering