

# Games put women in sponsorship spotlight

GLENDA KOPORAAL



The headquarters of construction group Buildcorp, in the inner Sydney suburb of Camperdown, today will host a discussion on the sponsorship potential of women's rugby.

Having sponsored university level rugby for almost 25 years and more recently expanding to women's university rugby, Buildcorp co-founder Josephine Sukkar, who was made president of Australian Women's Rugby last August, is keen to encourage more corporate support for the women's game.

Sukkar argues that corporations should think more rationally about sponsoring women's sport as she believes they can often get far more value out of their sponsorship dollar than with men's sport.

Once almost unheard of, women's seven-a-side rugby is now in the spotlight given the approach of the Olympics in Rio that begin on August 5, when sevens rugby for men and women will be played for the first time at the Games.

Sports sponsorship always sounds glamorous, but these days corporations are much more demanding of what they want for their sponsorship dollar. The success of the sponsorship is linked to the success of the athlete or the team.

More than ever, in the new era of social media, sponsors face the perpetual risk of one of their athletes doing something that could damage their brand.

In another recent development, accounting firm

KPMG this week announced its decision to resign from its long-standing role as auditor of world soccer body FIFA, a role it has had for 16 years.

The global sporting body has fallen into disrepute with scandals over payments made to officials and, as auditor, KPMG was even more closely tied with its reputation.

On the other hand, sportswear company Nike has decided to stand by glamour tennis star Maria Sharapova while many others deserted her after the news that she had taken a performance-enhancing drug that had just been put on the banned list.

The focus on the business side of the Olympics is set to step up this weekend with the annual Prime Minister's Olympic dinner at the Melbourne Convention Centre on Saturday with hopes that it will raise as much as \$3 million to help fund Australia's team of more than 450 athletes headed to Rio.

Last week Toyota re-signed as a sponsor of the Australian Olympic Committee for Rio and the 2018 winter Games, continuing an association with Australian Olympics that goes back 28 years.

With the 2020 Games in Tokyo, Toyota last year became the first car company to become a top-tier International Olympic Committee sponsor.

Telstra has pulled out as an AOC sponsor for Rio, replaced by Optus, while Seven is returning to the Olympics fold as sponsor and broadcaster for the

Rio Games. The Olympics is the one global sporting event where women's sport is highlighted as much as male sport, with the IOC insisting that women have competitions in every sport. This makes the Games much more appealing to women and family viewers compared with most

other male-only global sporting events.

Expectations are that women will bring home more than half the medals for the Australian team in Rio. In several sports, including rugby, the Australian women's team is rated higher globally than their male counterparts. (In soccer, the Matildas are a strong medal contender in Rio but the men's team has not qualified.)

Sponsoring a sport that has the Olympics — held once every four years — as its pinnacle is not easy. Few realise the importance of the generosity of Hancock Prospecting chair Gina Rinehart when she stepped in last year to become a major sponsor of the Australian swimming team.

The team had lost major sponsor Energy Australia after a disappointing performance at the London Games in 2012 and controversy over the use of sleeping drug Stilnox, which had been specifically banned by AOC president John Coates.

Rinehart's sponsorship of swimming goes back almost 20 years, when her foundation gave assistance to teams in Western Australia and Queensland. She has also been supporting Volleyball Australia since 2013.

The WA mining magnate was given a richly deserved AOC Order of Merit in 2014 for her generosity in supporting swimming and volleyball. At the time she was awarded the medal, it was noted that 122 swimmers were receiving direct financial support from Rinehart through her Georgina Hope Foundation.

This year she stepped up to back her third Olympic sport, becoming the official backer of Rowing Australia and the Australian rowing team through Hancock Prospecting and her foundation. The sponsorship came at an important time for the rowers, who came home

from London without a gold medal and whose sport locally was facing financial pressures.

Sponsoring Olympic sports such as rowing, swimming and volleyball, of course, does not give companies boasting rights during the Games themselves, which are subject to their own strict advertising rules.

The IOC has direct sponsorships with its international marketing partners under what is called the TOP scheme and that have priority over the athletes during the Games along with the local sponsors of the host nation.

Olympic venues are meant to be "clean", with no advertising, and athletes are not allowed to wear the gear of their sponsors during the Games if they conflict with the official sponsors.

But for these Games, the IOC is relaxing what it calls "Rule 40", which will allow those companies that have sponsored athletes to continue their ad campaigns featuring their athletes in a limited way during the Games.

For the next few months at least, as the focus on the Olympics increases, women's sport in Australia will get some time in the sun and hopefully begins to be seen as a viable investment for more companies.