Sports Geek Nation AMA with Andrew Walton

Andrew Walton knows sport, technology and how this flows into business very well. This experience since being a founder of InteractSport, that has delivered the MyCricket digital platform for Cricket Australia transitioning into netball, rugby and football, his appetite to learn from direct interaction has allowed deep relationships of significance to develop across the UK and India, particularly in cricket.

Andrew recently transitioned into a new role as the General Manager of MPower Sports that empowers organisations to make smarter business decisions through modern business solutions involving business intelligence, data analytics, digital and data strategy.
He is still actively involved with coaching cricket being the Assistant Coach for the Australian Blind Cricket Team for Cricket Australia and an associate with Cricket Mentoring.

Connect with Andrew Walton on LinkedIn,Twitter @AndrewWaltonx and Slack @andrewwaltonx. Find out more about MPower Sport at http://mpowermsl.com/

Here's the full transcript:
Links to names will link you into Slack community, if you are not a member please sign up here.

Q. Sean Callanan: How has your involvement in coaching helped you in your sports business career?
A. Andrew Walton: In so many more ways than I ever thought possible.
Being organised, available, understanding, listening skills with ears and eyes.
Focus on planning with logic and having a good sense of timing.
The doors of connections and opportunity that it creates with the players and beyond into their circles.

A need to be across technology, not necessarily as a highly skilled user, yet a healthy and curious awareness.

It also creates a bond that really is forever with the player, family and trusted others.

Q. Liam Murphy:Hi @andrewwaltonx you've been apart of a fundamental shift in cricket's use of technology to track performances across all levels, and assist administrators with their role. What was the toughest part of implementing this change? And how did you overcome the challenge?
A. Andrew Walton: Hello @Liam Murphy and thanks for the question where I am able to draw upon a time frame from the start of the century where the internet in Australia generally was very much early stages, and in relation to sports administration, practically non-existent.

The toughest part was convincing people to believe there was a better way from where we felt the capability was moving and a vision ahead to what was going to become normal. There was never a shortage of excuses as to why things couldn't or shouldn't work.
I was blessed in being able to start this journey with my partners (David and Peter, still actively involved and together as owners with InteractSport) where we had a reasonable clarity over our roles and abilities. We shared a common philosophy of creating a system where data was entered once and it flowed where it needed to go, along with a focus on team sports with a ball and a score that had a healthy representation of juniors (future audience) and a strong connection to the community.

Change can be complicated and difficult for those who have a strong need to possess and position themselves in a comfortable environment. I now accept that is still an existing behaviour. We failed often in delivering a message that was too complicated and challenging. We didn't listen well enough.

Common obstructions early were like "I don't have a computer" or "I don't have the internet" or "we can't let clubs do that" so much of this frustratingly revolved around individual control. This wasn't helped by the inertia from governing bodies at state and national level where the interest to engage or respond in many cases did not exist.

Thankfully as we persisted in meeting people personally and presenting, from Bunbury to Penrith to Warrnambool to Northgate to Dandenong to Newcastle and to the Adelaide Hills, over several years of consistent interactions, we were able to uncover and develop some beautiful and valued relationships where cricket bound us in spirit. These people (like Ted Hussey, Carole Jones, Ashley Kaye, Craig Hambleton, Garry Davis) became champions within their community and helped to establish and then build the trust in wanting to find a better way.

By the time we then were able to properly engage with Cricket Australia, through an official tender process six years after we started the business, the foundation of reliability and usefulness that was now well established in the majority of the regional and suburban associations and clubs made it easier to progress as a partner.

Q. Jason Davis: Hi @andrewwaltonx - now that you are involved with an international company after building an Aussie one, what facets of sports tech/biz do you think are stronger in Australia, and what are we behind in compared to overseas?
A. Andrew Walton: Thanks @jase for this question. At times the sports tech industry from a local (Australian) perspective is rather contrasting in logic and confusion.
For example, we have a world leading technology in Catapult, who needed to prove themselves elsewhere before being embraced here (thankfully) and then we have so much

of our sports broadcasting following trends observed overseas ahead of being original and innovative.

For sports technology a view is that we have recognised world class strengths here in sports science, performance analysis & coaching, data capture systems and product development around equipment and wearables.

From the opposite view in that we are behind in engineering and design for the user experience, fan engagement and services as these aspects typically emerge from innovations outside the governing body sector and have difficulties in being properly recognised as progressive with well-intended passion for sport.

We are well behind in the appetite to invest funds to support these innovations. It is encouraging that within the conversation around the value of sport that Sport Australia have many of the ministers accepting and articulating that sport delivers real benefits to the community for both economy (every $1 returns up to $7) and social (improvements to physical and mental health from activity). The investment needed could be a shared contribution from existing government spend and commercial providers.

> **Jason Davis**: Agree that local sports seem less keen to adopt innovation than overseas sports

Q. Liam Bednarski: What are and were some of the challenges of implementing digital scoring within Australia for grassroots cricket?

A. Andrew Walton: Hello @Liam, thanks for the question, kindly appreciated.
Initial challenges included helping the sport to properly understand all the different formats that needed to be handled. When this project started, states were operating differently across junior formats particularly. The advice, well intended and useful of course, of those who had been scoring at a high level for a lifetime, was only representative of a very small sample size.

Technology limitations were also a challenge as when the initial development started we only had the iPad operating system to work with. Things then changed faster with regards to devices.

With the introduction of the ECB to the project, this allowed a shared vision in accepting that the best opportunity here was to engage with the future audience that had fully accepted technology.

A typical scorebook can be quite daunting for those with little or no experience.

The philosophy applied was that the scoring system needed to be able to:
1. Handle all formats and match types,
2. Expect the user having no prior experience,
3. Worked on all device types and brands,
4. Worked online and offline,
5. All essential functions performed in same screen,
6. Integrated into existing platforms for display eg: PlayCricket in UK

And as always, aligned to the overall philosophy of "data entered once, flows where it needs to go".

The audience then started to rapidly understand and expect that real time data was available and easily shared across social platforms or display in other portals/apps.

The tipping point has now arrived as in March 2018, nearly 70% of all finals matches across Australia were scored live. On a typical weekend in the UK and Ireland, thousands of matches are now being scored live.
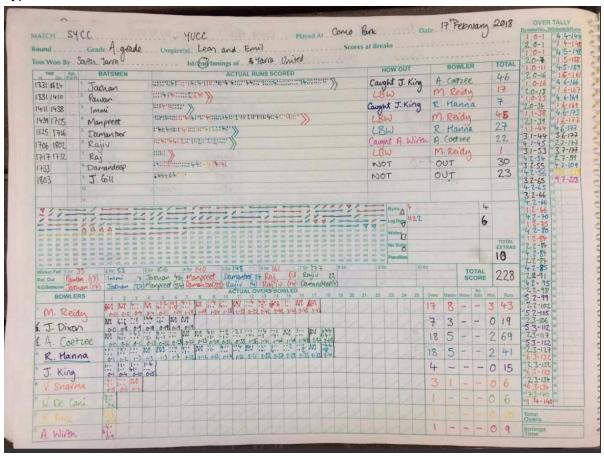
Observing the start to our summer here now, the acceptance of digital scoring appears to be viewed as normal.

Immediately ahead with the ability to deliver more advanced statistics around player performance and comparison, the capability of other sports as grassroots level will flow considerably easier.

Typical Scorecard:

Q. Sean Callanan: Another from me @andrewwaltonx what have you learned in your first few months working at MPower Sport?

A. Andrew Walton: Thanks @seancallanan for the question here, it feels in a way that I have stepped into a much larger start up situation where there is very much a future focus while wrestling with the complications of legacy.

The appetite from overseas for technology innovations in data analytics and business intelligence in sport from Australia remains incredibly strong. There is a real trust around the capacity and effort to perform. Being able to now achieve a position within the UK where 60% of EPL clubs are clients and recently adding Athletico Madrid is testament to this. The appeal in pursuing the international market is greater based upon scale of market and investment, willingness to accept change or transition.

The business overall is very well guided with clarity in vision (develop loyal communities) and strategic goals (increase venue clients to 5000 by 2020 – currently at 2400), plenty of technical experience and a cohesive happy working culture between divisions and locations (Australia, UK, Denmark and Dubai). All is in a good order to power to a higher level.

Many of the staff have worked together over many years, not particularly in sport, yet it is apparent why a good environment has been established together.

A recent article on Bullpen can be viewed >
http://www.bullpen.com.au/insights-from-mpower-msls-ceo-on-building-intelligence-and-loyalty-for-businesses/

Q. Andrew Hammond: @andrewwaltonx what's one thing you know now, that you wished you'd known when you started your sports tech journey?
A. Andrew Walton: Thanks @NetballDad for this.
There is no finish line. Just when you think the solution or method is nailed down either a new format will be created, rules will change or new technology to improve the experience is created.

I offer this in that if I had known how enjoyable this career would be, I would have moved into it much, much earlier. It has been so much fun and the opportunity to meet so many incredible people from all over the globe has been a privilege.

A very wise man told me a long time ago that "if you can truly discover your obsession and turn it into your profession, you will never work a day in your life again!"

I also wish @NetballDad that I understood properly the gains from working smarter in business hours rather than thinking that I could catch up by working harder after hours. Life balance is underestimated.

> **Andrew Hammond**: so true @andrewwaltonx

What is Sports Geek Nation?

Been forwarded this from a colleague? That's great we love seeing our members get credit for sharing their knowledge. Sports Geek Nation is a curated sports business community in Slack and Facebook which will help you learn from the very best in the world. Sports Geek Nation was founded by Sean Callanan in 2015 (as #SportsBiz Slack), it connects sports executives who work in digital, data and technology.

Sports Geek Nation has members from (in alphabetical order) Australia, Canada , Denmark, India, Lithuania, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States working in sports such as basketball, football, ice hockey, baseball, AFL, horse racing, golf, rugby league, netball and more.

You can join Sports Geek Nation by going to SportsGeekNation.com