



Podcast 3 – Gymnastics Victoria CEO Jamie Parsons

Tom: Welcome to Are You On Board! You're listening to a Vicsport podcast about helping our sport industry become more inclusive. Support comes from the state government of Victoria.

Sam: Hi, I'm Sam Bramham. I'm a Paralympic gold medalist, ambassador for disability sport and recreation, and a motivational speaker. I'm also currently working with the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Today I'm speaking with Jamie Parsons, CEO of Gymnastics Victoria, about how to champion disability inclusion. Welcome Jamie.

Jamie: Thanks Sam, It's great to be here with you.

Sam: Jamie to start why don't you tell us about your role at Gymnastics Victoria.

Jamie: I'm the Chief Executive Officer at Gymnastics Victoria. I've been here for 4 years. We have a team of about 25 staff, they include people who work in events, education, coaches, administrators and we're here to support our clubs and support our gymnastics community to grow.

(0:53) Sam: Today I want to ask you about your work to champion disability inclusion in gymnastics. Firstly, can you tell us about the value of disability inclusion for your sport?

(1:01) Jamie: It has been hugely valuable for us to take on an inclusive approach to everything that we do. I think when we started this process people thought of inclusion as being something separate or different than what we do every day, but I think people realising that inclusion as part of our everyday business has really helped us to drive participation and growth. We have increased membership this year alone by 15% and over 45% over the last three years.

(1:28) Sam: And what changes has Gymnastics Victoria made to be more inclusive of people with disability?

(1:32) Jamie: I think one of the key things that we did was to have buy in from the highest levels of the organisation, from our board. And we changed our mission statement to include the word inclusion. We identified people in our community that could be real role models and set benchmarks for being inclusive clubs. And then we used those people to be able to then demonstrate how easy it is to be inclusive and how it can benefit and grow their club.

(2:00) Sam: And as the CEO, what was your role in driving this change process?

(2:03) Jamie: My key role was getting people to understand how inclusion could benefit, it was recruiting the right people. Kerry Tavrou, who works in our office has done an outstanding job in embedding a culture of inclusiveness throughout our sport. And he hasn't done that overnight, but done it over a number of years. And I can think of a story of one of our Leongatha gymnastics club, who received our Club of the Year Award a couple of years ago, and they say how they had Kerry go down and meet with them and they had a specialist school down the road they weren't really sure about this

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inclusion thing, but they thought they'd give it a go, they gave it a go and it transformed their club and their club has increased in numbers in a significant way and now when you talk to them they say we can't think of our club being any different we don't know why we didn't engage with the schools around the corner earlier because it's just made such a positive difference to everyone's experience.

(3:04) Sam: Thinking about your board, your staff, and your gymnastics community what was standing in the way of encouraging a strategic focus on disability inclusion and how did you overcome those barriers?

(3:14) Jamie: I think everyone, including people in our sport, think of themselves as being inclusive. We think that we're here for everyone and anybody can come if they want. And I think that we worked out that you have to actually work a little bit harder, you have to engage with people. And I think that that's the difference, actually engaging with partners to be able to build that comfort with each other and then just realising that were all people and were all just here to have fun and we want to enhance our lives. And I think once people can get over that barrier of people with a disability being, not different, but we're all just human really enables each other to see each other as people and to work with them so regardless of who you are or what your background or what cultural background you might be that gymnastics is a sport for everyone.

(4:08) Sam: And what has been the tangible impact of your focus on disability inclusion?

(4:11) Jamie: I think the tangible thing is our growth. Growing from 34,000 members when we first went on this journey to now by the end of this year having over 60,000 members. We will have over 70,000 participants in gymnastics clubs throughout Victoria by the end of this year. So that helps to make people healthier, happier, they participate in our programs and have a lifelong love of physical activity and gymnastics is really good for doing that because it enables people to develop strength and balance and coordination and then having that love for physical movement means that they live a healthy, happy life throughout their whole lives.

(4:58) Sam: And before we finish Jamie, the gymnastics Victoria experience is a great story to share with other sports associations. What would you most like to tell other CEOs and board members about why they should increase disability participation in their sport?

(5:10) Jamie: I think it makes you a better organisation, it makes your staff look at the world differently. It ensures that staff and clubs are opening up their doors and making sure that everyone is feeling welcome, not that just they are welcome, that they feel welcome. And if you can do that then more people can be involved in your club and more people want to be involved in your sport, more people are physically active and your sport can grow.

Sam: Well thank you for chatting with me today Jamie. I have really enjoyed hearing more about gymnastics Victoria effort to open up participation in the sport.

Jamie: Thanks Sam.

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Key Messages:

- 1. Can you tell us about the value of disability inclusion for your sport?**
 - Since implementing disability inclusion, Gymnastics Victoria has seen increased membership this year alone by 15% and over 45% over the last three years. **(0:53)**
- 2. What changes has Gymnastics Victoria made to be more inclusive of people with disability?**
 - The key things that had to change in order to become more inclusive was that the highest levels of the organisation, the board, had to buy in and influence change. Governance within the organisation had to change. The mission statement and strategic plan had to include inclusion principles. **(1:28)**
- 3. As the CEO, what was your role in driving this change process?**
 - As a CEO, it was my job to get people to understand how inclusion could benefit the organisation and one way I did that was by hiring the right people. **(2:00)**
- 4. What were the barriers to inclusion?**
 - One barrier to inclusion, is not realising that change needs to happen. Many sports think that they are inclusive and welcoming, but they have to engage with people and make them feel welcome. Build relationships with people. **(3:04)**