

## **FRIENDS OF WATER POLO**

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Dear Sir,

### Re Olympic Funding for 2012

We are writing to you on behalf of the friends of Water Polo which is a newly formed association aiming to ensure that the Men's and Women's Teams are able to compete at the London Olympic Games in 2012. Since you announced the funding for the Olympic disciplines in the run up to the London Games and Water Polo was one of eight sports yet to have its funding decided virtually all of next year planned men's events have been cancelled. We know that you have said that no sport will be cast adrift yet we feel that water polo has already been drowned. Our understanding is that you have said only sports which are 'competitive' will have a place in the games but how can a team sport achieve the required standard with a budget that does not allow the current improvements in performance to continue. Water Polo is in a Catch 22 position.

The rules of water polo date back to 1870 one year after the inception of the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA). The sport was the first team event in the modern Olympics and Britain is still the most successful team in Olympic Water Polo history. Since the inception of the Modern Games only one host nation (Finland in 1952) has failed to enter a team. It would be very sad if the nation which invented the game failed to provide teams in 2012.

As a team sport water polo suffers from the fact that only two sets of medals are available in the men's and the women's competition and thus can be seen not to offer "value for money" compared to individual sports. This is of course totally contrary to the Olympic Creed which reads:-

*"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."*

Approximately five years ago an academy system was put into place which has led to greater participation in the Sport throughout Britain. We now have Mini Polo, Regional Training Centres, National Academies, English Schools Swimming Association tournaments, British University Swimming Association tournaments, University polo leagues and the National Water Polo League. All of this has produced resurgence in the sport after a period of decline. As a result many young people from inner city areas now play the sport. It is accessible to them because of the fact that no equipment needs to be provided by their parents.

The National High Performance centre in Manchester is now in place and is the base for the men's and women's GB squads in preparation for the London Games. A savage reduction in funding has put participation in the Games in jeopardy. The young men and women at the high performance centre are dedicated elite athletes who train a minimum of 20 hours a week. These young people have made considerable personal, social, financial and academic sacrifices since they were selected for the GB Academy in 2003. Their families have also made sacrifices. Since September 2007 until recently they have had to survive on funding of £250 per month and have had to live away from home renting accommodation in Manchester. Their training and playing schedule makes it impossible for them to commit to any form of paid employment and means that no employer is prepared to engage them. As you will no doubt appreciate there has had to be considerable family financial support which has proved difficult for some parents. Some members of the team are reading for their degrees at Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan and Leeds Universities. Others have had to put their academic lives on hold whilst they train. They have had very little time off. Some of their families live in the South of England which has meant that they have only had minimal family contact during their first period away from home. Both Junior squads trained throughout the summer for the European Championships in September. You, of course, will be fully aware of the effort needed to reach the top in sport and these men and women have been happy put their lives on hold in order to follow their dream. Those efforts are now reaping their own reward in improved results, only last week the British Swimming website featured a report on the City of Liverpool women's team success in European competition. Team performances for the National Teams have been improving and the Junior Men's Team (half of which now make up just under half of the current senior men's team) drew with Spain and beat both France and Holland for the first time in living memory over the Summer of 2008. The teams have done all that has been asked of them in terms of performance but still their participation in 2012 remains in doubt. The Junior Men's team is has recently been competing in the First Division of the National Water Polo League playing against the top five clubs. It played 10 matches and won 8 of them. Some of the players have financial commitments beyond March 2009 and yet, if something is not done, they expect to lose their income.

The Games in London offer the unique opportunity of a wild card entry as host nation. This will provide the impetus for a legacy beyond 2012 and the continued renaissance of the sport. To hold an Olympic Water Polo competition in London without the GB teams being represented would be a tragedy given the history and tradition of British Water Polo.

The successful bid for the Games spoke of the importance of legacy. What does that mean for the eight unlucky Olympic disciplines ignored by the funding allocation? Each week at Water Polo clubs across the country hundreds of new entrants to the sport take part in mini-polo and other training sessions. Most of these are initiatives were put in place since the winning bid was announced. There were plans to place Water Polo academies in each region to foster greater participation but these are now obvious casualties.

The Olympic Games has never been a competition but a festival of sport. The final medal table is only one aspect of a successful games. I wonder how other nations and the International Olympic Committee will view London's Games if a third of the disciplines do not have British representation particularly when it is the team sports who are on the whole missing out. In a country which prides itself on its' team sports it is very sad that they are not seen to be providing value for money in that in the case of Water Polo over 30 athletes are being funded to compete for 2 medals whereas multiple medal opportunities are available to individual athletes. Playing team sport teaches children valuable lessons for life which our government and society as a whole should encourage. No one in our discipline expects to be pampered or cosseted by funding but all that we ask is to be given enough funding to get to the starting line in London 2012.

We note that Canada sent upwards of 800 athletes to Beijing, maybe a young country such as Canada still has dreams and aspirations for its sportsmen and women not solely dependant on the number of medals achieved.

We look forward to meeting with you and to securing your support.

Yours faithfully,

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