

Herald Sun

Getting back to our local footy

SUBURBAN and regional footy is the lifeblood of the Victorian community. It's where friendships are made, health is protected, maturity and unity is cemented, neighbourhoods are bonded, passions are engaged and even future stars for the AFL are born.

But while local and regional seasons are due to kick off from today, all is not well at many clubs.

Grassroots Aussie rules across a range of areas in Victoria is struggling to get back to pre-pandemic levels.

A range of junior teams in metropolitan areas and the bush are seeing only a trickle of players return to the training track, while some leagues are concerned competitions may be disrupted or curtailed.

As reported in today's Saturday Herald Sun, a number of clubs have taken to social media to make desperate call-outs for players.

Greater Melbourne suffered the longest series of lockdowns in the past two years imposed anywhere, and ties have been broken between some clubs and their communities. Kids were stuck on couches or in bedrooms, glued to phones, computers or streaming services for inordinate lengths of time during Covid. As well as the mental health aspects of being closed off socially and schooling from home, physical activity and team engagement also dropped off.

Lifestyles became shuttered, where normal routines, like football training and involvement in the local club faded from front of mind. Time spent locked down and reliant on digital devices for entertainment or contact with friends appears to have established less than healthy and positive habits that have become hard to shake.

Today, former Hawthorn coach Alastair Clarkson, who is working to assist local coaches and clubs, issues a call to get back into sport to support individuals and communities as they rebuild after Covid. Clarko knows

first hand, growing up in the country, just how important local sport is.

While some clubs in high population areas — whether it be Aussie rules, soccer, netball, basketball or other codes — have snapped back with eager players rejoining sport, others have been unable to make up a full complement and some age-group teams have disappeared. Yarroweyah, playing in the Picola District in Victoria's north, will field only a reserves side in 2022, while others — including Officer and Gembrook Cockatoo — have also seen player numbers impacted.

In some instances, it's not just finite recruits but also, in the open-age sides, calls from struggling clubs for AFL Victoria to continue cutting salary caps so attracting players isn't reduced to a bidding war between teams.

In a range of suburban areas memberships have actually grown back strongly. Outer East Football and Netball League and Essendon District both report higher participation levels in junior teams.

Thankfully, there are green shoots across many suburbs that do show, despite the heavy impact of pandemic and lockdowns, teenage girls and boys are returning to their sporting passions.

And despite early concerns about suburban football being desperately short of umpires, there has also been a late uptick in new recruits for officials in some areas.

Still, re-engagement levels across the state are far from uniform and in order to get young people back into guernseys and onto local ovals, AFL Victoria and other sports organisations need to underscore the importance of getting involved.

The local football club has long been the epicentre for engagement and inclusion for our communities.

Along with the physical health benefits, supporting good mental health through team involvement is vital as we reunite and rediscover normality.

Great run, greater cause

MELBOURNE'S greatest fun run for the state's greatest cause is back.

Come Sunday, thousands of runners of all ages will lace up for the Herald Sun/Transurban Run for the Kids. The event has raised an incredible \$19.4 million for the Herald Sun's Good Friday Appeal since its inception back in 2006, providing vital funds for the Royal Children's Hospital.

As noted above, while there is a growing need to support local sports for individual and community benefit, it is heartening to see so many sign up for Run for the Kids after two years of Covid disruption.

Motorists tomorrow, and in some areas from tonight, will need to take

consideration of road closures in central Melbourne, the Docklands area, Bolte Bridge, West Gate Freeway and Domain Tunnel.

Whether it be the 5.2km short course or 14.8km long course, whether participants are some of the best athletes going or suburban sloggers, the scenic run generates crucial funds for lifesaving treatment, equipment and research at the RCH, our world-leading specialist hospital caring for children.

Individuals, workmates, friends, families and business all get behind Run for the Kids and, in its return year, it will again become the key fundraising event for the Good Friday Appeal that has raised more than \$399m for the RCH since 1931.

A BILLION DOLLARS IS A BLAST



JEFFREY WALKER

THE federal budget announcement of a \$1.16bn boost to the Australian space industry is very welcome news.

The Australian space industry is still relatively small by contrast to our international counterparts, but we undertake important work and have the potential to grow significantly. When it comes to Australian space science, it's easy to think of big exciting "Hollywood" projects like sending humans to Mars, but in fact we are just as deeply focused on what happens closer to home.

For Australia, the space economy is about innovation, developing sovereign capability and improving the lives of all Australians.

Innovation in space research and technology helps us take leaps and bounds towards a better understanding of planets like Mars, but it also helps us better understand our most important planet, Earth.

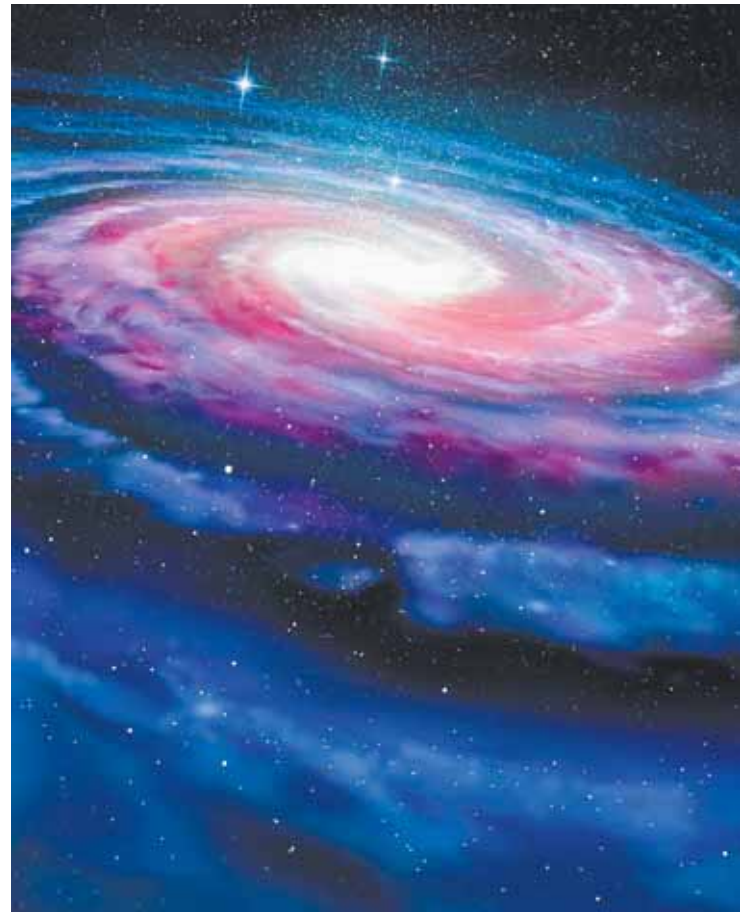
From space we have a bird's eye view of Earth and space can tell us a lot about what's happening in our own backyard. For example, using Earth observation satellites from space we can obtain better data about our weather and changes in climate which has real-world applications every day.

Collectively this satellite data gives us a picture of the health of Earth, like an MRI on a human.

To date Australia has played a major role in developing international earth observation satellites and the data we derive from them.

Our role in developing Earth observation capability is important not just in Australia, but to the international space industry too, because our southern hemisphere location means we can continue research on algorithm development when not possible in the north due to our reverse seasons; and our large, diverse and sparsely populated landscape provides ideal conditions for "quiet" testing environments; those with little or no radio frequency interference.

The announcement of new investment into the Australian industry means we will build four new Earth observation satellites of our own, rather than relying on internationally owned satellites to provide us with the data that monitors key indicators of the Earth's health.



While these will be specifically focused on water quality and fire fuel load management, Earth observation technology can exhaustively measure almost every atmospheric and land variable you can think of, including flood inundation, the Earth's gravity field and how it varies over time, ocean surface temperatures, ocean salinity, deforestation, glaciers and polar ice caps, air quality and so on.

We can even map soil moisture and other related data for more accurately forecasting of weather, monitoring drought, and letting farmers know when they should or should not plant or irrigate crops.

Australia has an important role to play in international space science and it is an exciting time to be involved. Australian expertise plays a critical role in Earth's observations, and our talented industry has the potential to fill gaps in the current international capability.

If something goes wrong with an international capability we are left in a vulnerable position in regards to vital data that we need for critical issues such as emergency management. Creating our own satellites removes that risk and enhances our strength. This sovereign capability is important in minimising our reliance on other nations, and ensuring reliable data streams and communications are maintained, such as we've recently seen with Elon Musk putting his satellites over Ukraine.

Perhaps most importantly, it's a big nod to Australia's scientific talent and a big boost to the space industry workforce.

A vital part of Australia's civil space strategy over the next decade is building the workforce and it is estimated that the Australian space industry will create 20,000 more jobs by 2030.

Universities can play a vital role in filling the gap and there are lots of transferable skills from other industries such as science, engineering and manufacturing that our space industry can benefit from.

At the moment much of the focus of Australian space development is on creating launch capability and having satellites to launch.

But my focus is far more grounded. I'm deeply interested in better understanding what are the best sensor combinations and how best to interpret that data so we can harness what space can tell us about ourselves.

Earth is the most important planet because it's the one we live on. If we don't look after it, we'll kill it.

If we can better understand the planet by having dedicated Earth observation sensors in space, then it's in our best interests to do so.

For the Australian space industry, the sky's not the limit.

DR JEFFREY WALKER IS THE HEAD OF THE CIVIL ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT AT MONASH UNIVERSITY AND A PIONEER OF GLOBAL SATELLITE TECHNOLOGY. HE STUDIED AT NASA AND REGULARLY COLLABORATES WITH NASA AND THE EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY. HE WAS A FINALIST IN THE AUSTRALIA SPACE AWARDS 2022 FOR HIS WORK DEVELOPING SATELLITE TECHNOLOGY.



ROAD DEATHS THIS YEAR

64

ROAD DEATHS LAST YEAR

59

Victorian deaths in 2022, compared with the same day last year