



He remained steadfastly silent about it, but the commentators, treading a fine line, let us infer whatever we liked.

Bruce Eva, introducing Heffernan on Melbourne sports radio station SEN that evening, probably came closest to breaking the taboo. "Karapetyan's Armenian by origin, but you've certainly been flying the true-blue colours. Well done, mate."

As for Heffernan, now he was telling us that he'd had enough, even though his message before the Games had been that he'd press on. Behind his vibrant, cheeky facade resided spooks of doubt.

During the euphoria of the Melbourne Games, Heffernan had no intention of throwing a Sidchrome into the system. To paraphrase the sheriff on *The Dukes Of Hazzard*, in regards to the AWF, Heffernan had been a fly in their ointment before graduating to a thorn in their side. By the time I met him in early August, he'd decided he might as well be a pain in their arse.

Heffernan's silver medal sits somewhere at his parents' house. He's not entirely proud of it. Long before the clamour of the Games drowned him out, he'd told anyone who'd listened: "I'd rather finish fifth and get beaten by every other country than finish second to a team-mate who lives in Russia."

Heffernan has worked too hard, put his body under too much strain, to put up with being dicked around by politics. Unfortunately, they have pestered him his entire career – not all of it deliberate, but not entirely without design, either. Drugs, too, have dogged his sport.

The way to today's predicament was paved with good intentions. Noonan was there when the import program began. It was a proposal from Paul Coffa – brother of current president, Sam, and now general secretary of the Oceania Weightlifting Federation – who posited the idea on the understanding that Bulgarian imports would become permanent Australian residents.

At the bottom of the initiative was an unexamined, erroneous assumption that the mere presence of the imports would somehow augment the local scene. Instead, they have become just another reason for the "marginalisation and irrelevance" the sport is now threatened with, as foretold in this magazine last year. Noonan, a former three-time national



The numbers don't add up for Noonan, and saying so cost him his AWF job.

champion and elite-level coach, never believed the scheme would work. Australian weightlifting has never had the resources to sustain imports. "A sizeable income didn't eventuate so, in order to make the best of a bad lot, they went back to their own countries on what income they got here," he says.

Despite Stefan Botev's silver medal for his "adopted" country at Atlanta 1996, local weightlifting was already in decline. Noonan, a maths teacher with a mathematician's regard for merciless figures, pointed out the decrease in participation. It cost him his AWF job in '94. The Federation's message was, "Decline? You want decline?" They "redesignated" his job and "invited" him to reapply. Of course, he was turned down. Since then, his yearly application for membership of the Victorian Weightlifting Association has been rejected with a standard "thank you for your interest" letter.

The problems Noonan identified, "administrative blockages and declining numbers", were only dragon's teeth back in the early '90s.

"High-performers left, and a few like Robert Kabbas found their roles circumscribed, or drew similar angst to me," says Noonan. "Robert got banned until he took action at the Equal Opportunities Commission. Most people had the sense to walk away, but I made the decision to never walk away. My role today is very limited. I'm a committee member of Robert's Phoenix club."

Kabbas, a silver medallist at LA (where Dean Lukin won super heavyweight gold), formed The Phoenix Club, and he took Heffernan with him. Training anywhere but the Hawthorn Weightlifting Centre, the hub of Australian weightlifting, is considered a defection.

Noonan was right. The dragon's teeth have sprouted, and now they war against Australian weightlifting. "Overseas" lifters still pose a problem for everyone, it seems, except the AWF. Participation is lower than ever. Local lifters are unencouraged. Drugs cast many a shadow.

"In Australia, doping violations in weightlifting are higher than in any other sport, certainly any Olympic sport. It averages about two a year," says Noonan. "The only education I know of was when they compelled athletes to go to a lecture given by the old Australian Sports Drug Agency before the last national champs. An hour later, they had four positives. You would have hoped they'd have worked to get that number down to zero."

Everyone, including the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), is awaiting findings from the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority, which has launched a two-part inquiry into the sport. Part one is investigating an incident last year in which three weightlifters tested positive ▶



Not even smelling salts can rid Heffernan of the foul smell in his sport. BELOW: A tarnished silver at the Melbourne Comm Games.

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