

to BzP, an illegal stimulant. Later, Sergo Chakhoyan tested positive as well. The second part is examining the issue of drugs in weightlifting in general. The investigation was launched in March; no-one has heard much since.

This is a sport in a shambles. It seems that most of the AWF's funds from the Sports Commission have been devoted to overseas lifters.

"The AWF hasn't produced an annual report for last year," says Noonan. "No financial report before the Commonwealth Games! Its draft budget for last year had miscellaneous expenses as \$120,000. That's with an income of around \$300,000."

Noonan is happy to single out Sam Coffa, president since '83.

"Sam believes he's 100 per cent correct, and likes everything to go through him. So nothing much works. The Commission has insisted on proper management structures and committee systems, but this is the first time they've actually suspended funding. I hope they stick to their guns."

Walking into Australian

weightlifting and trying to make sense of it is like being invited to fix a dysfunctional family-run business. All the signs are classic. The wrong types of behaviour are encouraged. One meaning matters. Denial reigns. Unshakeable myths about founding fathers pervade. Such an organisation is often a closed system. Before long, you realise you're tackling a fiefdom.

The fact that Kabbas and Heffernan are considered to have created a "faction" just by leaving the Hawthorn gym and training elsewhere says plenty. Absolutism is the



A hollow victory at the national champs.



enemy of variety. Healthy change becomes virtually impossible.

Heffernan is particularly annoyed by his treatment before the Commonwealth Games. Despite his result in Melbourne being in keeping with his ranking, he was not initially selected for the Australian squad.

"That's still a thorn in my paw," he said when I spoke to him at Emmaus

College, where he teaches, ahead of the national champs.

"At the trials, I met the minimum standard. They didn't announce the team that night. Couple of days later, they announced a team of five, with the rest to be decided later. I still wasn't in. Then a memo went round saying there would be different criteria. One or two other people who didn't do well at the trials were put ahead of me. Once it got to February, the team couldn't be changed – once it was submitted to the Commonwealth Games – and there was no time to appeal. Then I read in the *Herald-Sun* a couple of days before the last possible date that I was in the team. I had three weeks to tell work I'd be away.

"Last year the national championships were held in Queensland. I couldn't get \$200 to fly there – and I was in the Games squad. Yet blokes were flown here from Armenia and put in hotels."

Heffernan says it wasn't the lack of preparation that hindered him at the Games, but rather the "stress and the

feelings I had for the people who run the sport, the coaches and the people who didn't say anything; the people on my team."

"I felt really betrayed," he adds. "I felt low. I felt alone. I didn't want to say a word. People don't want to stick their heads out for fear of recriminations. They always say 'the doors are open', but why would you go forward with any grievance? What does that mean, 'the doors are open'?"

"I was ranked high enough. I'd qualified. There were ASC grants of \$10,000, a couple of those given out prior to the Games, and I missed out. There were people who didn't qualify for the trials who got money."

Here Heffernan is talking about Yurik Sarkisian and his son, David, who were encouraged because, apparently, their feelgood father-son story would be great marketing for the sport.

The Commonwealth Games experience holds few fond memories for Heffernan, apart from the opening ceremony

College, where he teaches, ahead of the national champs.

"At the trials, I met the minimum standard. They didn't announce the team that night. Couple of days later, they announced a team of five, with the rest to be decided later. I still wasn't in. Then a memo went round saying there would be different criteria. One or two other people who didn't do well at the trials were put ahead of me. Once it got to February, the team couldn't be changed – once it was submitted to the Commonwealth Games – and there was no time to appeal. Then I read in the *Herald-Sun* a couple of days before the last possible date that I was in the team. I had three weeks to tell work I'd be away.

"Last year the national championships were held in Queensland. I couldn't get \$200 to fly there – and I was in the Games squad. Yet blokes were flown here from Armenia and put in hotels."

Heffernan says it wasn't the lack of preparation that hindered him at the Games, but rather the "stress and the

and his school's assembly on his return,

when the kids cheered his success. He missed out on the Sydney Olympic Games thanks to the presence of Kiril Kounev, Chakhoyan and Karapetyan, all in his division. In Melbourne, he could have won gold. "Alex could have won the class above. I said, 'Move up.' They said, 'Nup.'" He often wonders why he persists: "I've been doing it every day after work for 15 years; it's not that easy to just cut it out. Mum and Dad want me to stop. It's been stressful for them as well."

Heffernan wants wholesale change but, in the short term, he expects only one thing: "I did completely the right thing. I started in the sport here as a schoolkid. I've always done my best to promote it well, always done the drug tests. I want a bloody apology."

He'll be waiting a long time. Now his role is to speak the unspeakable to Sam Coffa and his board. Surely he lives in secret hope that the ASADA findings will come out and the ASC will publish and damn Australian weightlifting. ■

"Sam Coffa believes he's 100 per cent correct, and likes everything to go through him. So nothing much works." – Michael Noonan