

**ZONE LASER SPORTS COMMUNITY PROPOSAL  
& ALTA BACKGROUND INFO**

To the Zone Nationals Participants, Site  
Operator's and League Communities  
**AUSTRALIA & NZ**

2<sup>nd</sup> October 2010

## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking the time to read this paper. It has been put together with these primary goals in mind:

- To take some time to reflect on “where we are” as an activity/sport/game
- Discuss the viability having an association. What it means for Nationals/League/Worlds
- Provide information on the Australian Laser Tag Association

### ***OUR IDENTITY CRISIS***

Many of us love this game/sport/activity that we participate in, but are a little confused about where we sit on the spectrum. Are we a game or are we a sport, and does it really matter?

We have an identity crisis on our hands, and for good reason. Have you ever had a conversation that goes like this.?

ZONER: “Yeah some friends and I play Zone laser tag on a Monday night. It’s pretty cool. Our team name is the *FABOULOUS 5*. We got second in the finals for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time straight!”

ZONER ASSOCIATE: “What.... Really.... isn’t that a kids game...?”

Five words regular players rarely enjoy hearing. Though, can it be expected that people think differently? We are one of very few activities that have become popular through the application of technology to the general entertainment and kids birthday party markets. The only reason our activity exists is because kids like to use our equipment. Similarly, it is unlikely competitive 10 pin bowling would have started had it not been for social bowling as a business model.

So why does it matter? We have a great National Titles, one of the best in the World. We have a good community of people that all work together to make things happen. Many of us have a local league to play at each week. Some of us wouldn’t care what the public perception of our activity is.

### ***SUSTAINABILITY & PROGRESSION***

Zone is unique in so many ways. We have a National tournament that has reached 20 registered teams & 130 registered players regularly in the last 5 or so years that was started and developed predominantly by site operators who are also enthusiasts. Doc Baldwin, Brett Johnstone, Ben Jansen, Michael Thomas (Wombat), Andrew Larkin & Marie Harris can all be credited (amongst others) as the site operators that have helped shape and grow the

tournament to what it is today. A very high percentage of league players are also Zone Nationals players (compared to other activities).

For many Zoners, it is the Zone Nationals that keeps us coming back. For some it's the social aspect, for some it's the competition, and for some it's a combination of both. As a consequence many Zone Nationals players play locally all year round.

### **Local leagues feed off the Zone Nationals, and the Zone Nationals feeds off local leagues.**

It is a symbiotic relationship. The Nationals needs local leagues as a *feeder* for the tournament. To sustain an annual event like the Zone Nationals over a long period of time without leagues and through 'word of mouth' of existing Zone Nationals players only would be difficult.

Successful local leagues need the help of their Zone Nationals players also. The Zone Nationals players are the best resource a league has to teach newer players the art of playing Zone. Not to mention that it gives them something to strive for, a reason to take Zone up as a sport.

### **One of the major factors affecting player retention at league is a players idea of whether they believe they are doing a worthwhile activity or learning something interesting or useful**

When Nationals players get involved in teaching and nurturing newer players, it allows them the opportunity to exercise leadership and increases the rate at which league players learn, increasing player retention. Not all Nationals players will be leaders and many will choose to just play and help out where they can.

Local leagues can survive without Zone Nationals player involvement, but heavy site operator involvement is often required.

Essentially the history and knowledge behind the Zone Nationals and competitive Zone laser gaming exists within the operators, and to an increasing extent, the players.

### **ARE WE A SPORT?**

It depends on who you ask. If you ask the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), the answer is no. There are 91 registered sports and it is unlikely that Zone will be the 92<sup>nd</sup>. Unless we can become affiliated to an International Federation we need to be in existence for 75 years with 5000 registered members to become a National Sporting Association (NSO). This would make funding through some of the ASC and AIS programs available.

If you ask Wikipedia then certainly we are. The Wikipedia definition;

### **A sport is an organized, competitive, entertaining and skillful physical activity requiring commitment and fair play, in which a winner can be determined by objective means**

So the answer to the question, “Are we a sport”, is yes and no.

We face a very similar battle to that faced by Paintball. We are a relatively new activity compared to traditional sports, we have evolved out of the development of technology primarily used in the entertainment market and for these reasons recognition by the ASC as a sport and access to funding to grow the sport has been limited. Despite these setbacks the administrators of the Paintball Association continue to work to increase the profile of their sport and secure funding to help grow.

Visit [www.paintball.org.au](http://www.paintball.org.au) for a summary of the Paintball Associations objectives, governance and other information.

## **THE VIABILITY OF RUNNING ACTIVITIES THROUGH AN ASSOCIATION**

From this point forward I will refer to our activity/sport simply as a sport for simplicity.

There has been much discussion in recent years about whether we need an association to help run things. In 2009 due to the hard work of Doc Baldwin and Andrew Larkin, the Australian Laser Tag Association (ALTA) was formed in what was thought to be a natural progression for our sport. It has been received with mixed feelings, mainly due to a lack of information and possibly a lack of inclusion of all the key people in the community. Without a proper explanation of the reasons for why ALTA was formed, it is a natural consequence that people in the zone community will be somewhat apprehensive about the necessity of, and the motives of the association.

Perhaps the biggest mistake made by ALTA in the beginning was a focus on insurance as the first agenda item for ALTA to tackle. Although insurance costs are a necessary part of any sport one will play (regardless of whether you have your own insurance or not) people in the Zone community were not happy that an extra fee had been added to the National Titles registration fees without consultation or discussion.

Furthermore, ALTA at this stage was being run by only 1 or 2 site operators that did not have the resources to put the appropriate time in to the project and follow it through to the end. As a consequence ALTA was criticized for “doing nothing”, when in fact they were doing all they could, but faced a time consuming uphill battle to move forward given the mixed feelings amongst the Zone community.

In 2010 Doc Baldwin stood down as ALTA president. Whilst he is still passionately involved in the Zone community, he could not give ALTA the time that it required to make it work. Following Doc’s resignation, I have taken up the position of president. This is a temporary assignment that will be relinquished upon an election on a date that is still to be decided.

## ***SO WHY DO WE NEED AN ASSOCIATION? THINGS ARE RUNNING JUST FINE***

At face value it would appear that forming an association might be an unnecessary step for the Zone community. We have experienced a solid, consistent number of teams registered at recent National events, we have an effective Nationals committee and voting system for making decisions and no shortage (at least in the short term) of sites ready to host the Nationals in any particular year. So what benefits will we derive from adding in this extra level of administration?

### ***NATIONALS***

Recently whilst in correspondence with a player, Assassin, who is involved in the administering of the Nationals in the USA I received the following comment; “Man, after reading your forums I am so jealous of what you guys have got there. You literally have sites queuing up to run the Nationals. We have so much trouble finding a site that will allow us in to take over the to run a National tournament...”

We have been very lucky to have so many Zone enthusiasts that are also site operators and have been willing to make very little or no money (in the early days) to get the tournament to where it is today. As it stands today, the National Titles is a profitable event. Not including the time that was put in to organizing the event, we estimate that the Sunshine Coast Nationals made a profit of approximately \$10,000 – 15,000. This figure is predominantly determined by how many teams attend and the cost of things such as trophies, dinner, shirts and other giveaways. Although the site is closed for a week, many birthday parties will re-book in a week outside the National Titles week, and extra money is made by the site on running pre-Nationals tournaments and training in the week leading up to the event. Unless the site is a very busy site and would be losing customers as a result of running the National Titles, it is a worthwhile venture notwithstanding the hours that are put in to being on the committee, organizing trophies, organizing the dinner, running the event (you get very little sleep for that week) and all the other administrative duties that are put in by the operator to make the event happen.

As it stands at the moment, the site operator receives a windfall gain for what is increasingly becoming the work of previous operators and players. Furthermore, whilst we have not faced an issue with this so far, there is a conflict of interest in that it is more profitable for an operator to “go budget” with the 2 high ticket items, the trophies and the dinner. These 2 items are inextricably linked to the perceived value a Nationals participant gets from the event and therefore affects future attendance. Other decisions are also made by the site operator that are linked to the quality of the tournament and therefore future attendance. Things such as equipment maintenance, maze design, installation of panic buttons, referee training and making on the spot decisions during the tournament all affect the quality of the tournament

but can currently vary from year to year. All of these decisions could become part of the responsibility of a sub-committee that could ensure we are dealing with things consistently from year to year and greatly reducing the amount of work required by one individual, namely the site operator.

By having a sub-committee to make tournament management decisions we also open up the possibility to host Nationals at sites that don't have a site operator involved in the National Titles. This is a system that the Americans have had to employ, so has been proven to work once the appropriate processes are put in place. There is no guarantee that Ben Jansen, Wombat, Brett Johnson, Doc Baldwin, Craig Williams, Dan Baker or myself will own a site or want to be involved in the National Titles in 10 years time. By forming these processes now, we are future proofing the National Titles in the case that all operators in Australia (& maybe NZ) become non-players. Whilst this may be a few years away yet, it will take some years to iron out the bugs and get the processes right, so discussing a change now is a valid consideration.

Currently we have a system whereby the players vote for who they would like to see make decisions on game formats, settings and various other Nationals guidelines, We call this the Nationals committee. This has been an effective system, and gives the players a chance to vote for 3 members of that committee to represent their interests. There would be no need to change how this system works given its effectiveness. The addition of some responsibilities like Nationals referee training and making on the spot tournament decisions could be added to their list of responsibilities.

There has also been some talk about sponsoring Doug Burbidge for his flights, accommodation and fees for the National Titles. Without an association it is difficult to make these kinds of decisions because all fees are handled by the site operator. I reluctantly make the next comment, as on face value it may appear to site operators that by implementing such a system that they will be financially worse off by running the Nationals, but I assure all site operators reading this document that I only seek to propose win-win situations in which the event can be equally profitable for the site operator whilst still tackling the issues discussed. If we look at the example of other developed sports & activities, it would make sense for fees to be determined and administered by the association from which money can be allocated to such things as players sponsorships for key individuals like Doug. This would mean that the site operator would receive a rental fee for hire of the site and would be relieved from many of the time consuming tasks that are required to run the Nationals, giving them more time to concentrate on their first priority which is running their site.

By having the association handling the fees, the benefits of the hard work put in by the players will be borne by the players. Excess funds can be used to provide World Titles sponsorships and promotion of the sport in locations that currently have no local league. We can also put more

money in to things such as welcome packs and other giveaways during the Nationals that there is little incentive for site operators to provide at the moment. There will be more discussion about this, along with the availability of community grants to booster funds in the sections below.

Another problem that is faced by site operators at the moment is the difficulty in changing fees and fee structures. No one could argue that compared to other events, the Zone National Titles is extremely cheap with respect to fees and training costs. Site operators have long feared changing fee's as a change would give the appearance of greedy intentions as the only person who wins is the site operator. By having an association handle fees and fee structures, changes can be made to represent the true value of the event and the only people who win are the players themselves. All these funds go in to a pool that is spent making the Nationals better, promoting the sport or helping our team get to Worlds. There is no question that Nationals fees will need to go up in the future. Everything goes up. The problem now is that the increase is always 5 years later than it needs to be because no one wants to appear greedy.

And to my final part of the discussion on the Nationals. The players. We have so many enthusiastic, experienced and skilled people in the Zone community, yet we only utilize a small subset of these people. Instead we put a huge amount of responsibility with just a few people requiring them to pull off extraordinary feats in the few months leading up to, and in the week of the National Titles. Why not include these people who are all full of creative idea's and energy to help make the event better than it has ever been before. The site operator can relax knowing they are making a handy profit whilst not having to take all the responsibility for every random game situation, bad pack, trophy design, referee decision and the mountain of tasks that go in to running the event. The skills that players will develop whilst working in this environment will help them outside of Zone, in their work and other sports they might be involved in, giving us an increased chance of retaining good people in the Zone community.

### ***THE WORLD TITLES***

There has been much discussion recently on the next World Titles which is to be held in the USA in 2011. There are difficult decisions that need to be made on team selections, team management, sponsorships and how to form a committee that can formulate methods to make these decisions.

Perhaps one of the key issues we face is that the tournament directors in the USA need to give someone or a group here in Australia the mandate to be the official representative group of the Australian team. Without an official group that has been mandated by the tournament directors in the USA there are question over the fairness of disallowing a team that is self formed and completely separate to the rest of the Australian team.

Utilizing an association, we can form a sub-committee that looks after making these decisions. The tournament directors in the USA can simply make this association the official representative body of the Australian team, announcing that teams will need to be okayed by the association before they attend the event.

Many of the problems faced at the previous World Titles in 2009 stemmed from too few doing too much. By having our association form sub-committee's we can include players in the decision making process in a structured manner. One possible structure could be to have 2 sub-committees, one for team management and one for team selection. The team management sub-committee could take care of things like organizing accommodation, flights, uniforms and create a fee structure taking all these various costs in to account. The team selection sub-committee could look after player applications, sponsorships, training and final selections. Having more people involved means a greater share of responsibility and an increased chance of an effective campaign.

### ***PROMOTION OF THE SPORT & COMMUNITY GRANTS***

Last but definitely not least, having an association will give our sport the structure required to help establish itself in areas that are waning in participation or have no participation at all.

It is no secret that there are cracks in the walls when it comes to participation in one of the key Zone states of Victoria. Nearly all of the Victorian players are existing players that have been at Nationals for many years, and without leagues it is extremely difficult to bring new players in to the sport. The opening of Werribee and the introduction of leagues by Dan Baker is a breath of fresh air, but can only service a subset of Victoria given its location in relation to the city. Furthermore, states like SA and NSW that have no site operators that play Nationals are doomed to non representation until we can create a structure whereby leagues can be run without the complete commitment of a site operator who is also a player.

Having an association will allow us to nominate individuals to work with local site operators to train and support a local enthusiast in getting leagues started and keeping them going. We can ensure that when new players start they know that they are part of a bigger organization, they are playing on settings consistent with top level tournaments and that an extra level of competition exists for when they want to make the jump to the National level. We can create official signage, systems and give them access to our software and central website for posting league results and communicating with players from around Australia via the forums.

In addition to providing league support, the association can look to educate the general public about the sport by undergoing various promotional activities. These activities may include a mobile laser tag operation (which we have available), exhibitions, and the creation of instructional you tube videos and workshops to create interest from regular social players.



These activities will go hand in hand with the launch of leagues in new area's that currently have no activity.

Despite being somewhat off becoming a National Sporting Organisation as recognized by the ASC, the only chance we have of achieving sponsorship whether it be from the Education Department, the Health Department or even corporate sponsorship is if we can show that we conduct ourselves in a professional way and that we are a legitimate sport. Having an association, with a corporate governance policy (which we have), a bank account (which we have), a long running national tournament (which we have), and a central website (which we have thanks Axis) are all part of what is required to create the image of a professionally run sport that merits support.

Furthermore many regional areas have Community Grants Programs to attract events and bring people in to the area. To be eligible for such programs the applicant must be an incorporated not for profit organization. Running the National Titles through an association will give us the ability to apply for these grants and possibly secure funding that can go towards improving the event, promoting the sport or sponsoring our Worlds team. Wyndham city council has a Community Grants Scheme that is specifically for community groups planning community events. Whilst I am yet to do detailed research on this scheme, we may be eligible to apply for this for our National Titles in Werribee in 2011.

As a site operator I hear regularly the glowing reviews that Zone gets from schools, teachers and parents about how effective Zone is as a sport for kids who aren't necessarily in to traditional sports. I loved that it didn't require me to be a particular height or a particular build, and I could play in anonymity unlike football or soccer where you inevitably have a whole bunch of strangers scrutinizing your every move. The game itself is unique in that we play with 3 teams, and it requires a mix of skill, strategy and teamwork that is different from any other sport around. There is so much potential for Zone. Potential that can only be tapped by taking the next step. The next step will require some work, but fortunately much of the administrative work has been done for us by Doc. All that is required from here is the will power and a little time from some key people.

## **SO WHAT NEXT**

There are a lot of suggestions and thoughts in this document, not all of which I would expect to happen at once if we were to move ahead with utilizing an association. The transition to utilizing an association is perhaps the biggest challenge. Once the association is actively working, and the basic systems and principles have been set, the various other decisions will flow naturally from the governance procedures that have been put in place.

There is a method by which we can move ahead and simultaneously open up the idea's presented in this document for discussion.

The idea behind the release of this document at this time, is to stimulate discussion amongst players before we attend the Nationals in Werribee. It is my hope that we will have an opportunity to present this information formerly to the players at Werribee and give the players an opportunity to decide for themselves whether they would like to see a transition to running via an association over the coming years. For the association to be fully accepted it makes sense that the players should have an opportunity to vote on its introduction.

This process can take place during the Nationals Committee voting procedure at Werribee. If the players vote for this change the current committee can announce an election by which all committee positions will become available and players from each state and territory will be invited to apply for positions. There are 6 positions in total. These positions are President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary and 2 General Members. Ideally we would like to see the key players from each key region on the committee to make it all inclusive and ensure we have the best available mix of experience and youth. According to our governance document, an election can only be held within 3 months after the end of the financial year which is the 31<sup>st</sup> March. This makes for perfect timing, I'll explain why.

Before we can vote in a committee we need a set of association members that vote in who they would like to see represent them on the association committee. At the 2011 Nationals in Werribee all attendees can be given a complimentary ALTA membership that will be valid for 2011. We can even issue a nice, printed plastic card with the official ALTA logo (still to be designed) if we wish, and the membership will be valid until 31 December 2011. In essence the attendees of the National Titles in Werribee will form the basis of our membership for the purposes of the election for 2011 only. Anybody who would like to take a committee position can express their interests prior to & during Nationals. During Nationals they will also have the opportunity to talk to players and gather support for their election to the committee.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of April a reply paid election form will be posted to all players that attended Nationals (Registration forms this year included physical address) requesting their preferences for the committee. This will be funded by myself to get things off the ground. Elections will close on a predetermined date and we will have our first elected committee for our association. Applicants who do not gain positions on the committee will be at the forefront of the various sub-committee positions. The committee's first job will be to establish the practicalities of how the transition to an association taking on more responsibilities will work, how memberships will be administered, and begin to setup the various sub-committees that will take care of matters possibly relating to the 2011 World Titles, 2012/13/14 Nationals and to establish some options for a new fee & membership structure with the consult of site operators and players. It will be

the responsibility of the committee to be 100% transparent in its actions and ensure a positive outcome for all the key stake holders involved in the National Titles and the sport in general.

## **TO FINISH UP**

There will be many questions that will flow from the distribution of this document. All the questions have solutions with positive outcomes. How do we know this? Because we are not the first sport to ask these questions and tackle these issues. Every sport in our community has transcended this stage and benefited as a consequence. There will be teething problems and issues that may take rigorous discussion to resolve but what is important is to remember why we are doing it.

We are doing it so that we can future proof our National Titles

We are doing it so that we can include all the talented people in our community in the decision making and share the workload

We are doing it so we can continue to improve our National Titles and ensure the quality of the tournament is of the highest standard each and every year

We are doing it so that as a community, we can build funds to sponsor our Worlds Teams or promote our sport or do whatever we feel is in the best interest of the players

We are doing it to become more professional and give ourselves the opportunity for sponsorship and community grants and maybe one day recognition as an NSO

If you have any comments or would be interested in a committee position should the players vote for a move to having Nationals run by an association please email [ben@laserzone.com.au](mailto:ben@laserzone.com.au)

Please answer the following questions:

What do you believe you can contribute to the committee?

What is high on your list of priorities for actions the committee should take right now?

What position would you like and why?

Contact details. Name, phone, email.

A topic will be open on the forums to discuss the ideas presented in this document.

Thank you for getting through this lengthy document. There is so much of the detail and nitty gritty that has been missed. But none of this is as important as the intention and the will of the players to make this transition happen.

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