

Off Season Update: July 2026

Momentous VAL & VRTA Awards Dinner

The VAL and VRTA Awards Dinner was held at the Brighton Beach Hotel in a sold-out event with 150+ VAL community members in attendance including Life



Members, Clubs, athletes, coaches, officials and sponsors in a very happy and cosy atmosphere. Unfortunately, several were turned away due to capacity.

An emotional tribute to the late Jemma Stapelton was a highlight of the evening. The VAL community united in support and care for the Stapleton parents, Joel and Tyler (partner), all who were bravely in attendance.



The voice of the VAL, commentator Oliver Wurm, was a brilliant Master of Ceremonies with the VAL Younger Member Committee (YMC) providing excitement and entertainment through games and prizes. The YMC led an unofficial VAL “after party” at the Richmond Social, which was attended by 60+ VAL party goers well into the early morning.

Thanks to Jameson Photography and Fixon Media Group, who captured all the images of award winners including a brilliant end of season video production.

Congratulations to all Award winners and nominees. Rye won Club Meeting of the Year. Lucy Zotti won a unique double with VRTA Athlete of the Year and the VAL Medal.



Rod Mathews won trainer of the Year and Rob McIntosh was awarded the President’s Award for his outstanding service as VAL Starter.

The VAL is exploring venues with a larger capacity for next season, including the MCG.

Regulations Review

In our effort to simplify and make the Regulations more user-friendly, the Board, together with our Integrity and Compliance subcommittee is undertaking a review. We expect a refreshed set to be available by September 2026. We will coordinate a briefing session. Amendments are focused on optimising competition integrity, improve competition participation, athlete retention and the overall member experience.

Raceday Review Panel (RRP)

The Board has approved the introduction of an RRP to shift the burden of complex performance adjudication on Raceday. In our effort to support the Chief Steward(s), during live race meetings and reduce race day angst, pressure and admin, the Board is in the process of establishing an independent subcommittee to expand oversight.

The primary objectives of the RRP are to:

- **Enhance League Integrity:** secure fairness in competition by ensuring all athletes race on their merits. Mitigate competitive manipulation and increase transparency
- **Relieve Race-Day Pressure:** reduce burden on Stewards
- **Enable Data-Driven Decisions:** provide a dedicated post-race window to rigorously analyse electronic timing and historical athlete performance data including ranges/deviations.
- **Boost Steward and Athlete Retention/Participation:** foster a trustworthy, level playing field where athletes feel confident of fair handicapping, support stewards with less onerous commitment of time, while directly encourage long-term sport participation.

VAL Officials



We are working through the appointments. We are delighted that Brad Armstrong agreed to continue as the Director of Handicapping after his first season in the role.

In this capacity, Brad will also be a member of the RRP and the new Integrity and Compliance Committee with Matt McDonough and chaired by Sonya Pollard (Chair).

Furthermore, Richard Wearmouth has agreed to continue as Chief Steward in 2026/27 significantly boosted by additional VAL support with the new Raceday Review Panel of which he will be a key member.

Elevate Leadership and YMC

Our women's athlete advisory group, Elevate, which aims to ensure female VAL membership remains attractive with strong representation, will be led by Meg Dean, who started in the VAL as a 14-year-old athlete. South Australian based former Stawell AC committee member, Mia Bell, will be her Deputy.

A diverse, enthusiastic and capable group include Megan Blair, Sophie Stokes, and Sarah No are all ready to elevate.



Congratulations to Hugh Hoffman and Isabella Morgan who will chair the Younger Member Committee with a talented, passionate cross-Stable Committee assembled.

The YMC will ensure VAL membership continues to remain attractive for our young athletes and engage the membership through events, participation, excitement, and fun. Athlete participation and retention is a strong focus of this group.

Queensland and NSW

The VAL has reached agreement to service and manage the registrations and entries on behalf of the Queensland Athletic League (QAL), as it has done and continues to do for the NSW Athletic League (NSWAL).

2026/27 Budget Process

The Board, and the Finance Sub-Committee oversight (chaired by Mat Boyes), are working through the key financial inputs for the VAL Budget and expect the Budget to be finalised at the August board meeting.

There are several major capital items of importance, and the Board is looking at optimal financing options. Capital items include photo finish camera equipment, circular racing finish gantry, mobile scoreboard and a larger equipment van. The Board remains vigilant to maintain the financial protection of the sport in the long term but supports logical, sensible improvements to improve race experience and support staff and volunteers.

Communication

As we seek to grow the sport's participation, please connect with EO Colin Lane val@val.org.au on matters of opportunity, or concern, or follow the VAL on Facebook or Instagram.

Thanks to all our valued volunteers and Clubs for supporting the VAL. It's not lost on me that our sport runs on enormous goodwill from all of you, which we are grateful for.

On a personal note, I am travelling with my daughter to Scotland where we will compete in the Royal Scottish Highland Games running competitions in late July and early August, which is exciting.

Best wishes to everyone.

Charlie

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