

# Officials under fire for surf injury toll

by MARNIE TURNER

THE decision to continue the National surf lifesaving championships at Kurrawa Beach, despite dangerous conditions, goes against the association's basic principles, says ironwoman Reen Corbett.

Corbett, who suffered injuries in the treacherous surf, said she believed officials did not pay enough attention to the safety concerns of athletes.

"We are there to protect lives, not to put them in danger," said Corbett.

"I don't think they paid enough attention to safety."

"You just had to look at how many people were getting hurt and how many of those injuries were serious."

Dozens of competitors, including top ironmen and women, were injured throughout the carnival and yesterday a teenage boat crew member went missing, presumed drowned, after the Kurrawa boat overturned during one of the final events.

Corbett and Samantha O'Brien, from Sydney, had to be rescued on Saturday after they were dumped and severely injured during the semi-finals of the ironwoman event.

They said it should never have happened.

Before the race a unanimous decision was reached by the ironwomen that conditions were too dangerous.

Officials ignored their pleas and started the race anyway, but only half the competitors made it to the end.

"It was pretty scary ... if they want to hold the event in conditions like these, the organisers are going to have to rethink things a bit," said Corbett.

"Safety should be the number one priority."

Corbett did not make it to the final and suffered bruised ribs and an injured back, and will undergo tests today for a suspected punctured kidney.

O'Brien's injuries also put her out of medal contention as she was knocked unconscious when her ski hit her. She was taken to hospital with head injuries.

"Samantha and I are two of the best female surf lifesavers in Australia and if the surf is throwing us around and causing us injuries, more inexperienced people should not have to go out," said Corbett.

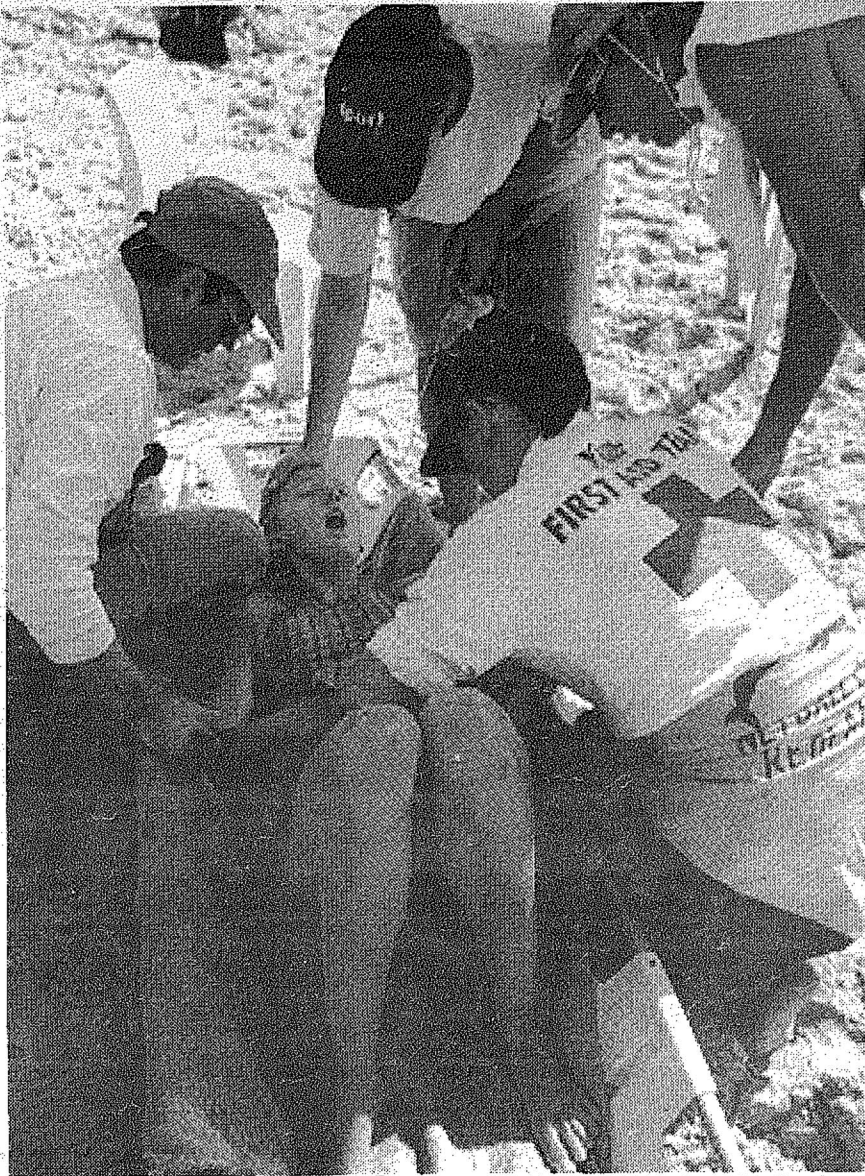
"It is not right to send juniors out in those conditions."

"They waited until way too late to hear the safety concerns."

Fellow ironwoman Karla Gilbert, whose hand was crushed in the heats, said the ultimate decision to compete lay with the athletes, but it was difficult to say 'no' after putting so much time into training.

Ambulance officers said 16 competitors were taken to hospital, throughout the carnival, with head and back injuries.

The on-site first aid tent was also kept busy, with several athletes being treated for cuts, bruises, sprains and other injuries.



**SURF CASUALTY:** Reen Corbett receives emergency treatment after being injured by a huge wave which smashed her board during heats of the lifesaving championships. Corbett suffered bruised ribs and an injured back, and will undergo tests today for a suspected punctured kidney.

## Lifesaving titles end in tragedy

● From Page 1  
Athletes in the first ironman heat failed to complete the course in four-metre surf and the titles were relocated to North Kirra.

On Saturday doctors from the Gold Coast Hospital emergency department phoned safety officers at the championships with fears over the number of competitors taken to hospital with injuries. Eight were hospitalised.

A hospital spokeswoman said they were told by officers at the championships that it was not possible to cancel or postpone the event.

SLSA chief executive Scott Derwin said an immediate investigation would be held into the cause of the accident.

"Surf lifesaving will conduct an immediate investigation into this. We'll look at all the circumstances into the accident," said Mr Derwin.

"It was an unfortunate tragedy and hearts of every lifesaver on the Gold Coast and throughout Australia go out to the family."

"We're not sure what happened to the missing member at this stage."

Mr Derwin said he was confident officials did everything they could

to prevent what they termed a 'freak accident'.

He added that the treacherous conditions, whipped up by Cyclone Beti near New Caledonia, had made the staging of the championships a difficult task.

"It has been one of the most difficult championships to conduct — not that it has been the worst surf — but the worst thing has been the conditions have changed hour by hour," he said.

Mr Derwin said it was premature to say that the championships may be moved to another location next year. Kurrawa was named this year as the venue of the championships for the next 10 years.

"We were confident today our members were able to complete the course. They undertake rescues in conditions more difficult than these," he said.

"The ultimate decision is made by the council referee (Alan Inwood), the national competition director and myself as the CEO."

Ironmen preparing to contest the last event of the day, the open men's final, unanimously agreed to call off the event out of respect to the missing boy and his family.

## Medics warned of surf injuries

DOCTORS from the Gold Coast Hospital made a desperate phone call to organisers of the Australian surf lifesaving championships at the weekend concerned about the number of injuries they were seeing from the event.

A hospital spokeswoman said emergency personnel grew worried on Saturday after 10 people were brought in by ambulance on Saturday and others arrived for treatment under their own steam.

Injuries at the hospital ranged from concussion and strained muscles to cuts and bruises.

The spokeswoman said the unprecedented intervention from hospital staff was prompted by the number of severe injuries which needed treatment.

"The emergency department contacted safety officers at the carnival and expressed their grave concern about potential life-threatening injuries which they were seeing," she said.

"There were too many cases from just one carnival," she said.

## Lifesavers weep as tragedy unfolds

VETERAN Gold Coast surf lifesaver Ron Payne last night said the tragedy surrounding the presumed drowning of a teenage competitor at the Australian surf lifesaving championships was a tragic end to one of the most controversial events on record.

Mr Payne, who has 36 years' experience in surf lifesaving, said the shocking conclusion to the championship was 'an extraordinary situation'.

"I've never seen grown men cry at a surf lifesaving carnival before, but men were openly crying when it was revealed someone was missing," said Mr Payne.

"Emotions were running high and I don't think anyone could believe it had happened."

Mr Payne said he could not remember a carnival where a competitor had died.

He said competitors met with officials yesterday morning prior to the start of the event and a majority voted to compete on the final day.

"This is an extraordinary situation and tragically unfortunate, but no-one is to blame for a tragedy like this," said Mr Payne.

"As lifesavers, we know the risks week in and week out. We train in horrendous conditions and this weekend we were competing in horrendous conditions."

"But when you become a surf lifesaver you

train to risk your life to save others and, sometimes, lifesavers make the ultimate sacrifice," he said.

Mr Payne, who was at yesterday's surf lifesaving carnival at Kurrawa, described the conditions as 'bad and changeable'. But he said conditions were no worse than the national championships of 1989 and 1975.

Mr Payne, who was a champion sweep with the Tallebudgera boat crew for a number of years, said yesterday's seas had a tremendous amount of strength.

"I think it would be unfair to describe these conditions as the worst ever but I think they would've been on a parallel with some of the other championships of the past," he said.

## VIEWPOINT

### The Bulletin

## Tragic end to sports feast

THE power and treachery of heavy seas turned the Australian Surf Life Saving championships at Kurrawa into a scene resembling a battle field.

As waves whipped up by a cyclone in the Pacific smashed boards, dumped swimmers and capsized or hurled surf boats back on to shore, competitors limped or were carried to the first aid tent. Sixteen were taken to hospital with suspected fractures and concussion.

Tragically, it took the disap-

pearance and presumed death yesterday afternoon of a young lifesaver to convince the organisers and the lifesavers themselves that enough was enough.

The attention of the nation and indeed fans overseas had focussed on the Gold Coast yesterday for a sports extravaganza.

While the Gold Coast IndyCar Grand Prix in the streets of Surf-

ers Paradise provided high speed action in a finale to a festival of colour and wide-ranging entertainment, at Kurrawa the gladiators of the surf were locked in combat in a sport devoted primarily to a long tradition of saving lives. The high risks of motor racing are known to everyone, particularly the drivers (and a fire in the pits yesterday reinforced

that point), but young lifesavers, their families and clubmates could not have approached the national titles with any thought or expectation that even though some risks were involved, competing in a surf boat race could have fatal consequences.

Australian Surf Life Saving has said an inquiry will be held. Such an investigation should

note the string of injuries, as well as the incidents that threatened competitor safety from the moment the titles began on Friday. Organisers reportedly overruled the pleas of ironwomen who wanted their semi-final delayed because conditions were too dangerous.

When professional ironmen and women — the people best prepared in the world to handle heavy surf — openly talk about being frightened, the movement should be listening.

1/4/96.