



Rally as One

Building resilient
communities
through tennis

2020-2025





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Introduction

The 2019/20 Australian bushfire season, also known as Black Summer, was one of the most catastrophic fire seasons on record in Australia. Intense and widespread bushfires burned across Australia, with devastating impacts on communities, ecosystems and infrastructure.

The loss of life, homes, wildlife, businesses, livelihoods and the impacts on the mental health and social fabric of so many communities were unprecedented.

But amid the heartbreak, something truly extraordinary happened: from across the country, and the world, kindness and support poured in.

Tennis Australia and the global tennis community rallied together to support bushfire affected communities, raising more than \$6M as part of the 'Aces for Bushfire Relief' fundraising campaign during the 2020 Australian Open. During the campaign the tennis family threw their support behind relief efforts by pledging to donate funds for every ace hit during the Australian summer of tennis. Fans were encouraged to support this idea by participating in a social media campaign designed to encourage anyone, from anywhere, to serve an 'ace' and donate to the disaster relief. Central to the fund-raising efforts was Rally for Relief, a spectacular night of tennis and entertainment led by Roger Federer, Nick Kyrgios, Serena Williams, Rafael Nadal, Caroline Wozniacki, Novak Djokovic and Petra Kvitova, held just prior to the Australian Open 2020 and broadcast to a global audience.

The sheer scale of the bushfires burning in nearly every state and territory saw the international tennis family, including players, sponsors, governing bodies and local tennis communities, lend their support. In addition to the Rally for Relief event and Aces for Bushfire Relief campaign, funds were raised through crowd and TV audience donations, direct player donations, the AO Music Festival, Bid 4 Good online auction and a public facing campaign to raise funds directly for the Red Cross to provide immediate on the ground support.

The Australian Tennis Foundation (ATF), Tennis Australia's official charity, received \$1.2M from the funds raised to deliver the Rally as One program (RAO), a long-term recovery initiative to support communities impacted by bushfires in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria. Using tennis as a vehicle to build social cohesion and community connection, the program delivered community events, tennis activities for children and young people and small grants to rebuild sporting facilities and infrastructure.

Five years on from the Black Summer bushfires, the ATF undertook a review to better understand how RAO contributed to the recovery of regional communities and to inform the role tennis can play in future community-based disaster preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

This report sets out how RAO has supported communities in their recovery to date, and shares stories from some of the 47 communities reached to showcase the difference funds have made. The report also shares some lessons and recommendations for future recovery programming.





Road to recovery

Research and experience tells us that community recovery following natural disasters is a long and complex journey. It goes beyond financial assistance or rebuilding infrastructure, and includes people's sense of hope and normality, social connection and community cohesion over the medium-to-long term.

Sport and community-based activities play a powerful and often under-recognised role in this process. Community sporting events and activities offer more than recreation - they are vital tools for healing, reconnection, and renewal. Enhancing community connectedness is known to serve as a protective factor for the mental health and wellbeing of disaster-affected communities, promoting post-traumatic growth and increasing their resilience to withstand future stressors.

Recognising that recovery takes years, RAO was designed as a five-year initiative (2020-2025),

ensuring a continued focus on communities impacted by bushfires and the availability of support over the medium-to-long-term¹. Leveraging the role of tennis in the social fabric of communities, the program aimed to increase social connection, community cohesion, and build resilience in young people and communities.

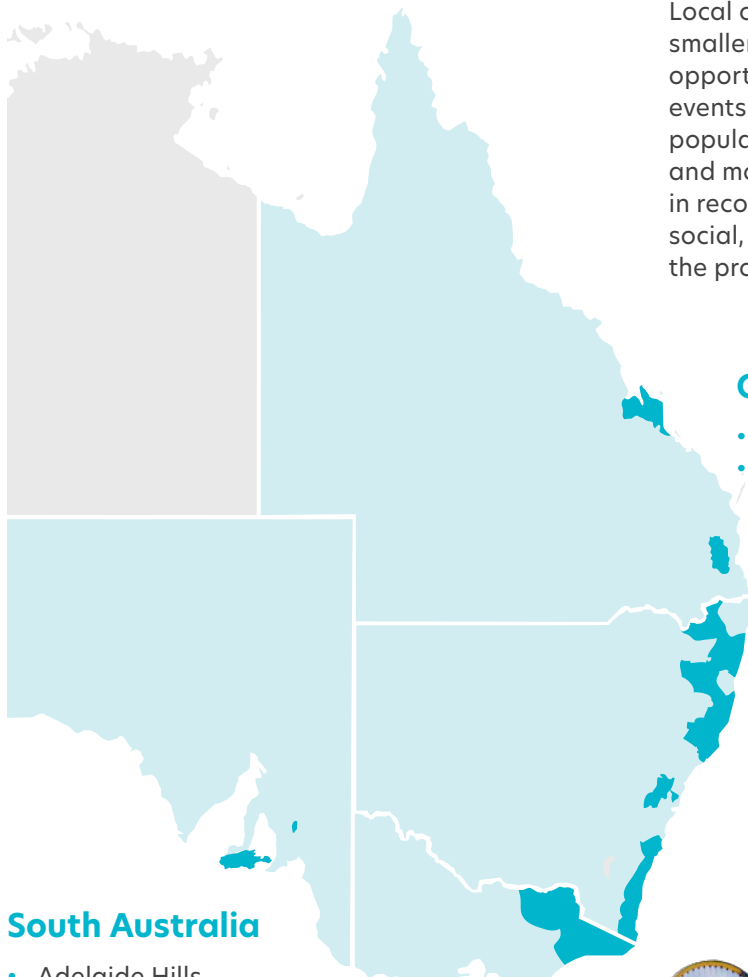
RAO's medium-to-long-term approach proved critical as recovery from the Black Summer bushfires coincided with the compounding challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in some regions, catastrophic flooding shortly after the bushfires.

¹ RAO was based on the findings of the Melbourne University study: Beyond Bushfires - Community, Resilience, Recovery.

RAO adapted delivery by adjusting timing and returning to communities facing multiple disasters, offering opportunities for people to reconnect at different stages of recovery. While modest in scale, these repeat visits provided valuable continuity and reassurance for communities navigating the uncertainty of overlapping crises.

RAO covered 23 local government areas and 47 communities, reaching 20,000 people impacted by bushfires and floods across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

While the impacts of the Black Summer bushfires were widespread and many peri-urban areas were affected, the majority of communities supported by RAO were in rural, regional, and remote areas. Local clubs are central gathering points in these smaller communities, but resources are limited, and opportunities for organised sport or community events can be scarce. By reaching beyond larger population centres, RAO helped ensure that smaller and more isolated communities were not overlooked in recovery and had access to the recreational, social, and mental and physical wellbeing benefits the program offered.



Queensland

- Livingstone
- Somerset

New South Wales

- Armidale
- Bega Valley
- Blue Mountains
- Clarence Valley
- Coffs Harbour
- Eurobodalla
- Hawkesbury
- Hornsby
- Kempsey
- Mid-Coast
- Port Macquarie-Hastings
- Shoalhaven
- Tenterfield

South Australia

- Adelaide Hills
- Kangaroo Island

Victoria

- Alpine
- East Gippsland
- Indigo
- Towong
- Wangaratta
- Wodonga





Impact 2020-2025



85,000

hours of joy delivered to families recovering from bushfires and floods



7,000

racquets, nets and balls supplied so kids and families could keep playing together



20,000

people reconnected with friends, family, and neighbours through play



181

community members and coaches equipped with the skills to keep tennis - and community - strong



137

free tennis programs delivered in schools and local clubs turning play into recovery



56

infrastructure projects funded, totalling over \$970,000, to rebuild and upgrade local clubs and courts at the heart of community life



8,500

children regained routine, confidence and a sense of normality after disaster

4Rs of Community-Based Disaster Recovery through Sport

To better understand the many ways RAO contributed to community-based disaster recovery, the ATF developed a simple framework to guide the review known as the 4Rs of Community-Based Disaster Recovery through Sport.

The framework captures four domains of impact that are seen as central to how communities recover after disaster: **Respite** for physical and mental wellbeing, **Restoring** normality and hope, **Rebuilding** social networks and connections, and **Reconnecting** with the built and natural environment.

For communities, these four areas describe the lived experience of recovery – from the immediate relief of coming together in moments of respite, through to the longer-term rebuilding of clubs and facilities. For the ATF, the 4Rs provided a clear way of organising and communicating the outcomes of a program that was never just about tennis, but about helping people feel safe, connected, and hopeful again.

The framework helped to draw together diverse stories and outcomes into a coherent picture of change and ensured that the review could capture the full value of the program – not only the immediate activities delivered, but the ripple effects that strengthened wellbeing, relationships, and community resilience over time.

01 Respite PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING

Sport and recreational activities can offer vital relief from the stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue associated with disaster recovery. These moments of respite help individuals regulate their mental health, stay physically active, and experience enjoyment amidst adversity.

02 Restoring NORMALITY AND HOPE

Participation in structured sporting activities can reintroduce routine, familiarity, and joy into everyday life. Sport and events serve as symbols of continuity, helping communities feel grounded and hopeful as they navigate the uncertainties of recovery.

03 Rebuilding SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CONNECTIONS

Community-based sport has the power to reconnect individuals and groups who may have become isolated or fragmented after a disaster. It creates safe, inclusive spaces for rebuilding trust, sharing experiences, and strengthening social networks.

04 Reconnecting WITH THE BUILT AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Sporting activities held in community courts, local parks, or beaches, foster renewed connection to both the built and natural environment. These experiences offer not only physical movement but also emotional grounding and collective re-engagement with spaces that may have been damaged or disrupted.

01 Respite

FOR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL
WELLBEING





Physical and mental wellbeing

Sport and recreational activities can offer vital relief from the stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue associated with disaster recovery. These moments of respite help individuals regulate their mental health, stay physically active, and experience enjoyment amidst adversity.

RAO delivered state-based community events and tennis roadshows for rural, regional and remote communities impacted by bushfires and floods. The roadshows were a travelling series of events designed to: rebuild social networks and connections; contribute to mental and physical wellbeing, and create opportunities for participation in sport. Generally held over two days in each community, events included an evening of social tennis activities, live music, food, and family entertainment, complimented by a program of tennis activities with local clubs and primary schools. These sessions provided coaching and tennis lessons, racquets for children, and information and support to encourage ongoing

involvement in tennis. Families attending select community events were also able to have a hit with Australian Tennis Ambassadors such as Wally Maseur, John Fitzgerald, Daria Saville and Casey Dellacqua and take photos with Australian Open Trophies, connecting disaster-affected communities to the broader tennis community. Community events were also held for Australia Day and followed a similar format.

During 2020-2025, RAO delivered 46 community events reaching over 11,000 people in communities impacted by bushfires and floods.

RAO roadshow events were highly valued by communities, offering moments of relief, recreation and a positive outlet for the stress and fatigue associated with disaster recovery. By creating spaces for people to come together in ways that were social, physical, and fun, RAO provided not only distraction from hardship but also opportunities for mutual support and optimism for the future.

“First and foremost, it’s really about being an ear and letting people talk. You find that people tend to hang around a little bit at the event and want to chat and relive and talk about what has happened here, they want to process it with you. So these community events give us the ability to do that.”

Former President - Lobethal Tennis Club, Adelaide Hills, South Australia

“When you talk to others who were in the fire, they know because they’ve gone through the same thing. Tennis to me, makes you forget everything for a little while, this event is a chance to do something different away from the farm and away from it all.”

Club member - Cobargo Sports and Tennis Club, Bega Valley, New South Wales

“There were so many of us burned out that we’ve all been working on our own properties rather than being out helping each other like we normally would. I’m looking forward to getting some frustration out and slamming the ball around a bit!”

Community member - Stokes Bay, Kangaroo Island, South Australia

“To have a community event means somewhere for people to come and actually talk about what’s happened, if they want to, it’s just an outlet away from work and home. People can use up some energy playing sport which has been really good.”

Club Coach - Lobethal Tennis Club, Adelaide Hills, South Australia

RAO’s commitment to visiting smaller, rural, regional or remote communities was particularly significant. Rural and remote communities face unique challenges in disaster recovery, including geographic isolation, limited access to services, and fewer opportunities for recreation and social connection. Large-scale events in regional centres often remain out of reach for residents of smaller towns, who must weigh long travel times against ongoing recovery tasks such as rebuilding homes, farm infrastructure, and restoring livelihoods. By bringing events directly into these communities, RAO not only removed barriers to participation but also signalled that smaller places mattered.

Equally important was RAO’s decision to return to communities over time. Return visits and tennis community events in the years after disasters were particularly meaningful, reinforcing social connections, providing continuity of support, and demonstrating that RAO’s commitment extended beyond the immediate aftermath. For communities, knowing that someone would come back created a sense of being remembered and valued—something many other organisations did not provide.



RESPIRE



“For RAO to come to our little town and hold these events, it’s unheard of! For those of us in Genoa, it’s a six hour round trip to somewhere like Bairnsdale. It’s unrealistic for us to attend community events, even if we wanted to, because we need to work on our properties and can’t justify the trip. So to have this event and the AO trophies in our little town is a once in a lifetime experience and means the world.”

Community member - Genoa,
East Gippsland, Victoria

“RAO worked with smaller communities impacted by the bushfires in the Port-Macquarie-Hastings area and there was always a mix of surprise and appreciation that the program came to them, rather than them having to travel to another regional centre. There was always such a buzz at those smaller events and the families loved it.”

Tennis New South Wales

“Tennis has been here from the start until now, the other sports like cricket and footy were here for the first six months but then they left and we haven’t had any engagement since. We really value the fact you came back!”

Community member - Mallacoota,
East Gippsland, Victoria

For many disaster-affected communities, RAO community events meant far more than tennis. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic shortly after the Black Summer bushfires diverted national attention and resources, making recovery even harder. Against this backdrop, the roadshow events became a visible demonstration of recognition and solidarity, and they played a vital role in lifting community morale and preventing feelings of neglect through consistent support and communication.



“The world’s attention understandably shifted to the pandemic shortly after the bushfires - but our rural and regional communities were trying to navigate the pandemic whilst also rebuilding their homes and livelihoods. There was the sense they weren’t receiving the support and attention they otherwise would have - these community tennis events were an important reminder they had not been forgotten.”

Tennis Victoria

“We’re a tiny community; we’re in the great shadow lands of support really - from when the bushfires happened to afterwards and now with the pandemic we’ve felt invisible . So, to have this event where the community and the kids feel supported and valued, that they count and that they are worthy of this special attention...we’re so lucky.”

Community member - Genoa,
East Gippsland, Victoria

Where possible, RAO community events partnered with service providers such as Beyond Blue, Headspace and StandBy Support to ensure disaster-affected communities had access to the help they needed most. At each event, these organisations set up information stands and spoke directly with community members, offering practical guidance, trauma support, and recovery planning. This partnership meant that people could connect with specialist services in-person and on the spot - an important step in addressing the ongoing mental health impacts of the bushfires, which were further compounded by the challenges of COVID-19 and subsequent floods.



CASE STUDY

Together again on court

How a travelling tennis roadshow brought joy and connection to Victorian communities impacted by bushfires.

In the years following the Black Summer bushfires in Victoria, rebuilding homes and infrastructure was only part of the challenge — many communities also needed time away from the stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue associated with disaster recovery.

That's what Rally as One's Community Tennis Roadshow set out to bring back.

In October 2022, Rally as One took tennis on the road — travelling 1,437 kilometres over eight days and staging four community events across the East Gippsland and Towong Shires, including Genoa, Mallacoota, Orbost and Corryong. Each of these towns had been deeply affected by the 2019-20 bushfires, yet each community remained focused on rebuilding — and reconnecting.

Each event offered far more than a few hours of play. Children painted faces and played giant Jenga under market umbrellas; families relaxed on picnic blankets, shared food, and cheered one another through friendly rallies; live music by local artists filled the air; and the Australian Open trophies glistened in the sun — a small but powerful reminder that the nation hadn't forgotten these regional towns.

More than 550 people came together across the four stops, with families, schools, and community groups reconnecting after years of stress and isolation. For many children, it was their first introduction to tennis — an entry point into ongoing local programs supported through Rally as One.

As one local in Orbost said, "It was the first time since the fires that we've all come together just to have fun. You could feel the relief — the smiles, the laughter, the energy coming back." Another in Corryong reflected, "You don't realise how much you need an event like this until it happens. It wasn't about tennis, really — it was about connection."

That sense of shared joy was exactly what the Australian Tennis Foundation hoped to achieve. "Tennis has an incredible ability to bring people together," says Vicki Reid, Executive Director of the Australian Tennis Foundation. "Through Rally as One, we wanted to create opportunities for people to reconnect, to share positive experiences, and to remember what it feels like to smile and have fun again."





The Rally as One community events in Orbost and Corryong also coincided with AO on the Road – a trophy tour that saw the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup and Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup visit more than 20 regional towns across Victoria in the lead-up to the 2023 Australian Open.

“AO on the Road is a wonderful initiative because it creates a tangible connection for people across Victoria to the amazing event that is the Australian Open,” said Australian tennis champion and former Davis Cup captain John Fitzgerald. “Having travelled to many towns as part of AO on the Road myself, I’ve experienced how special it is to bring these magnificent and historic trophies to country Victoria. It’s also a great opportunity to showcase our fantastic regional tennis communities and the tremendous work so many are doing to get more people of all ages involved in tennis.”

At the Orbost and Corryong events, locals posed with the silverware – affectionately known as “Norm and Daphne” – just like the champions before them. Live music, appearances by tennis legends, craft for kids, Tennis Hot Shots come-and-try sessions, food trucks, and games added to the festival atmosphere.

“We are proud to be partnering with Tennis Victoria on this tour to introduce more than 300 kids to tennis and provide schools and clubs in these regional communities with the equipment and programs they need to continue playing,” said Reid.

Through an investment of over \$35,000 in regional Victorian communities, the Roadshow delivered far more than a sporting experience. It offered respite – a reason to gather, to celebrate, and to recognise how far these communities had come.



02 Restoring

NORMALITY AND HOPE



Participation in structured sporting activities can reintroduce routine, familiarity, and joy into everyday life. Sporting activities can serve as symbols of continuity, helping communities feel grounded and hopeful as they navigate the uncertainties of recovery.

During 2020–2025, following community events, RAO delivered almost 2000 free before-and-after school tennis coaching sessions at local tennis clubs and/or primary schools in 26 communities impacted by bushfires and floods, reaching over 4800 children. These programs were designed to build confidence through rewarding positive behaviour, teaching valuable resilience skills and fostering friendship and connections with their peers. Professional coaches led fun and inclusive tennis activities, with all equipment supplied directly to the school or local club so children could continue playing at any time. 3800 nets, rackets and balls were distributed during the program. Children also received certificates recognising their resilience and positive attitudes, reinforcing a sense of achievement and pride during a difficult time.

The value of these tennis programs extended far beyond the tennis sessions themselves. Parents and teachers observed that the tennis sessions offered a return to regular routines for children, reducing their stress and providing stability or normality at a time when families were in the midst of rebuilding homes and livelihoods.

“We really appreciate RAO and Tennis SA that have come over and run sessions for the kids. A lot of us just don’t have the energy or time at the moment to put into running programs for our kids. They’ve missed out on sport over summer so these programs have been great for a sense of routine.”

Parent - Stokes Bay, Kangaroo Island, South Australia



“Communities need sport to move forward. We need sport to recover. When we could bring our kids back to start playing again, it was amazing. It was like being normal again. We could all gather together. We could check in on families, we could offer support to each other.”

Secretary - Cudlee Creek Tennis Club, Adelaide Hills, South Australia

“RAO gave us stuff to play with, we didn’t have anything, we didn’t have any nets, no balls, nothing. Our focus was on getting the kids out playing again, giving them a sense of normality.”

Club member - Stokes Bay Tennis Club, Kangaroo Island, South Australia

RESTORING



“These programs have been helpful in just getting back to a normal routine, children playing together and parents socialising together again, it’s been a long winter and it just brings families back together again!”

Club member - Western Districts Tennis Club, Kangaroo Island, South Australia

“Tennis is a means of returning to the normal activities that we all love and enjoy, and I think that’s what a lot of us in Mallacoota wanted to be able to do.”

Treasurer - Mallacoota Youth and Sports Club, East Gippsland, Victoria

RAO also invested in sustainability by combining immediate opportunities for play with longer-term investments in coaching. During 2020-2025, over 110 coaches and community members received training and/or support to build skills and confidence in delivering tennis activities in their community. This approach ensured that opportunities for children and their families to play and learn continued beyond the initial recovery phase and supported the long-term revitalisation of the game.



“A lot of the communities that RAO was delivered in are small communities where it’s hard to find an accredited or qualified coach to deliver programs. So we tried to leverage being present in the community thanks to RAO by also delivering upskilling activities like hot shots coaching courses for volunteers. That means these clubs don’t need a qualified coach to be able to continue deliver tennis activities for kids.”

Tennis Victoria

“The coaching course in our small town has been priceless. It has breathed life back into our only sports facility and restored a sense of pride and achievement in the club and community. We are weary, but the hotshots coaching has invigorated us to invest back in ourselves and revitalise some of those normal day-to-day activities that got lost after the fires like kids tennis”

Club member - Genoa Sports Club, East Gippsland, Victoria

“We have all this interest and enthusiasm here and the coaching course has allowed us to harness that enthusiasm, and that is going to support a vibrant and strong club going into the future.”

Coach - Mallacoota Youth and Sports Club, East Gippsland, Victoria



RAO kids tennis programs highlight how structured tennis activities can deliver more than physical activity – they create stability for children, ease pressure on families, and reactivate local clubs and contribute to lasting participation.



Serving up resilience

Kangaroo Valley's children find joy, resilience and connection through tennis

When the Currowan fire roared through Kangaroo Valley, New South Wales, in January 2020, it left behind more than scorched hillsides. Homes were lost, businesses destroyed, and the tight-knit community of fewer than 900 residents was suddenly cut off from the outside world. What had been a lush tourist haven became a blackened landscape of fallen trees and melted fences.

"The kids at the school were hit really hard," recalls Kate Hole, a local tennis coach. "Some of them lost their homes. Others, their parents lost jobs or whole workplaces. It really impacted everyone and still does."

Young people are often overlooked in disaster recovery efforts — children in regional areas can face disrupted schooling, anxiety and a loss of normal routines. Rally as One

made sure those children weren't forgotten, investing in activities designed for them — creating safe spaces to reconnect, move, and play again.

In Kangaroo Valley, that meant free weekly tennis sessions for every child at the local primary school, funded through Rally as One and the Australian Tennis Foundation. "It was something really positive for them to have," Kate says.



“For many, it was their first time holding a racquet. They learned the basics—forehands, backhands, rallies—but most importantly, they were together, laughing, encouraging each other.”

Kate began the program in 2021 and has reached children from kindergarten through to year six, building confidence and community connection term after term, each year since. “The kids were already really resilient,” Kate says, “but tennis teaches you life skills—how to win and

lose gracefully, how to work as a team, and how to pick yourself up when things don’t go your way. I’ve seen them become more supportive of each other, more confident, more connected.”

Each term ended with a celebration barbecue, where parents, teachers, and neighbours joined in. “Everyone comes along—it’s about the whole community,” Kate says. “Rally as One wasn’t just about tennis skills; it was about building resilience, respect, and strong relationships across Kangaroo Valley. When we get together, you can really feel that sense of belonging.”

In a place that has faced fire, isolation, and even floods in the years since, these moments of shared joy matter deeply. As Kate puts it:

“After everything, to see the kids out there smiling and cheering each other on—it’s exactly what this town needed. It gave them something to look forward to again.”



03 Rebuilding

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CONNECTIONS



Community-based sport has the power to reconnect individuals and groups who may have become isolated or fragmented after a disaster. It creates safe, inclusive spaces for rebuilding connections, sharing experiences, and strengthening social networks.

When disasters hit, they often fragment social networks and usual gathering places are disrupted, leaving people feeling isolated. The combined impact of the Black Summer bushfires and pandemic led to heightened anxiety, depression, and a sense of disconnection from important support including family, friends, and neighbours. Social connections that enable collective healing and action, are one of the strongest predictors of how well communities recover after disasters.

For many rural, regional and remote communities, RAO community events were among the first times people could gather together since the bushfires due to pandemic public health measures such as lock downs and social distancing. In this sense, the community events did far more than deliver sporting activities: they helped restore everyday bonds of social life, creating spaces where people could check in on each other, rebuild social connections, and re-establish a sense of belonging.

“So many people turned up for this community event - they’re not even tennis players! They came not just because there was food, not just because there was entertainment, but because it is the first opportunity to spend time with their friends and neighbours. It’s a reason to leave their property which requires so much work, and it’s a reason to feel connected to the community again in a positive way, in a safe way.”

Community member - Genoa,
East Gippsland, Victoria.





REBUILDING

“The bushfires were devastating and sad, so to have an event a couple of years later after everything has been so tough and everyone is trying to rebuild, it’s awesome to have a day where they can just relax and have fun”

Treasurer - Mount Torrens Bombers Tennis Club, Adelaide Hill, South Australia

RAO community events not only revived existing social networks but they also helped build new ones, with the impact of RAO community events extending beyond the day itself. The opportunity for families, clubs, and schools to gather around tennis re-energised local clubs and sparked new interest in tennis.

Sustained opportunities for social connection are critical for maintaining wellbeing and resilience after disasters, helping communities avoid a return to isolation once the initial recovery phase passes. RAO community events not only brought families, friends and neighbours back together in the moment, but also led to more children picking up racquets, parents re-engaging with clubs, and neighbours reconnecting around shared facilities. These ripple effects demonstrate how tennis can transform short bursts of relief into enduring benefits and lay the foundations for longer-term community recovery.

“We have definitely seen higher engagement off the back of RAO initiatives like the community events and coaching courses. We’ve seen that younger demographic coming back to the tennis clubs and then the parents returning back to the game as well which has been really encouraging. Clubs have become affiliates again after many years away and we’ve seen inter-club competitions starting up again which has been incredible.”

Tennis Victoria

“RAO was a really interesting entry point in terms of local clubs within the Port Macquarie-Hastings area reconnecting with each other through the community events that brought several smaller clubs and their members together. Through those connections membership of the clubs has gone up and we’re actually in the process of starting up the interclub competitions again.”

Tennis New South Wales

The Australian Open 2025 marked five years since RAO began to support communities impacted by bushfires and floods. To recognise and celebrate the incredible journey of community recovery, 41 families (180 people) from eight communities in regional Victoria were hosted in Melbourne for an unforgettable trip to experience the Happy Slam in person. These families were VIP guests at an exhibition match during the Australian Open's Opening Week.

For many, the trip was more than a special day out – it was a chance to step away from recovery work, spend time together in a joyful setting and connect with other families who had lived through similar challenges. Being welcomed at one of the world's premier sporting events was also a powerful signal of recognition – reminding communities that their stories and resilience were valued on a national stage.

“The smell of smoke makes it feel like yesterday, you can close your eyes and one thing can suddenly take you right back. I had to pack our bags and take our three boys out of there, my husband stayed back to fight the fires. This is huge for us, it's great to be able to go somewhere like this – it's an unbelievable experience. It's like a dream come true for us.”

Community member and RAO participant
- Corryong, Towong, Victoria



“I just want to say a massive thank you for the opportunity Rally As One and the Australian Tennis Foundation gave my family. We had an amazing weekend at the Australian Open – from our incredible front-row seats at Rod Laver to the family-friendly activities. The trip was perfectly organised and made it so easy for us to enjoy the experience together. It was a truly unforgettable experience for all of us.”

Community member and RAO participant
- Bright, Alpine Shire, Victoria



Rallying On

Five years on from the Black Summer bushfires Clifton Creek Tennis Club continues to serve up connection and recovery

For Meagan Dennett and her family from Clifton Creek, the Black Summer bushfires were a defining moment. Their farm sat in the path of the 2019-20 East Gippsland fires in Victoria that forced repeated evacuation and blanketed the region in smoke for weeks. "My husband and I both work in emergency management, both on the fireground and coordinating relief efforts

through local government," Meagan recalls. "We were evacuated on numerous occasions, often separately – he'd be out on the fireground and I would have to make decisions on my own and evacuate our young girls into town, not knowing what was happening. Our lives were just on hold during that time."

Like for so many in East Gippsland, the experience lingers. "As soon as there's any sign of smoke, the kids still worry," she says. "They're concerned for their friends, pets and family. You carry that with you – it's a risk we take living in such an amazing environment, but it's always there."





In the months and the years that followed, the Clifton Creek Tennis Club became a cornerstone of their recovery. Supported by Rally as One, the club hosted free weekly kids tennis sessions that brought families and neighbours back together. "It's been an amazing group of people that have rallied together to support the kids in their own recovery," Meagan says. "We had our courts resurfaced, nets and equipment donated, and we ran community events – it really helped us reconnect after the fires."

Although the COVID-19 pandemic slowed progress, the renewed energy at the club was clear. "When we were able to come back together again during

COVID, we really embraced that. Membership has really improved. Week after week we have new people wanting to join – they drive past, see all the excitement, and want to be part of it."

Five years on, Rally as One invited families from communities impacted by the Black Summer bushfires to the Australian Open – a symbolic moment to celebrate how far they had come. Meagan's daughter Gemma was chosen to perform the coin toss on centre court.

"When we got the email, it was absolutely amazing," Meagan says. "Gemma practiced all week – I think there are dents in the floorboards from the number of coins she dropped!"

For the family, the experience was about far more than tennis. "We travelled from our rural community to stay in Melbourne, which we don't often get the chance to do. The kids were so excited, riding the tram to the Open, seeing all the people, they were really full of hope and excitement. It was such a joy to just relax together."

Being part of Rally as One also reminded Meagan of the broader network that had stood behind them through recovery.

"We'd just like to really thank the Australian Tennis Foundation for this opportunity," she says. "Five years on from an event like that, we're so busy on our properties looking after cattle and our businesses, and you don't often get a chance to stop. To be able to come together again, as a family and community, has meant so much."

Through tennis – on their local court and under the lights of Melbourne Park – the Clifton Creek community rediscovered connection, belonging, and the confidence to look ahead. She says,

"We'll take this experience into everything we do. It's a reminder of how far we've come – together."

04 Reconnecting

WITH THE BUILT AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



Sporting activities held in local clubs and courts, local parks, or beaches, can foster renewed connection to both the built and natural environment. These experiences offer not only physical movement but also emotional grounding and collective re-engagement with spaces that may have been damaged or disrupted.

Community sport is the lifeblood for many rural, regional and remote communities. The Black Summer bushfires had a profound impact on local tennis clubs, either through damaging facilities and courts, or through the suspension of summer play and events, and the loss of vital funds to operate the club. For some communities, the local sports or tennis club is much more than a place to play - it is also the heart of the town. Local sports or tennis clubs often serve as the primary social gathering space, hosting events, meetings, and celebrations, and providing a place where neighbours can come together, share experiences, and support one another. When bushfires damaged tennis clubs and facilities, communities not only lost access to sport but also to one of their most important spaces for social connection and belonging.



“The clubrooms themselves were destroyed, wiped off the face of the earth pretty much on the night of the 3rd, which was a really traumatic experience for a lot of people, because that’s the community hub at the western end of the island.”

Club member - Stokes Bay Tennis Club, Kangaroo Island, South Australia



“We’re realizing just how much the club meant to the community. It was an outlet for us in terms of physical activity and mental wellbeing. It’s a social thing that we do together. So rebuilding is a really good way that we can get the community healing. I know it’s a long road, but we’re incredibly motivated to do it.”

Club Member - Stokes Bay Tennis Club, Kangaroo Island, South Australia.

RECONNECTING



During 2020-2025 Tennis Australia provided 56 small infrastructure grants totalling \$972,690 to repair and upgrade local clubhouses, sporting facilities and courts that had been damaged or disrupted by bushfires. RAO grants were often combined with other grants such as Tennis Australia's Court Rebate Scheme and Bushfire Community Development Relief Fund as well as grants provided by local, state and federal government. These projects contributed a total of over \$10m worth of community infrastructure upgrades.

Grants were used for diverse repairs and upgrades including: rebuilding or upgrading clubhouse facilities; rebuilding or resurfacing courts; restoring or upgrading court lighting; purchase and replacement of essential equipment such as ball machines and shade structures; purchase and replacement of essential machinery for venue maintenance; hitting wall installations; and accessibility upgrades including wheelchair ramps, digital locks and booking systems.

RAO infrastructure grants contributed to more than equipment or physical upgrades - they offered communities a tangible way to reclaim familiar spaces, restore a sense of normality, and re-establish pride and ownership in local facilities. By bringing people back into their local clubs, RAO supported people to reconnect with each other, and re-engage with the built and natural environments that anchor their daily lives, supporting both social and emotional recovery.

“Regionally a local sports club is incredibly important, it’s often the only social hub and losing it has a big impact on a community. Kangaroo Island is remote - it’s separate from the mainland, you take a ferry to get there, the locals all drive into the one place, the local club, on a Friday or a Saturday night and that’s the main reason they play tennis - to connect with community and have a few drinks and socialise. That’s the impact of the infrastructure grants - it’s not just about the physical rebuilding it’s also about rebuilding the social connections again.”

Tennis South Australia

“The upgrades are amazing. We want to be able to include anyone who wants to play tennis or use our courts for recreation. We can do that now”

Secretary - Cudlee Creek Tennis Club,
Adelaide Hills, South Australia



“I’ve never seen all the courts being used at the same time, this is amazing to have everyone here. This is the first time we’ve turned on our new lights and we are thrilled.”

President - Condobolin Tennis Club,
Lachlan, New South Wales

Rebuilding tennis facilities was not just about functionality – the visible improvements supported by RAO such as resurfaced courts, rebuilt clubrooms, or upgraded lighting also served as tangible markers of progress and resilience, offering reassurance that recovery was underway. For many, these upgrades were not just repairs but also investments in the future of their communities, helping to restore a sense of pride in place.

“Stokes Bay and Western Districts courts were burnt to the ground, nothing left. Today Stokes Bay has a new community hall that overlooks the rebuilt tennis courts and Western Districts has new broader club facilities that cover a number of different codes, but RAO contributed to the tennis courts rebuild. That can mean so much to a community because whilst they might personally still be rebuilding, they’ve got that facility they can access.”

Tennis South Australia

“Both Corryong and Cudgewa were impacted by the bushfires with their tennis courts needing resurfacing - in Corryong’s case they completely transformed the tennis facilities into a central hub, creating an eight-court facility that can deliver more programming including summer competition - the community can look back and say look at what we’ve achieved and what we now have access to, and that came off the back of the necessity to rebuild and from seeing it as an opportunity. RAO was a contributor to that transformation.”

Tennis Victoria



“I think it’s one of those clear physical signs of recovery occurring, seeing a local clubhouse or court go from being damaged or destroyed to what it’s now become with repairs or new courts. Emotional and mental recovery is not necessarily visible, but things like that are, and that’s really important for a community to see tangible progress.”

Tennis Victoria

CASE STUDY

From Ashes to Aces

From devastation to renewal, the Stokes Bay Tennis Club's recovery shows the power of tennis to spark resilience and bring a community back together.



During January 2020, residents of Kangaroo Island in South Australia watched as an emergency 'watch and act' warning transformed into catastrophic bushfire conditions. There was little hope for the township of Stokes Bay as bushfires tore through the small village and beautiful landscape. The fires devastated homes, farmland and native bushland — transforming a tranquil coastal village into a blackened landscape.

The Stokes Bay Community Hall fell victim to the flames, along with the homes of seven of the club's nine members. For generations, the hall had been a vital and inclusive hub for the community — a place where people of all ages gathered for Saturday tennis, dances, and celebrations. Its loss, alongside the destruction of the courts and clubrooms, was deeply felt.

"The fire swept through on the 3rd of January — it was something we'd never seen before," recalls Marina Gregor, a long-time member of the Stokes Bay Tennis Club. "Every member of our tennis club was affected in one way or another. It took out livestock, fences, homes, cars — and our clubrooms, which had just been renovated in December. Our three courts, nets and fencing were gone, and even the surface was damaged."

"On the night of the fire all these buildings were alight," remembers Kate Stanton, from the Stokes Bay Hall Committee. "Our main kitchen and dining area were completely totalled, and the heat burnt all our backstops. The court surface was completely ruined — there was nothing retrievable."

"We lost everything," adds Tracy Downing from the Western Districts Tennis Club.

"All the sporting clubs lost their memorabilia, their equipment, their sense of place. The tennis club lost its courts, nets, fences and match balls. It was devastating."

Yet even in those early months, the community began talking about rebuilding — not just the facilities, but the spirit of connection that made Stokes Bay special. "We realised just how much tennis meant to the community," says Marina. "It's not just physical activity — it's a social thing we do together."

It's a really good way we can help the community heal."

With support from Rally as One and the Australian Tennis Foundation, that vision started to take shape. A \$40,000 grant helped fund the repair of the tennis courts, clubrooms, kitchen and playground – including a new solar system to power court lights and provide additional energy for the kitchen and a planned conference room. "Now we've got a clean slate," says Tracy. "We're looking at new opportunities – how to get tennis and people back, and get the community involved again."

During the rebuild, nearby clubs opened their doors so the Stokes Bay players could keep playing. "The rest of the clubs were amazingly supportive," Marina recalls. "Being able to use their courts kept everyone connected and lifted our spirits."

The shared hope of one day returning to their own courts and a new community hall has now been realised. The new Stokes Bay Community Hall officially reopened in late 2023, rebuilt with modern facilities and once again serving as the beating heart of local life – a place for sport, gatherings and celebration.

As the community returns to the courts beside the new hall, the meaning of the rebuild is clear.

In Stokes Bay, tennis has done more than rebuild a club – it has reconnected a community.





Lessons Learned

The RAO review highlighted several important lessons about how tennis can contribute to community-based disaster recovery, and how future initiatives can build on this foundation to strengthen community resilience.

1 Small communities matter

RAO's greatest impact was often felt in smaller, more isolated towns. In places like Genoa, Stokes Bay, and Mallacoota, the decision to bring events directly into the community—rather than concentrating delivery in regional centres—was critical. These visits demonstrated that every community, regardless of size, was valued and not forgotten. Future programs should continue to prioritise rural and remote areas, where the presence of external support can be both symbolic and transformative.

Going forward, recovery initiatives should be more integrated with state and regional Tennis Association development and growth plans. Aligning recovery activities with existing participation programs (such as Hot Shots or Opportunity Knocks) would enable programs like RAO to strengthen relationships between associations, clubs, and local members, while contributing to the long-term growth of the game.

Embedding these linkages early ensures that recovery programs reinforce the existing tennis ecosystem, increasing both sustainability and reach.

2 Continuity builds trust

Returning to communities over time proved just as important as the initial visit. Repeat engagements provided reassurance, sustained connection, and signalled long-term commitment. Communities often commented that “tennis came back when others didn't.” For future recovery programs, this continuity—through multiple visits or ongoing partnerships—should be seen as essential, not optional.

4 Strengthen partnerships for holistic recovery

While RAO engaged external partners such as Beyond Blue, StandBy Support, Headspace and local fire authorities to attend community events, these collaborations were largely occasional. However, when activated, they provided valuable wrap-around support for families and individuals navigating the emotional and practical impacts of disaster recovery. Future RAO programming should proactively establish and formalise partnerships with mental health, wellbeing, and emergency service organisations as part of program design. Building relationships with organisations that have specialist expertise—but may lack resources for on-the-ground outreach—would create mutually beneficial partnerships that extend the reach and impact of all involved.

3 Invest in sustainability

RAO's combination of community events, coaching courses, and small infrastructure grants helped communities keep both tennis and social connection alive long after the program team had left. Building local capacity—through coach training, equipment provision, and club development—ensured that recovery benefits were embedded within the community itself.

5 Understand local dynamics

Working with communities means navigating complex local relationships, histories, and sensitivities. When new opportunities or resources are introduced, comparisons and tensions can naturally arise—particularly in regions where neighbouring communities have experienced different levels of impact or attention during recovery. Future programs should be mindful of these dynamics and maintain transparency in how communities are selected, prioritised, and engaged. Clear and consistent communication, along with equitable access to opportunities, can help preserve trust, inclusivity, and fairness across regions.

6 Support preparedness, not just recovery

Many local clubs noted that they were unprepared for the impact of bushfires and floods and lacked mitigation plans for how to protect or re-establish operations. In several communities, tennis clubs also found themselves acting as informal emergency hubs during bushfires and/or floods offering essential facilities such as hot water, showers, and toilets. While this role was often unplanned, it reveals the potential for clubs to be included in local emergency management and resilience planning.

Future collaboration and partnerships with relevant state government agencies and local emergency management services could support clubs to integrate simple preparedness, risk management, and facility-readiness into their annual planning and would strengthen the role of sport in local resilience systems.

7 Recognise climate change as a constant backdrop

As extreme weather events become more frequent, communities are increasingly recovering from one disaster while preparing for the next. Programs like RAO must therefore remain flexible, adaptive, and responsive to evolving local conditions. Embedding climate resilience thinking within sport and community programming—through facility design, scheduling, and resource planning—will be critical to future effectiveness.

8 Resource for scale and longevity

The success of RAO demonstrates the value of sustained, community-based recovery through sport. However, scaling up such approaches requires realistic resourcing, staffing continuity, and cross-sector partnerships. Tennis Association staff noted that, while they were well placed to deliver the tennis component of RAO, the broader logistics, marketing, and reporting requirements placed significant additional pressure on teams already managing competing work demands.

Looking ahead, there may be value in exploring a scalable delivery model that shares responsibilities across partners—leveraging the strengths of Associations in program delivery, while centralising or outsourcing administrative, communications, and coordination functions. This would help ensure that future iterations of RAO initiatives are both manageable for associations and sustainable over the long term.



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