

BASKETBALL

# Tauranga Whai transition from pretenders to champions

A month ago 'transition' basketball wasn't working for Tauranga Whai at Taihi Basketball Aotearoa. But yesterday their persistence led to them beating third-time finalists Tokomanawa Queens



by Adam Julian 23/12/2024

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Tauranga Whai celebrate beating the Tokomanawa Queens 90-71 in the final. Photo: Brad Pittman/ @shot.bybrad

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An unrelenting faith in "swift transition" has driven Tauranga Whai to their first Taihi Basketball Aotearoa championship.

At a boisterous Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre, the visiting Tokomanawa Queens were blown away 90-71 in the final.

Whai led by 20 points at halftime as their urgent movement and unflinching faith in three-point shooting



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marked by 20 points of halftime as their urgent movement and shimmering return three-point shooting from anywhere reaped dividends.

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It was ironic that Queens ultimately attempted more three-pointers but Whai sunk as many triples in the first half as the Queens did in the whole game.

The Whai were up a dozen after the first quarter. Captain McKenna Dale was imperious with two triples, including one at 16-12 that left the hands not far from mid-court.

Some vintage hustle from Tall Fern Stella Beck cut the deficit to six. However, three buckets in a minute by Whai defensive lynchpin Lara McSpadden illustrated the difficulty of facing an unhesitant, unstructured offence. Whai coach Alex Stojkovic forewarned.

"I like to think it's a fun system to play in and when it's working, it's very difficult to play against because you don't know where the next shot is going to come from."

Though Dale and prolific-scoring Ashley Jones are expected to shoot regularly, Jade Kirisome hitting two triples from the bench was less likely but indicative of growing Whai confidence.

McSpadden would eventually contribute 14 points without missing a shot. The Whai bench outscored Queens 24-3.

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Morgan Yaeger's return from injury was the biggest infusion of confidence for Whai. Without their Aussie import, four defeats were suffered. With 19 points, four assists and three steals in the decider "Yaeger Bomb" was MVP.

"My injuries are my biggest strength ... I know I have been injured more than most, so when I step on the court, I can confidently say I have endured more than most, therefore, I believe I can achieve more than most," Yaeger said.



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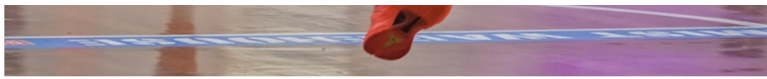


Photo: Brad Pittman/@shot.bybrad

Landing 6/12 three-pointers in the first half was abnormal by Whai but it forced the Queens to attempt the same feat in desperation to catch up. That ended dismally with figures of 6/30.

Queens WNBA recruit Jordan Horston was subdued with 13 points on 5/20 shooting. Jihyun Park finished with 16 points but missed seven three-point attempts.

Lou Brown battled bravely for the Queens with 19 points and 17 rebounds.

“They can shoot the heck out of you. We wanted to get them in half-court, a slower more interior game. When they got into broken play, hitting threes early, it was a tough style to guard. They were hot coming in and tonight they really clicked,” Brown conceded.



Dale finished with 16 points on 4/9 shooting.

“Getting healthy and never giving up was the key to our season. We always trusted the process and trusted what the coaches had to say. When we found our stride, it was special,” Dale said.

She singled out Kirisome and Linda Snyder who had 10 rebounds from the bench as “unsung heroes”.

Sunday’s victory caps a remarkable resurgence for the Whai, who lost four of their first five matches and had to beat defending champions Northern Kāhu for the first time on November 23 to stay in contention.

That they did 80-72 with Dale scoring 29 points, including eight threes. Whai again had Kāhu’s measure in the semi-final 78-63 with Jones scoring 28 points. She only had 16 in the final but ended 2024 as the league’s highest scorer.

The final doubled as the 100th match of Taihi Basketball Aotearoa.



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