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Basketball history: Tauranga Whai team reaches first national final in Taihi League

By [Kaitlyn Morrell](#)

Multimedia journalist · Bay of Plenty Times · 19 Dec, 2024 10:03 AM · 4 mins to read

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The Tauranga Whai after beating the Northern Kāhu, taking them to their first-ever final in franchise history. Photo / Brad Pitman

Tauranga women's basketball team the Whai have made history by reaching their first grand final since joining the national professional Taihi League three years ago.

What's more, the final will be played in front of a home crowd.

The Whai took down the 2023 winners, Northern Kāhu 63-78 in Sunday's semi-final in Auckland, and head coach Alex Stojkovic said planning on how to beat them started immediately after last year's semi-final loss.

"Last year gave us an idea, and to be honest with you, there has been no change of plan.

"It's our third season, and to finally get over the hump and beat them [Kāhu] on their home court in an away semi-final, that's pretty special."

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Stojkovic said reaching this final meant a lot to him as had been involved with the Whai [from the team's inception in 2022](#).

"To see how far we've come in such a short period, [starting a men's and women's team](#) is a big project and for it to come together like this to play a home final is pretty special to me.

"We play with a lot of joy. You can see how much the players enjoy each other's company, they enjoy the style of play that is different to anyone else in the league."



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The Whai were known for their dominant offence, and all had "the green light" to shoot.

"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," he said.



Whai head coach, Alex Stojkovic, has been with the team since its inception and felt lucky to coach such a group of great women. Photo / Brad Pitman

Stojkovic said sometimes he had to pinch himself because he felt so lucky to coach such a great group of women.

"I think we've got the best team and we're going to bring our A-game on Sunday."

The Northern Group Tauranga Whai take on the Tokomanawa Queens this Sunday on their home court at Tauranga's Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre.

Both teams have a 6-win, 6-loss record but in their [last regular season against the Queens](#), the Whai finished off the Queens 63-97.

Ashley Joens, who led that game with 32 points, is one of the Whai's imports for the 2024 season and leads the league in points (311), three-pointers made (43) and average points per game (23.9).

She also made this year's Tauhi League All-Star 5. She said the team's confidence was high ahead of Sunday's historic final and everyone was excited.

"There's lots of behind-the-scenes stuff that people don't see on the daily but we've all bought into what coach Alex was giving us and we're all ready to go now.

"Playing at home is super exciting, to have our fans there to be a part of it, there is no better place than to play at home," she said.

Team captain McKenna Dale, in her second season with the Whai, said making

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Whai franchise history was incredible.



Whai captain, McKenna Dale, said making history for this team was incredible, especially being able to bring the final home to Tauranga. Photo / Brad Pitman

"Last year we had a tough ending, that's not how we wanted to go out, but Alex has been building a team to bring us exactly to this point where we are now.

"We've had a lot of fun doing it ... we love it and we love each other and I think that's what's gotten us here."

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Despite missing the start of the season, Mikayla Cowling, in her second season with the team, and said it had been a "beautiful experience".

"We're in our groove right now and I think we want to stay in that, lock in and buy into it even more. Be sharp, mentally ready to go and just stay together, that's the main thing."



In her second year with the Whai, Mikayla Cowling is thankful for the home support and wants to make the Tauranga community proud by taking the team to the top. Photo / Brad Pitman

She said the Whai was like a family organisation, balanced with professional relationships.

"That balance of having friendship, having that family connection, and still going on court and doing our job helps everything fall into place. Finishing the season at home is the cherry on top."

Cowling was thankful for the home support and love the community had shown the team this season, and hoped this would be the case for the final.

"We just want to make them proud."

GJ Gardner Homes Tauhi Basketball Aotearoa Grand Final

When: Sunday, 3pm

Where: Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre

Tickets: Via Ticketek New Zealand

Watch: Live on Sky Sport

Kaitlyn Morrell is a multimedia journalist for the *Bay of Plenty Times* and *Rotorua Daily Post*. She has lived in the region for several years and studied journalism at Massey University.



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