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Basketball: Tauranga women's team Whai Basketball inspires new players and fans



By Sandra Conchie Multimedia Journalist, Bay of Plenty Times · Bay of Plenty Times · 8 Aug, 2023 02:50 PM · 5 mins to read

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The Tauranga-based Whai Basketball team. Photo / Cameron Walker Photography

Interest in women's basketball is "definitely increasing" in Tauranga as a professional national league competition plays its second season, and international scouts are eyeing some of Tauranga's top talent.

Co-founders of Tauranga's professional women's basketball team say the national league, Tauhi Basketball Aotearoa, is the "perfect vehicle" to inspire young women to try the "fastest-growing sport" in the country.

Now in its second year, the Tauhi league's national competition is made up of five regional teams: Tauranga-based Whai Basketball, the Northern Kāhu, the Tokomanawa Queens, the Mainland Pouākai and the Southern Hoiho.

The professional competition also includes a Rapid League competition for developmental players, who play games of four four-minute quarters.

Whai Basketball co-founders Lorraine and John Miller said they wanted to provide Tauranga and the wider community with a platform to grow basketball locally and inspire women to take up the sport.

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Miller said having a mix of home-grown and international talent train and compete in Tauranga had helped to raise the regional profile of women's basketball.

He said the league was the "perfect vehicle" to inspire the next generation of women to participate in the "fastest-growing sport" in the country.

"This is all about ensuring young people are given a new pathway, a new horizon to show them what is possible if they want to achieve their dream of playing the sport at the highest level.

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"Already, we have had an interest in our Whai players from national and overseas [basketball] scouts, including from US colleges keen to offer professional opportunities."

Miller said the Rapid and Tauhi games were livestreamed on Sky Sport twice a week and also featured on a Youtube channel with an audience of 25,000 to 45,000 viewers a week, while typically, between 350 to 800 spectators attended the Whai's home games.

He said the goal was to "create a vibrant social connection with the wider local community" to encourage more people to come and watch.

Whai Basketball's professional players included Sarah Sagerer from Austria and Americans Mikayla Cowling and Aaliyah Wilson, who has connections to the US Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) - the world's top women's basketball league.



Tauranga-based Whai Basketball pro player Sarah Sagerer (centre) shoots during a Tauhi Basketball Aotearoa national league game against Southern Hoiho at the Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre on August 4. Photo / Whai Basketball

In front of 350 spectators at Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre on Friday night, the Whai professional team lost by two points to the Southern Hoiho but came back strong on Sunday with an 84-78 win against the Tokomanawa Queens in Porirua.

Rookie Whai guard Honey Cooney, 17, said it was "gutting" to lose by such a small margin on Friday.

"It feels even worse than if we had lost by 20 points," she told the *Bay of Plenty Times* after the game.

The Year 13 student at Tauranga Girls' College, who also played for Tauranga City in the 2023 Under-19 National Championships, said she hoped to play for a college in the United States next year.

"Playing in the Rapid League and the Tauhi national competition is an amazing opportunity. It has huge advantages for us local players, as it gives us the chance to gain more exposure to national and overseas audiences."

Cooney said she hoped this would spark "more attention and more appreciation" for women's basketball, as well as extra funding to grow the sport locally.

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"I don't think a lot of people realise how hard our players train every week and play on game day. They all have incredible work ethics, and some of our professional players have left their homes overseas and moved to Tauranga to take up this opportunity."

Whai's development squad and professional team will play Mainland Pouākai at Tauranga's Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre on Friday, August 11.

The Whai development team won their home game on Friday 28-21 against the Southern Hoiho and beat the Tokomanawa Queens team 29-21 in Porirua on Sunday. After five games, both teams were sitting in fourth place in the rankings.

Tauranga City Basketball Association women's and clubs development officer Jeanna Cooney - Honey's aunt - said interest in the game was "definitely increasing", particularly because of increased exposure on TV and social media platforms.

Cooney said having a professional team alongside the development players in Tauranga was the "perfect platform" to showcase the sport to a wider audience. For example, the players could help promote the sport in schools.



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Avid Whai Basketball team supporter Rewi Toka attended the games against Whai and Southern Hoiho at the Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre in Tauranga on August 4. Photo / Sandra Conchie

Avid Pāpāmoa Whai Basketball supporter Rewi Toka and his family were among the vocal spectators at Friday's home game.

Toka said he started supporting the Whai teams last year after his brother-in-law Tane Bennett was appointed assistant coach.

"It's exciting stuff. I'm here to support the girls and watch their win. The Whai pro team missed out on the league title last year, and it's definitely time for our women's team to shine," he said.

Bay of Plenty Times' publisher NZME is a trusted partner of Whai Basketball.

Sandra Conchie is a senior journalist at the *Bay of Plenty Times* and *Rotorua Daily Post* who has been a journalist for 24 years. She mainly covers police, court and other justice stories, as well as general news. She has been a Canon Media Awards regional/community reporter of the year.



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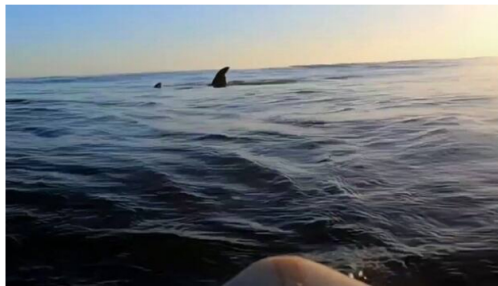


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