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Basketball: Bay of Plenty NBL team Whai visit schools ahead of historic first Rotorua game

By [Kaitlyn Morrell](#)

Multimedia journalist · Rotorua Daily Post · 19 Mar, 2025 12:33 PM · 3 mins to read

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'Whai in the Community' is a programme that aims to connect individuals and communities across Tauranga and wider Bay of Plenty. Photo / Supplied

An [NZNBL team](#) is "making the dream feel real" for aspiring youth ahead of tonight's milestone first-time home game in [Rotorua](#).

The [Tauranga Whai men's team](#) have started their [second season](#) in the National Basketball League (NZNBL), and are making their presence known in the wider Bay of Plenty.

Last week, a handful of Whai players visited schools around Rotorua to roll out the initiative Whai in the Community in association with the [Rotorua Basketball Association \(RBA\)](#).

Whai Basketball co-founder John Miller said community was at the heart of everything they did at Whai Basketball.



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"We're focused on using basketball as a vehicle to bring people together, inspire young athletes, and create meaningful opportunities in our region."

The visits were designed to inspire youth and highlight the importance of staying active.

"We're a platform for growth, inspiration, and community pride."

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He said a presence in Rotorua was crucial because it strengthened ties with the wider [Bay of Plenty](#).

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Whai Men's head coach Matt Lacey (centre), co-founder John Miller (left) and director of coaching Alex Stojkovic (right).

"These school visits are about showing young people that there are real pathways in basketball, whether it's playing at the highest level or being involved in the game in other meaningful ways.

"By making our players accessible and sharing our journey, we hope to inspire the next generation to get involved."

The Whai will play a home game tonight in Rotorua.

Miller said this was a historic first and an exciting milestone.

"Bringing a professional-level game to Rotorua raises the profile of basketball in the region, gives local players a first-hand look at what the next level looks like, and creates an experience that can inspire future talent.

"Exposure to high-level competition can be a game-changer for young athletes, it makes the dream feel real."

Rotorua Basketball Association (RBA) community operations manager Sue Pene said this was a great opportunity for the community to experience a top-level basketball game.



Sue Pene, community operations manager at Rotorua Basketball Association, pictured in 2020. Photo / Andrew Warner

Pene said she was contacted by Whai in December as they were keen to get smaller towns in the region to not only promote basketball but allow others to enjoy professional sport.

Rotorua does not have an NBL team in the national league.

"Basketball is extremely popular, especially with our youth."

She said youth made up 80% of basketball numbers but the sport could not grow much larger due to a lack of facilities.

"The school visits provide our youth not only with basketball development but also to meet and interact with some of our upcoming Tall Blacks as well as overseas imports."



The 'Whai in the Community' programme aims to connect individuals and communities across Tauranga and the wider Bay of Plenty. Photo / Supplied

Returning to the Whai for another season, Jayden Boucher said the school visits were a success.

"The kids seemed engaged and excited to hear about our different backgrounds and stories.

"Myself and others felt happy that we could share our stories and provide some positive motivation," he said.

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Whai player Xanda Marsters, from Rotorua, said the sessions helped engage youth, improve skills, and build strong relationships.

"They also support the sport's growth, create opportunities for locals and build stronger relationships between Rotorua and the Tauranga Whai."

When: Tonight — 6pm Rapid league, 7pm Sa's NBL

Where: Unison Arena, Rotorua

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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