

## **Replacing Year 7 & 8 representative programmes with skill development opportunities for more participants – lessons from the roll out of Netball New Zealand’s Player Development Programme**



In this case study, we hear from Netball New Zealand, Netball Central and Netball Wellington Centre about the implementation of the Player Development Programme and its impact on participants. The programme was developed to: (1) provide more 11- and 12-year-old participants an opportunity to take part in skill development programmes (as opposed to the few who were historically selected into representative programmes run by netball centres); and (2) improve the quality of skill development programming provided to these participants. The case study ties together perspectives from Netball New Zealand, Netball Central and Netball Wellington Centre. As such this case study illustrates how competition structure changes aligned to Balance is Better were made across one sport’s network (from national to local) and the impact of these changes.

*\*The following video’s were captured at the July 2021 Sport New Zealand – Sport Development Hui.*

**What was the catalyst for Netball NZ to look at replacing Year 7 & 8 representative programmes with the Player Development Programme?**

Netball NZ recognised the following four factors were key for them when making changes to their Year 7 & 8 representative offering:

### 1 | The Sport NZ Talent plan

The Sport NZ Talent plan called out the following three myths about athlete and talent development:

- Early specialisation sets future athletes up for adult success
- Childhood success leads to adult success
- Successful athletes focus on winning

Upon reflection on the Sport NZ Talent Plan, Netball NZ began to realise how their own competition structures, in this instance, representative programme for 11- and 12-year-olds were underpinned by, as well as continued to perpetuate, these myths.

### 2 | Voice of the Participant data

Voice of the Participant is a national club membership experience survey run by Sport NZ. Sport NZ conducts this survey with some NSOs to understand their respective club members' experiences. Data collected in Voice of the Participant surveys for Netball NZ on netball club members between 2016 and 2019, indicated that they would like Netball NZ and their respective zones and local centres and clubs to focus most on improvements to player development programmes.

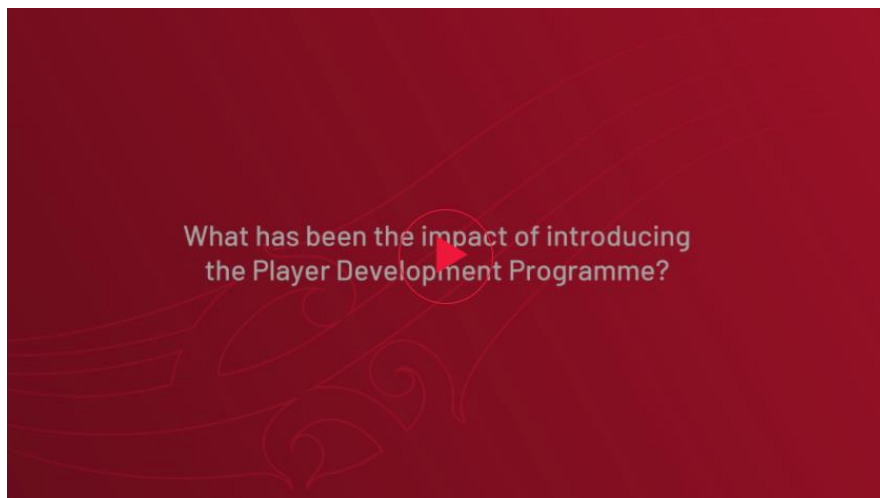
### 3 | ACC injury data

ACC statistics showed that 10-14 year olds have the highest rates of injury when compared to all other age groups. This statistic, led to Netball NZ reflecting on what changes were needed regarding competition delivery as well as education within its community to improve player welfare and injury prevention for this group.

### 4 | Talent deselection and the subsequent narrowing of the netball talent pool

Netball NZ recognised that competition structures that foisted (de)selection processes on young participants before they had physically and emotionally matured was not just unscientific but had the effect of narrowing down the talent pool prematurely. That is, young participants who picked up netball (relatively) later than other participants were more likely to be disadvantaged by selection decisions made by coaches and administrators. As too were young participants who were late-developers (i.e., went through maturation later than most people of the same chronological age) or were born later in the year for their cohort (i.e., relative age affect).

## What did this change journey look like and what were some of the key tactics?



The implementation of Year 7 and 8 Player Development Programme was grounded on the back of a series of changes that Netball NZ has been making into the junior and youth landscape, beginning in 2012 with the Junior Netball Review.

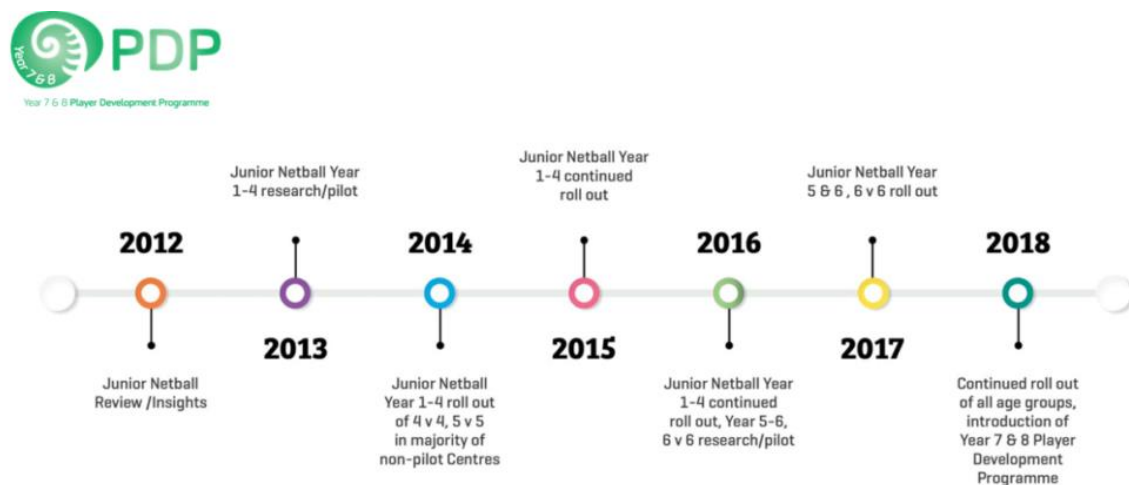


Figure 1. A timeline of significant events and changes leading up to the roll out of the Player Development Programme.

Key tactics to support the implementation of the Player Development Programme from Netball NZ's perspective included:

- **Education** – Netball NZ released articles via social media and their e-newsletter every fortnight in the 3-4 months leading up to the launch of Player Development Programme that socialised relevant concepts to their stakeholders. These would later support the rationale for removing year 7 & 8 rep teams.

- **Resource support** – a comprehensive follow-along resource was provided to community to support coaches and centres to deliver the Player Development Programme.
- **Internal alignment** – all staff members at Netball NZ (i.e. marketing team, finance team, etc. not just staff members involved in the delivery of community sport) were supported to understand the rationale for the Player Development Programme. Ultimately, the test here was that all Netball NZ staff members, if questioned at random on these changes (e.g., in a supermarket), were confident enough to have a two-minute conversation about the ‘why’ for the introduction of Player Development Programme.
- **Planned changes were introduced at the Netball NZ’s AGM.**
- **Network support** – Netball NZ staff along with regional netball zone staff supported staff in centres to adopt the Player Development Programme into their centres. Important to note that the Player Development Programme provided an element of flexibility so that centres were able to deliver the programme using different options.

## What has been the impact of introducing the Player Development Programme?



The roll out of Player Development Programme has reflected in the following positive results:

- Data collected in the Voice of the Participant survey indicates a decline in the number of netball stakeholders feeding back to Netball NZ that they should prioritise improving player development programmes.
- An estimated extra 700 participants have received a development opportunity that would historically not been offered if representative structures remained in place.
- High participant satisfaction.
- The majority of netball centres are now delivering Player Development Programme, despite it being an opt-in process for centres to determine whether or not they choose to deliver Player Development Programme.

## What has Netball New Zealand learned from introducing the Player Development Programme?



Key lessons that Netball New Zealand has reflected on are:

- The importance of **alignment**. Ensure that everybody who needs to be involved in a conversation is involved, and provide people the opportunity to learn and understand the rationale behind change.
- Work from a **strengths-based approach**. Acknowledge that even if people agree to adopt a change, they might not be ready to support it for a variety of reasons. Tailored support may need to be implemented (which may include concessions and compromises) to begin some organisations' journey to change.
- Be clear on the **evidence** behind the change. This evidence needs to be easily digestible and shareable. Be specific in connecting evidence to rationale for change ("*we need to do something*"), as well as the change itself ("*this is what we should do*").
- Stick to the **compass** not the clock. Be clear on purpose and philosophy but acknowledge that change make take longer than you anticipate.
- **Collaborate and lead**. Part of the process is understanding what other stakeholders need to support any change that you might be driving. Also, having the courage at times to try something different (even if it fails).

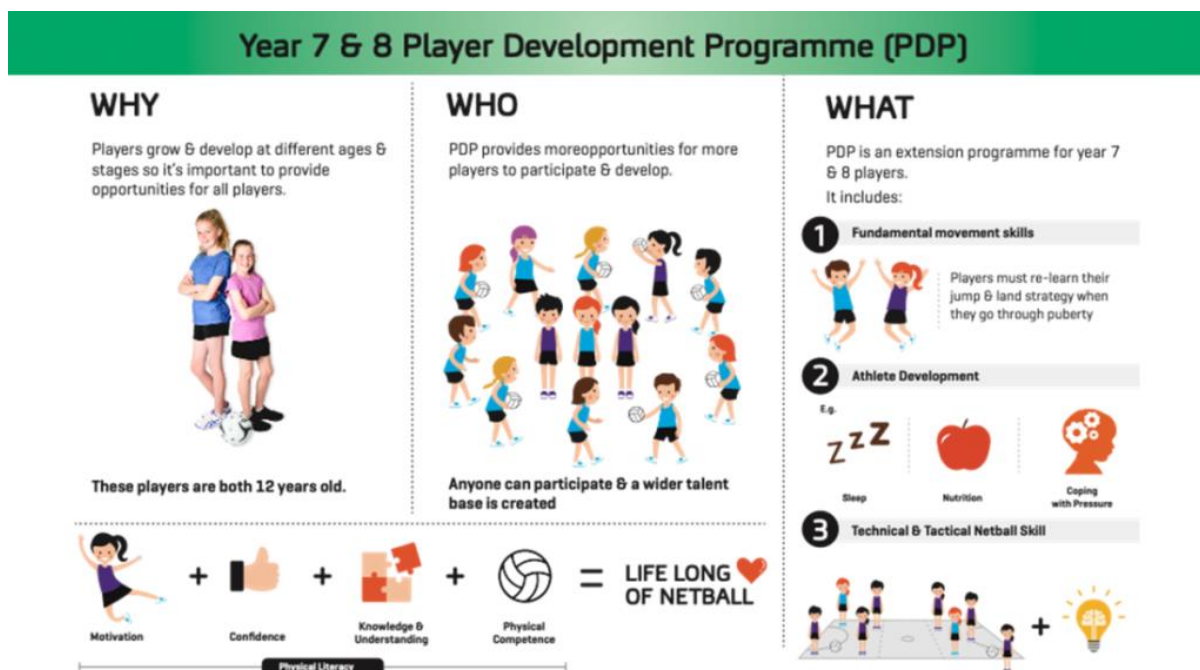
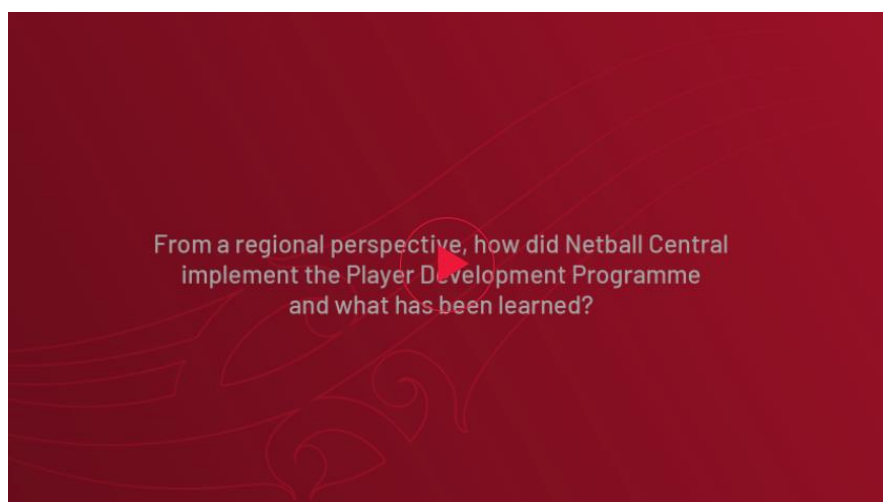


Figure 2. Example of communication connecting evidence, rationale and explanation of Player Development programme.

## From a regional perspective, how did Netball Central implement the Player Development Programme and what has been learned?



Netball Central are responsible for regional administration and support of netball in the bottom half of the North Island.

Over the two years that Netball Central have rolled the Player Development Programme out they have had:

- 11 out of 13 centres adopt the programme, with the two remaining centres not electing to deliver because of current capability, yet still electing to support interested participants to join a programme at another centre nearby.
- 40-80 participants attend each programme, as opposed to 12-24 participants that would historically have been selected in a representative programme per centre/satellite.

The Player Development Programme was rolled out over two years, starting with year 7s, and then the following year was delivered to year 7 and 8. Centres introduced the programme in different ways according to what suited them, examples included:

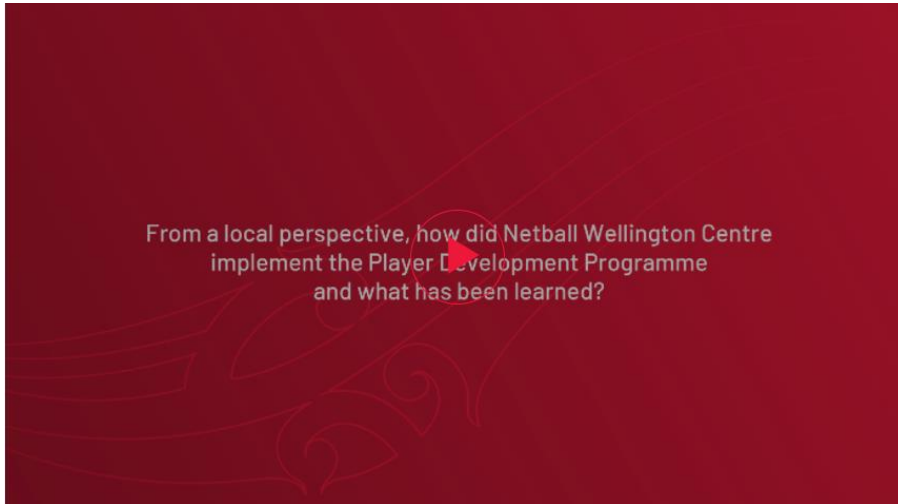
- 6-week extension programme run mid-week during the season
- 6-week extension programme run in the weekend during the season
- Pre-season programme focussing on activating skills and movement patterns
- Post-season programme to support young people who don't take part in other sports.
- Condensed into a one-week or weekend holiday clinic

When reflecting on what they had learned, Netball Central discussed the following:

- Many people are resistant to change – especially stalwarts of the community. Evidence is key to rationalising change, yet so too is giving yourself time to communicate the evidence plus any changes. Ensure that there is good consultation time before ushering in changes. And ensure that communication is spread as widely as possible.
- Many centres felt that they were losing their identity through the displacement of representative teams. In response to this Netball Central ensured that inter-Centre competition was still available through the Player Development Programme by way of a fun festival format to celebrate the end of the programme.
- Some coaches struggled to coach groups of young people that consisted of varied skill level and ability. Netball Central used this as an opportunity to provide additional coach development by providing more development around the ADAPT (Ask questions, Duration, Area, Players, Tweak the rules) coaching tool.
- Some may speak out against change. If these dissenters are well known in the community this can often amplify this challenge (even if only a few), especially if picked up by media. To combat this, Netball Central ensured they had their own advocates prepared to champion the Player Development Programme, in this instance Irene van Dyk and Sandra Edge.
- Support and showcase the early adopters, so they can demonstrate to others how to deliver the revised programme. For rolling out the Player Development Programme that meant working with more capable centres, so that a proof of concept could then be modelled to the volunteer centres.
- Rolling out the Player Development Programme meant more participants were provided skill development opportunities. Subsequently, this increased demand for capable coaches. As such, coach development support was critical for centres to being able to effectively roll out the programme. Whether shoulder-tapping or spreading the word regarding coaches wanted via social media/website, providing print copies of the resource, loaning equipment or

hosting in-person or Zoom coach workshops to demonstrate activities pre-delivery – all helps.

## **From a local perspective, how did Netball Wellington Centre implement the Player Development Programme and what has been learned?**



With in-principle alignment between Netball Wellington Centre, Netball Central and Netball New Zealand gained circa 2018, Netball Wellington were ready to gear up and roll-out the delivery of the Player Development Programme to their community. From a local perspective, this roll-out was underpinned by the following key factors:

1| **Consultation.** Netball Wellington Centre invested time engaging with critical leaders and administrators in their community. Through these people, they were then able to connect into schools and parents to foster further consultation.

Key to Netball Wellington Centre's consultation was:

- Hearing and understanding the concerns of volunteers (for example, new initiatives can increase demands on volunteers' unpaid time).
- Communicating clearly the challenge and/or downsides of the status quo. In this instance, many volunteers agreed with issues raised about representative programmes, such as fall-out over trial selections, dealing with negative parent behaviour, and increased expense.

2 | **Work with the willing.** Netball Wellington Centre identified supportive spokespeople (who are often already respected in their communities) to advocate for change and supported these people to educate the Netball Wellington community. Use of Netball NZ infographics along with information evenings or taster sessions supported this.



Side note: **Get parents onsite.** Building sound relationships by way of inclusive communication that in turn fosters positive word of mouth is an important consideration for ensuring changes introduced into any community are met with support. Netball Wellington Centre spent time ensuring parents connected the dots between their child benefiting from an improved experience (laughing, smiling, motivation to attend, heightened engagement, surge in self-confidence, etc) and the Player Development Programme.

3 | **Support verses encouragement.** At some point, volunteers need to be empowered to take ownership of delivering the programme themselves.

Key tactics employed by Netball Wellington Centre to make this happen included:

- Sign posting relevant resources to volunteers. The Player Development Programme is supported with a coaching guide.
- Weekly Zoom calls were held to introduce how to deliver recommended session content, demonstrate activities, and support coaches to consider what they might do to manage attendees' skill needs & expectations.

4 | **Roll-out.** Netball Wellington Centre planned a gradual roll-out. This saw year one delivery to year 7 only, and year two delivery to year 7 & 8. It was a trial-and-error process. In response to Covid-19, sessions condensed from five weeks to three weeks. As Netball Wellington Centre iterated the programme, they were mindful not to make too many changes at one time. One tweak at a time helped keep change manageable.

5 | **Leverage off the programme.** It's beneficial to piggy-back where able – explore ideas on how to leverage learning opportunities. Netball Wellington Centre used the Player Development Programme to grow their pool of confident coaches. Mindful not to drop coaches in the deep end, Netball Wellington Centre invited beginner coaches to be mentored, shadowed, or observed by more experienced coaches. In the umpire space, the final FunFest was further extended to serve as a practical junior umpire development opportunity.

*Image Source: Netball New Zealand*

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