

Let's get fun



How do we ensure young people develop a lifelong love of community sport and being physically active?

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Community sport

A Sport New Zealand think-piece on young people's participation in community sport.

The challenge

They call it '**Shifting Baseline Syndrome**'. It means we notice changes that happen suddenly, but overlook changes that happen slowly. A gradual decline in membership, for example. If—suddenly—nobody joined our club, or people stopped using the local pool, we'd notice. But when it's just one or two who don't, we carry on. We adjust our baseline: different becomes our new normal.

We believe there is a gradual change happening that should concern us all: there are indications that fewer kids are taking part in community sport. At year 13, almost half of girls (47%) and 39% of boys are spending no time in organised sport; and around one in 10 kids at year 13 are spending no time in any sport or physical activity. Of course, the other way of looking at it is to say most kids are participating in community sport and to say kids have always dropped out as they get older. True, except there is an international trend which New Zealand is not immune from. Around the world, sports participation rates are falling and inactivity is on the rise. And at the same time, New Zealand kids are getting fat: 11% are now obese and 22% are overweight. Never mind shifting baselines, we've got shifting waistlines.

In the community sport sector, we could of course blame external influences such as poor food and lifestyle choices for obesity. And we could blame technology and say: "They should get out more." This is the digital generation, after all, and we know that kids (boys especially) are spending more and more time in front of screens. On the other hand, they watch less television and, in fact, their most popular leisure activity is spending time with friends — that's how a third of them spend more than three hours a day. Interestingly, those who do play sport tell us that socialising, being with friends and having fun is their main reason for doing so...

Maybe it's us? Maybe there's been a gradual change in sport and active recreation that we haven't noticed. Maybe the reason fewer kids are being active isn't 'out there' but 'in here'? Girls in particular tell us that they lose interest in sport when it becomes too competitive: they want us to focus on social aspects and fun as well as challenge and competition.

Let's get serious about understanding young people's participation in community sport. Yes challenge and competition have their place, but so do play and fun.

Let's get fun

Kiwis love their community sport, and we know it enriches our lives, builds kids' determination to succeed and makes our communities better places to live. But when parents are arguing on the sidelines of an under-8s game most would agree we're taking it too seriously. Of course, sport is competitive by definition — and some kids want that and thrive on it — but for many, winning is not the most important thing. Having fun is.

Sport New Zealand's vision is for New Zealand to be the world's most successful sporting nation. Winning on the world stage is one measure of that, but so too is more Kiwis participating in community sport for the sheer enjoyment of it, and the benefits they derive. Clearly, there's a relationship between the two - both are valid and the pathways through our sports should cater for both.

There's a balance to be found between creating engagement and participation in community sport and achieving excellence. Experience shows that if engagement comes first — if young people enjoy their experience — then they are more likely to stay (often for life). The more who stay, the more talent will emerge and the more relevant our pathways to excellence will become. But if we forget about making it fun for kids, we'll see engagement, and participation, evaporate. Undoubtedly, it's a message for parents as much as it is for all of us in the community sport system.

It's time to change the way we think. When someone window-shops community sport, but doesn't stay, instead of asking — as traditionally we may have tended to — “What's wrong with them?” we should instead be asking, “What's wrong with us?” We should be thinking harder about what young people are looking for that we don't seem to offer. Asking what changes to the way 'we've always done things' would lead to more of them — regardless of gender, ethnicity, ability, location or socio-economic background— having fun and participating in community sport.



Reversing the trend

If you want a different result, you need a different approach. Bring back the fun—that's what Sue Croskery¹ realised when she resolved to do something about declining participation in Gisborne secondary school sport. Back in 2000, when participation levels were first measured, Gisborne was near the top, but by 2012 they were second lowest. "At least let's get back to the national average," Sue said to her school principals.

Sue identified the barriers to be overcome. Saturday sport didn't suit many students because they had weekend jobs. It wasn't straightforward for them to get to sport and then home again, which made it less enjoyable. For many families cost was an issue. And, some sports didn't cater for girls: they had a highly competitive women's league, but nothing in place at the entry level that girls could do just for fun.



¹At the time Sue was Gisborne's Regional Sports Director, Secondary Schools



The solution? The schools agreed to finish half an hour earlier on Wednesdays. Sport NZ's Kiwisport funding helped make the programme accessible, meeting the cost of venues and transport there and home again. And Sue created an appealing mix of accessible sport and active recreation options for the students to try (including ju jitsu, crossfit and yoga).

It was a great success. In just one year, student participation climbed from 42% to 56% (the target was 53% after three years). Teacher involvement went from 24% to 51%. And Gisborne's Wednesday After-School Sport Project won the 2014 Community Impact Award at the New Zealand Sport and Recreation Awards.

Meeting the *need*

Before considering what young people are looking for from our own sport, it's worth considering what they want from any sport or active recreation experience. When you think about it, people don't participate in community sport for its own sake. Rather, it is a way of meeting some of our fundamental human needs. It follows that the better a community sport experience is at meeting these needs, the more relevant it will be and the more likely people are to keep participating.

Sport New Zealand's 'physical literacy' approach shows the way. It groups these fundamental needs into four distinct but aligned quadrants — physical, social/emotional, cognitive and spiritual — and it explains that the way people have those needs met changes as they go through life.





When we are thinking about attracting more young people — let's use young adults as an example — the physical literacy approach helps us see that 'being with friends and making new friends' (social and emotional quadrant) is likely to be at least as important to them as 'the opportunity to pursue competitive, intense sport' (physical quadrant) and that 'choosing for themselves why and how they participate' (cognitive quadrant) and 'the confidence to express their own beliefs, attitudes and values' (spiritual quadrant) will influence the kind of opportunity they are attracted to.

The key point is that physical literacy is multi-dimensional. The better we understand this, and the better we evolve our sporting or active recreation 'offer' to align with people's needs — at their particular life stage — the more successful we will be at attracting and retaining participants in community sport.

Anything is possible

It's an unusual name for a school: Bairds Mainfreight Primary School (BMPS). Long story short: for over twenty years, Mainfreight has supported the school financially and so the school changed its name in appreciation². It tells you this is an enterprising school community, where the school motto — 'Anything is possible' — really is the code they live by.

How, though, to convince the students that anything is possible: for them? Convince them that it's not where you start; it's where you finish? It's not how you go; it's how you land? The answer, they decided, was sport. School principal, Alan Lyth, explains: "We knew if we could get the kids to succeed at something, then they would believe that anything is possible. A lot of our kids are keen on sport, so sport became our vehicle for achieving the wider outcomes we want."

What they did, essentially, was to mainstream sport: to put sport at the centre rather than on the periphery. To achieve that, they engaged the local sports clubs, asking them to find sponsorship for uniforms, equipment and fees, by persuading the teaching staff to volunteer their time and by taking advantage of Regional Sports Trust initiatives, such as bringing in specialist coaches. As a result, at BMPS, sport is happening before school, at lunchtime, after school and on weekends. Every child in the school has swimming lessons. Parents are involved, turning up to positively support.

"Sport is helping us show the kids how to be a better person," says Alan.

"We had one boy, great at sport, but his attendance was poor. We told him if he didn't achieve at least 90% attendance, he wouldn't be picked. Instantly fixed. And you can see the crossover to our academic results. For example, our top boy and top girl last year were both great at sport and strong academically."

²To learn more go to <https://youtu.be/obAgw4Z1G9Y>



Shifting a mindset

Fran McEwen³ intends, as Steve Jobs put it, 'to make a dent in the universe'. She's very aware that participation by young women in sport and active recreation is in decline and she's determined to do something about it. "Young women will give you all sorts of reasons why they're not physically active — time pressures, financial pressures, social pressures — and there are ways we can lower those barriers, but the underlying problem is they just don't see the benefits or the fun. That's the fundamental thing we have to change."

The programme Fran is leading is called SHIFT⁴, a pilot at this stage. 'Programme' is an inadequate word, really, because SHIFT is a new approach for a new generation. 'Co-design' is the buzz-word term: involving the customer in service and product development. Groups of young women from Wellington schools are being tasked with developing and leading activities to increase physical activity and wellbeing among their peers and for themselves. In parallel, there is 'Give back, Shift forward', an online, crowd-sourcing social enterprise to lower the financial barriers to participation and an opportunity for young women to participate in design thinking.

Another Steve Jobs saying was, 'Design is not what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.' Fran gets that. "We've had young designers and young women involved from the start of this project. The customers are the experts in their own life experiences. That's why we're involving them in the programme — they'll identify what has to change to make physical activity 'work' for them — and it's why we're using co-design, technology and social media."

"It's a different mindset," says Fran, "Instead of the traditional, top-down, 'here's the answer' approach to solving a problem, it's the networked, connected, bottom-up way of thinking that young people relate to. That's the real SHIFT: a paradigm shift."

³Wellington City Council Parks Sport and Recreation Health and Wellbeing Partnership Leader.

⁴SHIFT is a joint initiative between Wellington City Council and the Boys' and Girls' Institute

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Sport New Zealand's *role*

Sport New Zealand wants New Zealand to have a world-leading community sport system.

Our vision is to enrich and inspire the lives of young people by creating a lifelong love of community sport and being physically active.

The specific outcome we want is more young people (aged 5-18) taking part in three hours or more of community sport each week.

To learn more about what Sport New Zealand will do for young people and how we can help your organisation enrich and inspire their lives, read our Young People Plan at www.sportnz.org.nz/youngpeople

We believe:

- Young people need to be physically active
- Young people should be heard
- Young people's needs are paramount
- Community sport should be fun
- Community sport enhances the lives of young people and their communities.

The critical success factors to achieve our vision are that:

- Young people are physically literate
- Their experiences are high quality, stage-appropriate and fun
- They are positively influenced, encouraged and supported
- They can access quality opportunities
- They can participate and compete to the level of their aspiration
- They are empowered to shape their community sport experience.



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