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## Sports bodies join together to change youth sport

Youth sport is set to undergo a dramatic shake-up as the leaders of Sport NZ and the country's five largest participation sports speak out in a united front against negative experiences that are driving too many young New Zealanders away from sport.

"We're taking a stand to bring the fun and development focus back to sport for all young people," says Sport NZ CEO Peter Miskimmin.

"This includes pushing back against early specialisation, over-emphasis on winning and other factors that are driving young New Zealanders away from sport. Sporting organisations are aware of the problem and some are already making changes, but more is required and the six of us are stepping up to say we will lead the way."

The group have signed a Statement of Intent, published today in the New Zealand Herald, Dominion Post and Christchurch Press, that they believe will pave the way for substantial change in the way young people experience sport in this country.

Individually and collectively we commit to:

- Ensuring all young people who play our sports receive a quality experience, irrespective of the level at which they compete.
- Leading attitudinal and behavioural change among the sport leaders, coaches, administrators, parents and caregivers involved in youth sport.
- Providing leadership to our sports in support of changes to competition structures and player development opportunities.
- Working with our sports, clubs and schools to identify young talent later in their development, rather than sooner, including reviewing the role and nature of national and regional representative tournaments
- Supporting young people to play multiple sports.
- Raising awareness of the risks of overtraining and overloading.

The six organisations have also announced that they will be launching an integrated marketing campaign early next year, targeted at youth sport influencers such as parents, caregivers, coaches and administrators, to further raise awareness of the issues and help drive positive change.

With close to 600,000 young people participating across the five sports each week, the group believe that the collective action will be a 'game changer' for young people.

David White, CEO of New Zealand Cricket, says the initiative will help administrators, young people and parents understand that sport is for everyone, not simply those in top teams.

"Sport isn't simply about the elite and aspirational or, for that matter, the winners," he says. "It remains as relevant to amateur, lower-grade and social participants as it does to the professionals.

“With respect to our international champions, the best part of New Zealand sport is still the sight of the thousands of Kiwi kids of all abilities who every weekend take to the fields and courts throughout the country to have fun”.

Mr White said to help sustain this trend into the future, New Zealand Cricket was encouraging parents, caregivers and coaches to allow children to experience a healthy variety of sport, rather than concentrating on one.

“Early specialisation in sport reflects an adult mindset, rather than what is most enjoyable and, by definition, best for the child,” he says. “Allowing children to experience a wide range of activities and experiences means they will transfer skills and strategies from different sports to create more-rounded and socially-balanced individuals”.

The change will meet resistance from some, Andrew Pragnell, CEO of NZ Football notes.

“We are fully supportive of Sport NZ’s position and feel it has the ability to be a game changer for sport in New Zealand. It is never easy to make changes to culture, but we need to look at the way our young people play sport and ensure it is appropriate for their stage of development. With the backing of some of our leading sports organisations, I am sure we can all make a positive impact on the future of sport for young people in New Zealand.”

“We are also excited about what this culture change could mean for off the field, as we strive to improve our side-line behaviour in all sports and look to create an environment that is fun and supportive.”

The movement challenges traditional models with support from both formal research and experience. Ian Francis, CEO of Hockey NZ, says that the more balanced approach would help to combat factors such as burnout and the startlingly high rates of dropout in sport.

“Traditionally we have viewed early success in hockey as being an indicator for future success. We now know this is not true and that a balanced approach to sports during your youth years is going to provide an athlete with a more well-rounded skillset when they get into adult levels of the sport.”

“Deselection in sport has led to the large dropout rates in youth sports in New Zealand. We know that young people develop and pick things up at different rates and removing deselection at an early age is going to make kids enjoy the sport more and play for the love of the game”

Jennie Wyllie, Chief Executive of Netball New Zealand, says it is time to put the needs of young people first.

“Young people are not mini adults and it is important to meet their needs, taking into consideration their physical, cognitive, social abilities and well-being”.

Netball has already implemented changes and would continue to review its offerings.

“Netball New Zealand’s programmes provide more opportunities to a broader base of players to further develop their skills and inspire a life-long love of the game. We want to retain players in netball and provide them with the opportunity to continue to progress towards becoming the best that they can be”.

Nigel Cass, Chief Rugby Officer for New Zealand Rugby, says they also welcomed the movement, with changes already underway in some centres such as North Harbour and Southland, which had both removed representative programmes for players under 14.

“We know that the thinking around youth sport has changed and we want to put the player at the centre of everything we do.

“Rugby is our national sport and we want it to be a fun, safe and positive experience for everyone, from Small Blacks through to adult rugby. Our goal is for as many people as possible to have an opportunity to play rugby and develop a life-long love of the game.

“Young people play rugby and any sport to have fun with their mates. We need to make sure we keep sport enjoyable by focusing on developing skills rather than pushing high performance. We need to give all our rugby players the opportunity to be the best they can be.”

ENDS

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