

AUT sets trend with lunchtime sports

by Gordon Gillan

Shorter games to increase the number of players was a new issue raised at the inaugural Business of Sport summit in Auckland last month.

Bruce Meyer, sports co-ordinator for AUT, one of 100 people at the summit, was pleased to hear of successful trends already in place at the university.

The Akoranga campus already has 15-minute sport sessions, as it maximises the number of students playing and allows students to fulfil other commitments.

"We introduced the sessions at lunchtime in a variety of sports, including netball, basketball, ultimate Frisbee, touch and volleyball," says Meyer.

"The short time frame allows students to also eat their lunch and to get their important assignments done.

"The only real drawback is that some students want to play on for longer."

AUT will attempt to introduce similar sessions at the city campus next year with the help of new sports officer Morwenna Berry.

"We were unable to run sessions this year as my time was taken-up establishing the Akoranga games, and social sport was not a skill set the old sports officer focused on," says Meyer. "An extra court in the new accommodation block will also make it easier in the city."

Meyer is approaching the end of his first year in his role at AUT and believes the summit is a useful tool for others in the sports industry.

"The high calibre speakers and the range of attendees, from facility managers to administrators of national sporting bodies, made it extremely beneficial both for myself and for AUT.

"It addressed several strategies and research techniques, for example, identifying how we can develop greater pride amongst students in playing sport for the university."

It has taken Meyer time to become fully aware of the culture and processes of dealing with the university and the student association.

"I want to build a better communication system to get students involved," he says.

"I had problems getting information on the general notice board that all students can access.

"It has also proved difficult to communicate with city campus students from our Akoranga base."

North Harbour rugby players Luke McAlister and Nick Evans are good examples of AUT students who are supported by their university classmates, says Meyer.

Management and marketing services company Strategic Sports were

behind the two-day summit.

They hope it will provide a platform on an annual basis for the country's sports industry to keep up-to-date with changing trends, methods and developments.

The conference gave different sports the chance to be aware of the issues other sports face, says Strategic Sports managing director Chris Simpson.

"For example, one sport may have good sponsorship but be poor on membership numbers, while another may have lots of participants and little sponsorship."

Chief executive of Sport and Recreation New Zealand Nick Hill chaired the first day of the summit. Other speakers included TV3's head of news and current affairs Mark Jennings, Auckland rugby technical advisor Graham Henry and director of Real Sports Australasia Graeme Perigo.

The use of technology is continuing to have a major impact on sports organisations, according to Perigo.

"Two years ago around 40% of sports bodies had websites. Now that figure is almost 90%.

"The development of player databases by national organisations is a significant improvement, as opposed to in the past when just the individual clubs held the information."

The summit explored new ideas and pushed the industry to think differently, says Auckland Cricket marketing and communications manager Paul Ford.

"It was good to see so many case studies that have worked in different sectors.

"The Action Indoor Sports presentation on creating a business model was of particular interest and emphasised that people are prepared to pay if they get good value from their chosen sport."

NZRU insists clubs must be proactive to ensure survival

by Michael Cummings

Dwindling player numbers and a lack of public interest in the face of long Super 12 and NPC seasons have rugby fighting for survival at grassroots level.

NZRU president Tane Norton says clubs need to be proactive if they want to survive in the professional era.

Norton, who was elected in April, says while times are tough for club rugby, a lot of clubs are too quick to turn to the NZRU for handouts instead of raising their own funds.

"When I was playing you couldn't walk two paces into the clubrooms without buying a raffle ticket or something. You don't see that so much these days."

Helensville Rugby Club chairman Stanley Phillips says the NPC and Super 12 have lowered the profile of club rugby and clubs are struggling as a result.

"The problem is the squeeze between the NPC and the Super 12 and until we get that sorted clubs are going to be in the dire straits that they are in."

Professionalism has been good for

the game as a whole, says Phillips, although it has affected the interest in club rugby.

"Super 12 is a good competition but it has hurt us. It's killed the interest in club rugby. Not all of it, but a lot."

While any money from the NZRU would be welcomed, Phillips says, it's not going to solve the problems facing club rugby in New Zealand.

Club manger at Kumeu, Keith Robinson, disagrees with Norton's assertion that clubs need to stop turning to the NZRU for handouts.

"I think that's a sorry point. We try to stand on our own feet but they never give us anything. We just struggle through as best we can," says Robinson.

Both Helensville and Kumeu are struggling for player numbers and are finding it difficult to get by. Both clubs fielded four senior teams this season and Robinson says the number of junior players is dwindling, as many parents prefer their children to play less physical sports like soccer.

"Helensville struggle, we struggle, Mahurangi struggle. What are you going to do? The big clubs get bigger and the small clubs get smaller."

Shortage of role models hurts junior rugby skills

by Michael Otto

Several Auckland rugby clubs are worried playing standards are dropping because of a lack of older players.

Marist coach Bernie McCahill says the average age of players in club football in Auckland is now 22.

When he was playing in the 1980s and 1990s, it was 28.

The former All Black fears young players just below the elite level are missing out on the tactical knowledge and hard mental attitude that comes with playing alongside men 10 or more years their senior.

"When I was starting out, having 32-year-olds criticising your mistakes was a great incentive to improve your game," he says.

"The only way to learn is to make mistakes and find out how to get out of the situations mistakes put you into."

The absence of older players from the club scene is due to factors like increased work commitments and the

lure of overseas contracts.

Grammar-Carlton coach Terry Reardon says player development programmes can teach all the right decision-making skills, but mental hardness is something that you can't teach.

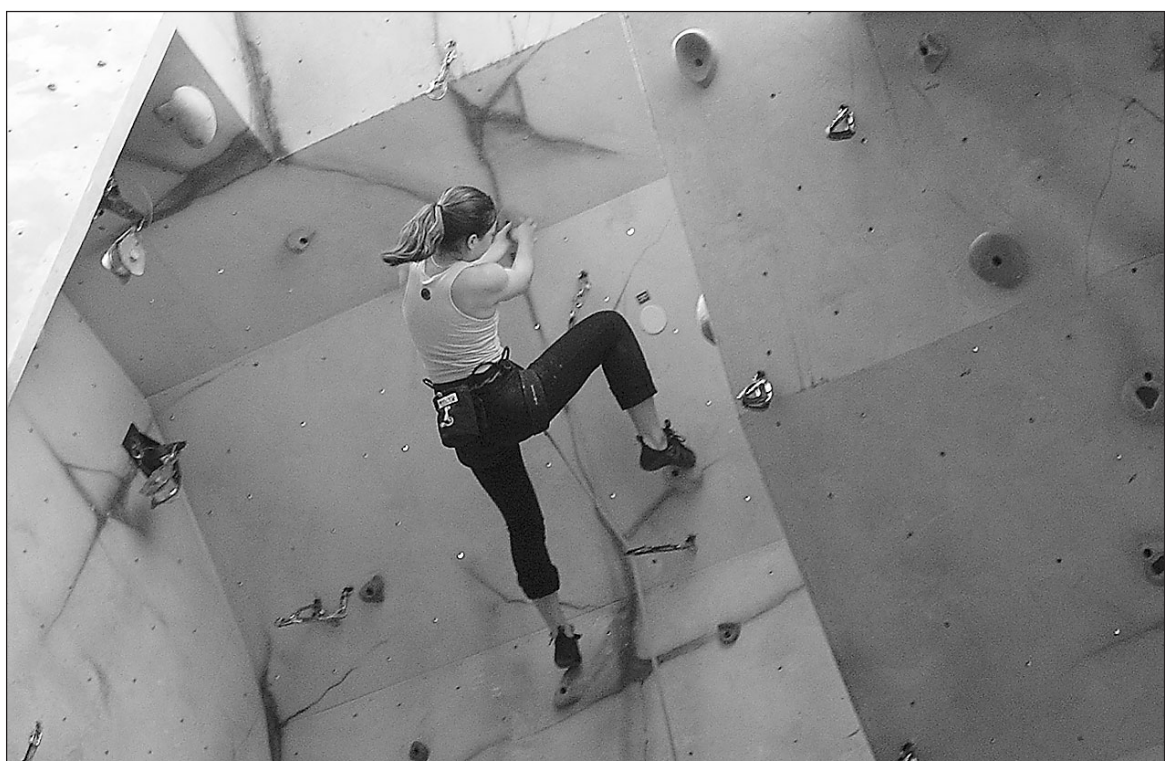
Reardon doesn't think standards of club play are what they used to be across the board, but sees clubs like Ponsonby and University setting a benchmark for player development that Grammar-Carlton would like to follow.

University coach and former All Black Gary Braid thinks local coaches tend to rely on the x-factor of elite players coming out of development programs to win games for them, at the expense of developing proper tactics.

This has always been a tendency of New Zealand coaches at all levels, he says.

"Coaches tend to go with what they have always done but x-factors are a thing of the past."

Kiwi climbing scales new heights



OFF THE WALL: 16-year-old Sophie MacDougall is among a select few chosen to train for the international rock climbing competitions.

by Amanda Kyne

Participation in rock climbing has doubled in New Zealand over the last three years to the extent that more than 1600 climbers compete in national competitions at the elite level.

Sport Climbing Federation president James MacGuire says more people are interested in climbing as a professional sport because it is well exposed and the number of climbing walls throughout the country is increasing.

While most walls are indoors, the federation attracted newcomers to the sport last summer by erecting portable bouldering walls at popular beaches and activity spots.

Since 1994 the federation has held national junior competitions annually. Next year MacGuire says they intend to push the sport more into colleges.

"It's a sport where kids can develop their self-confidence, especially for those who don't fit into other sports. It's something they can do by themselves but they can also have the camaraderie if they want it."

Mt Roskill 16-year-old Sophie MacDougall is three years into her bid to become a future world champion rock climber.

The teenager is among a select few who have been training for the international youth rock climbing competitions.

She is driven by a desire to be number one in the world in rock climbing, which is still relatively new

in New Zealand.

MacDougall's passion is nurtured by coach Emma Hawke, a woman who wants to put New Zealand on the map at world climbing events.

"Internationally it will take a little while because we don't have the experience of competing at that level," says Hawke, New Zealand's top female climber.

Going by Hawke's dedication to help youth gain knowledge and experience in the sport, it will not be long before some top climbers gain international ranking.

He says kids like MacDougall, who is dedicated to being a world champ, have the opportunity to make a living overseas out of climbing.

But it is a tough lifestyle choice. MacGuire and partner Hawke, both top climbers, work part-time.

"Sponsorship is limited in New Zealand because the sport is not huge," says Hawke.

Hawke and MacGuire have founded a specific training and mentor programme to train young New Zealanders up to international standard.

Based in Palmerston North, the couple voluntarily hold training camps every six weeks, write up strict fitness programmes for youth climbers and give fortnightly feedback on climbers' self-evaluations.

Each year the pair escort a team of four climbers to the world youth champs.

MacDougall, one of 30 climbers under Hawke's wing, is currently

ranked second in New Zealand.

MacDougall competed in the Youth Climbing World Cup in France last year, finishing 12th in the speed climb and 34th in the difficult climb.

The athletic teenager prefers the difficult climb, where overhangs and handholds get smaller the higher she climbs.

"I like the movement of difficult. It is problem solving. It comes down to technique, not strength," she says.

International sport climbing, which became a large-scale event in the 1980s, has a strict code and grading system.

At competitions, walls are up to 20m high and the top must be reached within six minutes. Climbers get five minutes to assess the wall, visually work out a possible route and then return to isolation until it is their turn.

"It's hard in isolation. Some people go around and psyche other people out. The vibe can be very negative," says MacDougall.

But mental focus is MacDougall's strength. Learning the art of visualisation is a big part of her training programme.

Four times a week she heads to the Panmure and Dominion Rd climbing walls with her chalk bag and shoes, sweating it out at four-hour training sessions to gain more strength, more endurance and better technique.

"I always try to push past my comfort zone, both physically and mentally. I need a lot of endurance for the climbs I do," says MacDougall.