



To: Provincial Associations  
From: Chief Executive  
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Subject: Touch NZ junior development and tournament structure  
Number of pages: 5

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### **Executive summary**

Following on from our recent stakeholders conference the Board of Touch NZ discussed the challenges related to junior development strategy and the current Junior IPS representative structure at the October 2019 Board meeting.

The Board determined that;

1. A participation (rather than representative) based junior competition and tournament structure was the preferred option.
2. This structure would ideally be implemented and managed at Provincial Association and Regional level with Touch NZ resource support
3. That it is important to continue to offer Touch for children over and above module Touch, but based upon a mass participation model for the majority rather than a representative model that caters to a selected minority
4. That the effect of this Board position statement is that the Junior IPS structure in the current Provincial Association representative format will not continue to be supported by Touch NZ and therefore the December 2019 Central and Southern Junior IPS and the January 2020 Northern Junior IPS will be the last Junior IPS tournaments run by Touch NZ under the current Provincial Association representative structure and model

Touch NZ will now engage with all Provincial Associations and regions to determine what a participation based junior tournament and development strategy could look like in your area.

### **Rationale**

As you are all aware the delivery of sport to children (tamariki) and youth (rangatahi) is very topical at this time through both mainstream media and the sporting communications network. The communication is all based around the best model to achieve retention of our children and young persons in sport, both in the short term and as a lifelong option



The discussion has highlighted deficiencies in current models that focus on “representative” rather than “participation” structures. Representative generally focuses on selection and needs of a minority, where participation tends to focus on retention and the needs of the majority

Sport NZ and other research bodies have stated that the general reasons why children and young person’s play sport tends to revolve around playing with their mates, having fun, and playing in an environment that rewards fairness and equity for all. Our children and young persons also like to play “multiple sports”, involve themselves in various forms of “active recreation” and they like to simply “play” at times. The experiences that they receive through their sport, active recreation and play then tends to determine whether they stay as a participant or leave altogether

Closely aligned with that experience is the behavior of adults and the “sideline” at sporting events. Evidence suggests that negative sideline and adult behavior (including parents and coaches) has a significant impact on whether a child or young person stays in sport

Representative structures for young players also create expectations around early specialisation, which research indicates is not ideal for young developing athletes and again has been cited as a cause of reducing the fun factor in sport for these younger athletes

There is also considerable anecdotal evidence related to representative coaches utilising coaching practices with young athletes that are not in the best interest of the young athlete. Too many coaching sessions and sessions that are too long as an example. Also unrealistic expectation by coaches. In effect coaching children as if they are adults with the primary focus of winning

The purpose behind a sport specific representative structure is to talent ID for future sporting stars. Logically this would mean that there is a tangible correlation between the children and young persons that are the subject of talent ID within that representative structure and the elite teams and players that make up the elite sports structure, in our case the Touch Blacks

We have been unable to establish any tangible link between children aged under 14 that play in our current Junior IPS structures and the players that eventually make the Touch Blacks. This is mainly due to the differing rates of growth and physical development of both boys and girls, which makes it impossible to determine whether a child under 14 is going to be the next star in the Touch Blacks

This is without even taking into account that they may be as suited to other sports as well when they begin to reach maturity and that the sport of Touch may not even be their first choice when faced with the option of being able to choose a professional sport that will provide them with an income



Dr Chris Whatman, AUT head of department Sport and Exercise Science, discussed this subject with our stakeholders on the teleconference held on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2019. His final comment was very clear, that below the age of 16 we are selecting on physical development, not talent

It can be argued that our current Touch module system, which is based primarily on primary and intermediate school or club based teams provides an opportunity for everyone to play Touch. Particularly when in most cases the children can pick their own teams and play with their mates in a fun and competitive environment

The same however cannot be said for our Junior IPS system. The key challenge we have is that currently our 19 Provincial Association bodies select teams in the under 10, under 12 and under 14 age grades to attend either the Northern, Southern, or Central Inter Provincial Touch tournaments, dependent on their geographic location. Each age grade accommodates boys, girls and mixed grades. Each Provincial Association can bring more than one team per age grade and division but invariably the majority bring 1 with the more resourced Provincial Associations sometimes bringing 2. In most Provincial Associations the number of children trialing far exceeds the number of children selected. If a Province brings two teams in a grade or division then they generally call them "elite" and development" Touch NZ currently runs these Junior IPS tournaments.

This structure captures a huge amount of Provincial Association time and effort into a relatively small group of children, and has become accepted practice in terms of a "junior development" strategy which of course it is not. It is also an environment where winning is everything, evidenced by the behaviour of some coaches and many parents.

As a sport we are not opposed to winners and losers, or competitive play, however the Board and senior management of Touch NZ is increasingly uncomfortable around the small number of children capturing a significant amount of resource and time, with little or no strategic junior sport development as a consequence

The overriding message being sent to the children that are selected in these representative teams is that they are better than the other children and the message the non-selected children receive is that they are not good enough. Is that appropriate messaging for under 14 aged children when the correlation between these age groups and the Touch Blacks is tenuous? Is it then any wonder that children might drop out of the sport after that? Dr Whatman's comments are very relevant in that in this space we are simply selecting the most physically developed children, not the most talented ones.

The selected ones then often drop out anyway because of parental pressure and burnout, the other children because they don't believe they are good enough. Both groups equally because often the "fun" goes out of the sport for them at this point



You will all be aware that there is a significant push from Sport NZ supported by academic research that all sports should address the issues related to tamariki and rangatahi in sport and when it is optimal to bring rangatahi into a representative structure within a sport

New Zealand Rugby have now publically announced that they have disestablished the Roller Mills (under 13 age grade) representative rugby structures and are developing for implementation a tournament structure that is based upon more children playing rugby (or variants of rugby) rather than the current representative rugby structure

New Zealand Netball disestablished their tamariki representative netball structures some years ago

Irrespective of personal views our Junior IPS representative structure is now out of alignment with Sport NZ strategy and academic research and view point. The Board of Touch NZ discussed this at the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019 Board meeting.

The Board determined that a participation (rather than representative) based junior competition and tournament structure was the preferred option. This structure would ideally be implemented and managed at Provincial Association and Regional level with Touch NZ resource support

The Board determined that it is important to continue to offer Touch for children over and above module Touch, but based upon a mass participation model for the majority rather than a representative model that caters to a selected minority

The effect of this Board position statement is that the Junior IPS structure in the current Provincial Association representative format will not continue to be supported by Touch NZ. Therefore the December 2019 Central and Southern Junior IPS and the January 2020 Northern Junior IPS will be the last Junior IPS tournaments run by Touch NZ under the current Provincial Association representative structure and model

The question now is how do we accommodate tamariki and rangatahi under the age of 14 (essentially the primary and intermediate school age children) in our sport within an appropriate and competitive participation based sport structure that offers more options than weekly module Touch? If we are to offer some form of tournament Touch over and above module Touch, then taking into account all of the research now available, what does this look like?

This may ultimately be different in each Provincial Association or Region, as we have determined for some time now that we are not a “one size fits all” sport. There also appears to be a number of age group tournaments available within Provincial Associations based upon school, club, or module participation that could be aligned to an inclusive mass participation strategy to meet the needs of tamariki and rangatahi over and above weekly module touch.



On that basis, and rather than providing a number of possible strategies and options, Touch NZ would like to work with each Provincial Association and Region to develop a tournament structure to meet the needs of your areas and which can then be delivered locally to meet identified local need. This can form part of the partnership agreements and strategic work we have agreed to work on together

### **Summary**

It is clear that change is upon us and at this point in time we still have the ability to influence that change in a managed process.

Any strategies and options developed will need to be based upon mass participation but competitive junior tournaments which will allow Provincial Associations to target their resources towards developing engagement with the primary/intermediate school structure, creating junior development opportunities, creating linkages and growth within the junior module structure, and ultimately develop the sustainability of the sport

By contrast, with some exceptions, currently a significant amount of Provincial Association resource is targeted at a very small number of children that attend Junior IPS, which could be argued as not being an effective use of resource when our agreed ambition is to be the largest participation sport in New Zealand

The video conference on 13<sup>th</sup> October with Provincial Associations and stakeholders was utilised to position the challenges and develop constructive discussion towards developing solutions. The Board of Touch NZ has now also provided clear strategic guidance through a position statement. As a result Touch NZ management is signaling that the current Junior IPS structure will now be disestablished after Northern Junior IPS in January 2020

### **Moving forward**

All Provincial Associations are now requested to consider what an appropriate and competitive participation based tournament structure might look like within their Provincial Association or Region post January 2020. Touch NZ will work with each Provincial Association and/or Region under our partnership agreements to develop these structures and options for our tamariki and rangatahi

We look forward to progressing this important work with you all

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