

How Might We:

Retain Players/ Athletes

Across most sports in Australia one of the greatest challenges is keeping existing members, particularly as they transition out of school and into work or other study commitments, explore their newfound independence and develop alternate priorities. 2017 AusPlay data shows us participation rates for young adults can fall by between 25-40% from 15-17 years to the 18-24-year cohort. This means we either need to increase the number of players in the younger age group so there are still enough players to ensure competition; or to find ways to retain young people as they transition into adulthood.

Hockey Queensland

Hockey Queensland realised they needed to retain their existing players across various age groups if they were going to be able to offer sufficient competition and develop their elite players into the future. Subsequently they decided to actively consider what players they were losing, and how to prevent potential drop-off of players in their game.

Their approach was not just about what to do with 18-24 year olds, but also how to keep all their younger age groupings so their pool of players was sufficient for competition and met the needs of each player segment.

Step 1:

Undertook a series of **consultations and active discussions** amongst HQ staff and HQ Committees on how to best resolve the existing and potential drop-off of players from their game.

This included a competitions and annual in-depth review of the sport with all avenues of the sport invited to comment.

Findings showed a pattern of individuals on teams being increasingly younger than the age grouping suggested which reduced playing opportunities especially for 17-24-year-olds. Hockey Queensland determined there was a need for a cultural shift within the sport to enable more opportunities for growth in player numbers, and a shift in approach to 'participation for life'.

Step 2:

Prioritised feasible actions that leveraged existing skills in the organisation and positively impacted on known barriers to participation.

- Review and feedback sessions conducted after each state title – under 18, Super League, Under 15 & 13's;
- Data collected regarding ages competing at each level;
- Competition review undertaken;
- Think tank amongst Staff and interested/targeted Associations;

- Ideas and recommendations taken to Committee and Board;
- Board recommendation – yes or no. In this instance yes;
- Introduction of recommendations broadcast to all Associations;
- Feedback – negative & positive received and responded to;
- Change in policy – recommendations;
- Implementation of policy.

Step 3:

Introduced a series of interventions of cumulative effect, demonstrating HQ's willingness to make structural changes that fit participant needs. These included the introduction of THREE program initiatives and ONE policy change:

A. Program: Targeted program for U16 Athletes (HQ State Team age groups are U13/ U15/U18)

For players coming out of U15 age group, Under 18 seems a long way off, and Hockey found that young people are likely to lose interest in the sport as 16 year olds. They determined there was a need to keep 16 year olds engaged for at least another year where they might then make it in to the U18 age group.

Realising that feeling valued leads to increased participation/ retention, Hockey introduced a series of **regional camps specifically for 16-year-olds**. The focus is on helping them develop skills and have fun, whilst feeling valued through personal identification and invitation. Costs are kept to a minimum by holding the camps regionally.

B. Event: Annual Festival of Hockey

To support ongoing interest in hockey players who have turned 18, a **Festival of Hockey** was developed to create an opportunity for the over 18 age group to participate in a more relaxed tournament or carnival environment.

This event involves a modified version of the game including:

- shorter duration games;
- 9 a side, instead of 11 a side, teams;
- modified rules to add interest to the event;
- males and females competing at the same time and at the same venue.

In addition, there is a phasing in of 18 and over minimum age for participation to redress the tendency for teams to use 16 and 17-year-olds as a priority. The phased introduction of the 18-year minimum age creates more available spots for older players.

A plan is in place to introduce two levels of competition – a competitive State League and a Social Competition.

To note, there is intentionally NO state selection process at this tournament, therefore there is less pressure on players to perform. As a result, the focus is on participation and fun.

C. Program: Introduction of an Under 23 sub-high-performance squad (Males and Females)

Understanding that some young adults leave hockey because they realise they are not going to make the representative teams, the sport introduced a targeted program focused on skill development and competition for players who come out of the under 18 program (19 year olds) and haven't made the next level; and those players who come out of Under 21 level (22 year olds) and haven't made the AHL level.

The intention is to maintain a sport pathway through to adult player and to support a wider base of players than just the elite.

D. Policy Change: No player can participate in more than 2 National Championships in one calendar year

This policy was introduced to reduce the opportunity of a 'gun' player playing in Under 18, U21 and the AHL Nationals in the same year. The result is there are more age specific opportunities for a bigger number of athletes.

To resolve anticipated negative responses and help Regional Associations with team composition, Hockey Qld are phasing this change in over a two-year period. It is anticipated the implementation of an age specific policy into State Championships will encourage more players to stay within the sport and not be overlooked for younger, 'better' players.

Step 4: Evaluate

To evaluate and refine the implemented changes Hockey Queensland are:

- Conducting ongoing age analysis of teams competing at all levels. They are expecting an increase in the average age at State Titles and for State Teams;
- Monitoring the number of teams at State Titles;
- Monitoring the number of players within Associations;
- Intentionally fielding two teams in each gender at State level competitions in Under 13's and Under 15's with the aim of increasing the pool of players competing at National levels.

If you have any questions about Hockey's initiatives they are happy to share information.

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HOCKEY QUEENSLAND KEY LEARNINGS

