

A local approach to bringing kids back to cricket

Mercury Bay Cricket Club, Thames Coromandel

Junior cricket participation in Mercury Bay was declining season after season due to significant travel demands and long game formats.

The Challenge

In a small coastal community where families balance multiple sports, activities, and lifestyle priorities, the model no longer met local needs. As a result, parents were reluctant to register their children, and young players were becoming disengaged due to long game times and limited involvement. Geographic isolation had become a major barrier to participation for tamariki and rangatahi in the region.

The Solution

Mercury Bay Cricket Club withdrew from the traditional regional competition structure and created a locally-led, school-based cricket model.

- Games were shortened to two-hour sessions and held every Saturday, but alternating age groups so each age group only played every second Saturday.
- Training sessions became optional, reducing pressure on families.
- Flexible “turn up and play” participation allowed children of all skill levels to join in.
- Modified game rules ensured all children stayed active and engaged throughout matches.

Why It Worked

- **Removed key barriers:** Travel, time commitment, and rigid participation requirements.
- **Cricket was redesigned:** They redesigned the competition around the needs of children and whaanau rather than around traditional competition structures.
- **Games became shorter, more social and more enjoyable.**
- **A flexible format:** This suited the lifestyle of families living in coastal and rural communities.
- **Increased opportunities:** Allowed participants to bat, bowl, and run, keeping children actively engaged.
- **Locally developed and locally delivered:** The community felt ownership of the approach

THE RESULTS

250%
INCREASE IN
PARTICIPATION

FROM 0 GIRLS
PRIOR TO THE
CHANGE IN
FORMAT TO 12 ON
SOME SATURDAYS

INCREASE IN
PARENT
VOLUNTEER
SUPPORT

SIGNIFICANTLY
REDUCED TRAVEL
AND GAME TIME



System Impact

- The initiative challenged the assumption that traditional club-based competition models are the **only pathway** for junior sport delivery.
- The approach demonstrated the value of **locally adaptable sporting systems** for geographically isolated communities.
- The model aligned strongly with Sport Waikato's focus on **reducing barriers to participation** and improving quality experiences for young people.
- The club created an environment where **participation and enjoyment were prioritised** over competition and performance outcomes.

Outcomes

- More children participated in cricket, including many who had never played before
- Girls' participation increased
- The atmosphere became more positive and community-focused, with less sideline pressure and competitiveness
- Parents became more involved, with strong volunteer support emerging naturally on game days

Learnings

- **Removing barriers** to participation can significantly increase engagement in community sport.
- Small changes to competition structure and delivery can create large impacts for participation and retention.
- **Flexibility** is critical in rural and regional communities where families balance multiple commitments.
- Young people are more likely to stay involved **when sport is fun, social, and accessible**.
- **Local communities** often already know what solutions are needed — they simply need permission and support to trial new approaches.
- **Participation-focused design** can coexist with skill development and positive sporting experiences.

Next Steps

- Continue refining the local cricket format based on participant and parent feedback.
- Share the model and learnings with other rural and regional sporting organisations.
- Continue adapting game formats to ensure
- all participants remain engaged and included.



“ Immediately through the numbers that were turning up, we knew that we were onto a winner. — Rob Corkill, President ”

“ It's brought a lot of fun back into cricket rather than boredom and tedium. It doesn't matter what skill level they are. Anyone can show up and enjoy themselves — Daniel Brownlee, Parent & Coach ”

[Read the full story and watch the video](#)



Scalability

Key scalable elements include:

- Local school partnerships
- Reduced travel requirements
- Flexible participation structures
- Shorter game formats
- Inclusive, participation-first design

Community sport systems can be successfully adapted to meet local needs while still maintaining meaningful sporting experiences.