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Basketball: New NZ professional league 'a long time coming' for female athletes

By Emma Houpt
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Whai's Esra McGoldrick, Makayla Daysh and Kendell Heremaia are stoked to be representing the Tauranga-based team. Photo / Mead Norton

A trio of Tauranga basketballers say nothing beats playing professionally in New Zealand - describing a new national women's league as a "stepping stone" towards giving the sport the exposure it deserves.

The Bay of Plenty Times Weekend caught up with three players from Tauranga-based team Whai ahead of their first game on Saturday.

Whai - stingray in te reo Māori - will represent the Bay of Plenty, Gisborne and Waikato in the new women's National Basketball League (NBL).

The league, Taulhi Basketball Aotearoa, has five regional teams representing North, Mid North, Central, Upper South and Lower South regions.

Born and raised in Tauranga, 26-year-old Makayla Daysh (Ngāi Tahu), said it had always been her goal to play professionally in her home city.

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"To finally be able to do that is pretty amazing."

After graduating from Tauranga Girls' College Daysh moved to Nebraska where she played basketball for Chadron State College.



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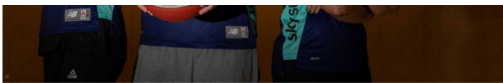
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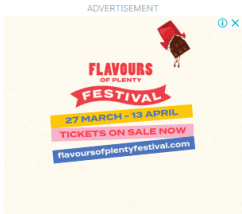
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What's Esra McGoldrick, Makayla Daysh and Kendell Heremaia are stoked to be representing the Tauranga-based team. Photo / Mead Norton

Returning to New Zealand in 2016, Daysh took up a role at Tauranga Intermediate - a school she also attended - as a sports assistant. She remains at the school full time while playing for Whati.



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Daysh, who was coached by the team's head coach Mel Bennett as a teenager, said the culture and philosophies she brought to the team were about "more than basketball".

"Our biggest thing as a team is unity. These girls have come from America and they feel like they have been here for 10 years - not 10 minutes. That is just a credit to our coaches."

Kendell Heremaia (Ngātiwai, Ngāpuhi, Te Arawa, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Te Rangī) agreed.

She returned to New Zealand in April after five years at Fordham University in New York.

The 23-year-old said her heritage and the coaching were the reasons she made the call to represent Whati.

Heremaia said Bennett made team values - including whanaungatanga (kinship), trust and communication - come to life.

After being offshore for five years it was also "really nice" to be part of a team that expressed Māoritanga, she said.

"Me being away for five years, I haven't been able to properly express that myself. Being in a team that is really full-on with it is really nice. It's a new experience for everyone - getting to the real insides of what actual Māoritanga is," she said.

"For a lot of us, if it wasn't for the Mel being our coach it would have had a different pathway for our decisions."

"I have been living here for two months now. But my connection here is through my heritage. I am Māori and I have connections on my mum's side whose whānau is from Tauranga.

Esra McGoldrick, 22, (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Tūwharetoa) grew up in Christchurch but chose to move to Tauranga as she had two siblings living in the city.

She also wanted to play under Bennett and to be close to Mauao.

McGoldrick, who has spent a year playing for North Carolina State University, said there were "a lot of green ticks everywhere for coming here".

The trio started training together on May 13 alongside their other teammates, and they were all feeling excited and nervous for the first game today.

"It's gonna be awesome to see how the competition and intensity will be out there," said McGoldrick.

They train six days a week while also holding down jobs.

There are 15 players on the roster - including three US imports - Kyra Lambert, Dominique McBryde, and Nikki Greene.



The trio had their first training together on May 13. Photo / Mead Norton

Basketball New Zealand said the league would give women's basketball more exposure with players receiving equal pay to male players.

Heremaia said the league had been "a long time coming" and would give women's basketball the recognition it deserved.

"Women's basketball has been a part of New Zealand for a long time - but there was nothing that appreciated it. It was always like brushed under the mat."

Daysh felt the new league was a "stepping stone" for raising the sport's national profile and hoped opportunities would only grow for female players.

"There has never really been that pathway unless you want to go to the States on

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scholarship. It's really exciting - especially for the generation under us - to now know you can stay at home, go to university and still play in your own country.

"They can get paid to play the sport they love, and stay at home with family and friends."

- Whai will face the Tokomanawa Queens in their first game today at the Te Rauparaha Area Wellington. They will play their first home game at 7pm on Tuesday against Mainland Pouākai at the Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre.



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