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Whai Women’s Basketball: Returning players and fresh faces to tip off a new season

By [Kaitlyn Morrell](#)
Multimedia journalist · Bay of Plenty Times · 4 Oct, 2024 04:02 PM · 5 mins to read

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The 2024 Whai women's basketball team is set to kick off their 2024 season.

Returning players and fresh international faces are geared up as Tauranga’s Whai [basketball](#) team returns for a third year.

Kicking their [Tauti](#) season off this Saturday at [Queen Elizabeth Youth Centre](#) (QEYC), the Whai go head-to-head against the Mainland Pouakai from Christchurch in the women’s league.

It comes as work ramps up on [Tauranga's newest indoor basketball venue](#) – the [Cameron Rd building vacated by The Warehouse](#) and sold to Tauranga City Council for \$25 million.

McKenna Dale, Whai captain and current [Tall Fern](#), is returning for a second season and said coming back to the Whai was a no-brainer for her.

"I didn't even really consider going anywhere else or playing anywhere else.

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"I think the environment that the coaches and the players and the staff have created is just really so special.

"The people are just so great and I've created some really good connections and relationships with players, with staff, with admin and with people in the community.



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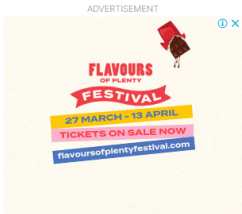
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McKenna Dale returns for another season with the Whai and will be leading the team as captain for the 2024 season.

"So for me, it was a really easy decision to come back to Tauranga," Dale said.



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Last year, the team placed third in the five-team women's professional Taihi Basketball League.

Heading into the 2024 season, Taihi Basketball Aotearoa announced teams can sign five non-NZ players, classed as imports, with at least two of these players having to be Australian.

Director of basketball and Whai head coach, Alex Stojkovic, chose to go with three Americans and two Australians.

"Every team in the competition is going to be a lot deeper than last year, so the talent level is going to be higher across the board.

"What we lacked last year was a little bit of size and rim protection, so that's why we got Lara. She's going to allow us to put some pressure on the rim," Stojkovic said.

Lara McSpadden was recruited from Australia, and she was looking to change things up, do something different and travel with basketball.

"Whai came along and it was kind of just like a no-brainer for me, just to do something different.



Australian import, Lara McSpadden, is ready to be dominant inside for the season both defensively and offensively getting rebounds.

"I feel like I haven't played for a team like this before where everyone has the green light to shoot the ball in some way.

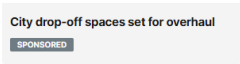
"We're all scorers, we're all shooters, we're all capable and I think that's going to make us better every day at training and then that'll further improve us and put us in good stead to go all the way, hopefully," said McSpadden.

Laina Snyder, one of Whai's American imports, had been on watch for recruitment by coach Stojkovic for the last two years.

"I've been in Europe for the past few years and I was looking for a change in scenery so it came at the right time, and this also coincides with the European season.

"I knew how connected to the community the Whai are and how important that is to them, so that was something I was looking for to broaden my impact that I'm having in the game."

Snyder said the team had put in a lot of work during the preseason and to see it all come together will be rewarding.



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Import Laina Snyder, is ready to bring the best start to each game and enjoy the process.

Dale, McSpadden and Snyder said the Whai were aiming for a championship this season and are excited to see the last month of preseason work come to fruition at their first home game on Saturday.

Whai general manager, John Miller, said Tauhi fans are impressed by the style that the women play.

"If you're in Tauranga it's worth coming to have a look, it's a different version of the game. The ball flows better in my opinion and that's just a beautiful thing to watch ... it's fast, there's lots of passing, lots of three-pointers, lots of layups."

Whai home games have taken place at QEYC for the past two seasons, but the facility is set to be decommissioned.

Mark Ross, senior programme manager of civic development projects at Tauranga City Council, said work inside the new building is progressing well, and QEYC will remain open to support community sports until the Cameron Rd facility is ready.

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Tina Harris-Ririnui, general manager of operations at Bay Venues, said the new facility was expected to attract more interest from regular and casual users due to its visibility and location.

"The centre will ease pressure on Tauranga's indoor courts and meet growing demand, offering space for up to four basketball-size courts, alongside casual bookings and court hire.

"Basketball remains the most popular sport in our indoor facilities, with more visits than any other sport last year," said Harris-Ririnui.

The *Bay of Plenty Times* also asked the council and Bay Venues how much the new Cameron Rd facility would cost and when it would be finished.



Lara McSpadden, Laina Snyder and McKenna Dale (captain) have signed with the Whai women's basketball team for the 2024 season.

Bay of Plenty Times' publisher NZME is a trusted partner of Whai Basketball.


Kaitlyn Morrell is a multimedia journalist for the Bay of Plenty Times and Rotorua Daily Post. She has lived in the region for several years and studied journalism at Massey University.



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