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# Queens or Whai for Tauihi Basketball Aotearoa glory

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Ashley Joens of the Tauranga Whai during the Tauihi Basketball Aotearoa semi-final. Photo: Andy Skinner

The climax to the third edition of the New Zealand women's basketball league has arrived with the Wellington based Tokomanawa Queens, facing the Tauranga Whai in the Tauihi Basketball Aotearoa grand final on Sunday afternoon.

Since early October, both sides plus three others, the Auckland-based Northern Kāhu, Christchurch's Mainland Pouakai and the Southern Hoiho from Dunedin, have been playing out a closely fought regular season, which culminated in the Queens coming back from a 16-point deficit to beat the Pouakai 75-70 in one semi-final last weekend, and the Whai winning over the defending champion Kāhu 76-63 in the other.

The standard of play and competitiveness of the league has been better than ever in 2024, with all teams regularly beating each other, meaning no clear favourite for the title emerged all season.

That means no stone can be left unturned for both coaches - the Queens' Tania Tupu, whose team won the title in 2022, and the Whai's Alex Stojkovich, whose team has won six of their last seven games.



Tokomanawa Queens head coach Tania Tupu Photo: Chris Symes

"They're fast, they get up the floor, they shoot the majority of their points in transition, or off the catch," Tupu said.

"So we just need to know our scout, and make sure we have our rules in place, and do a good job,"

Both sides know each other well, having met three times during the regular season, with the Queens winning two of them.

But Whai player American Ashley Joens reckons those two losses do not mean much now, with two other key Whai players, Mikayla Cowling and Morgan Yaeger, injured for those games.

"They're going to give us their best game, and we have to do the same in return," Joens said.

"No matter what, the season's over at the end, so you want to go out on top."

Joens, who has played 19 WNBA games, has been a star for the Whai.

She has topped the points-scoring ladder, averaging just under 24 a game, while also claiming nine rebounds a game.

Tupu said she loved how the league was evolving.

"We've got to lift the standard of our Kiwi girls and the only way to do that is to be playing amongst or be around these key internationals.

"Bringing in these players does set that pace and standard for our Kiwi girls to rise to, and they need to be around that and experience it, to get to it."

Joens, who has loved her time in New Zealand, said she agreed.

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"Just getting those experiences at a young age definitely help and you can see them kind of grow, not only in their basketball, but also in their confidence."

Joens will be straight back to the States after Friday's game as she chases her next opportunity, but will leave having impressed many, including Tupu.

"She's a killer scorer, like it's pretty crazy how many times that she'll put the ball up but she doesn't care, she just goes go for it," she said.

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