

Netball Australia Player Retention Research: *Understanding Why Players Stay, Leave and Return.*

WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

Netball provides significant physical, mental, social and wellbeing benefits for people of all ages. While participation in netball remains strong, retaining participants through adolescence and into adulthood continues to be one of the sport's biggest challenges.

To better understand participation patterns, Netball Australia commissioned a national research project with Federation University to understand why players stay involved, why they leave, and what encourages them to return.

The findings show that improving player retention requires a strong focus on the participant experience. Creating enjoyable, inclusive and connected environments, supported by quality coaching and flexible participation options, can help players remain engaged in netball throughout their journey.

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

The research included four stages to provide a comprehensive understanding of player participation.

1. Participation Data Analysis – Analysed national registration data to identify participation, retention and dropout trends.
2. Player Survey – More than 4,600 current and former players shared their experiences, motivations and ideas for improving participation.
3. Former Player Interviews – Explored why players left netball and what would encourage them to return.
4. High Retention Club Interviews – Identified the practices and environments that help clubs retain players over the long term.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The research found that player retention is influenced by the overall quality of the participant experience not just the game itself.

Players are more likely to stay involved when they:

- Have fun
- Play with friends
- Feel welcomed and included
- Experience positive coaching
- Feel connected to people and their club
- Have flexible participation options that fit their lifestyle

Players are more likely to leave when:

- Participation is no longer enjoyable
- Friends leave the sport
- Competition becomes overly performance focused
- Study, work or life commitments increase
- Participation lacks flexibility
- They no longer feel a sense of belonging
- Players will re-engage if the right participation opportunity is available.

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THE WINNING FORMULA FOR RETENTION

The research identified four key ingredients that keep people involved in netball:

1. Friends – Strong friendships and positive team environments encourage participants to stay connected to the sport.
2. Fun – Enjoyment is one of the strongest predictors of long-term participation.
3. Flexibility – Participation opportunities should fit around changing life commitments and motivations.
4. Belonging – Players are more likely to stay when they feel welcomed, valued and connected to their club.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

The research identified six priority areas that will strengthen player retention across the netball community.

1. Strengthen Governance – Support clubs with clear leadership, transparent decision making, effective communication and participant focused governance.
2. Monitor Retention – Use participation data and regular feedback to better understand player experiences and identify where support is needed.
3. Strengthen Coach Development – Invest in coaches who create safe, inclusive and enjoyable environments that prioritise player development and wellbeing.
4. Foster Belonging – Create welcoming club environments where participants build friendships, feel connected and enjoy being part of the netball community.
5. Develop Flexible Participation Pathways – Provide more social, recreational and flexible participation opportunities that reflect different life stages, motivations and levels of commitment.
6. Strengthen Family Partnerships – Build stronger relationships with families through clear communication, greater transparency and meaningful opportunities to contribute to club life.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CLUBS

Every club plays a vital role in improving player retention. Small changes can make a significant difference, including:

- Creating welcoming first impressions for new players and families.
- Supporting coaches to focus on positive player experiences.
- Encouraging friendships and team connection.
- Communicating openly and consistently.
- Providing flexible participation opportunities.
- Celebrating positive behaviours and club culture.

OUR SHARED GOAL

Together, we can create a participant centred netball experience that supports players to stay involved for longer, transition between different participation opportunities and return to the sport throughout their lives.

By focusing on positive experiences, strong relationships and flexible opportunities, we can build a stronger, more inclusive and sustainable future for netball.

Together, we can create positive experiences that keep more people playing, connected and thriving in netball for life.