



# MORE THAN 'JUST TENNIS'

The advantage of engaging juniors and connecting with the wider community

## CASE STUDY #1

Thank you to all clubs who shared their stories and contributed to this article

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## ***MORE THAN “JUST TENNIS”:***

### ***The advantage of engaging juniors and connecting with the wider community***

In a promising trend, more and more WA tennis clubs are playing it smart by capitalizing on the advantages of engaging junior players within their clubs. And the results are speaking for themselves.

For several years now, **Blue Gum Park Tennis Club** have embraced the juniors within their club through establishing a **Junior Committee**. Much like the traditional Club Committee, the Junior Committee meets throughout the season and includes a nominated President, Secretary and supporting committee members. In formalising the structure further, committee members are immortalized with name and position badges worn proudly by the committed youngsters.

**Club President, Sue Redmond**, attributed the introduction of the Junior Committee to her predecessor, but said the involvement of the young players has proven extremely important for the young player’s commitment to the club.

“Each season we have a new group of juniors taking on roles within the committee”

“Their involvement is heavily dependent on the confidence and skill sets they bring,”

“It’s a great opportunity to mentor these young people in developing their leadership skills in organisation, communication, accountability, decision making and initiative,”

“The key is in building their confidence to contribute, that way, we empower young people with life skills they can apply to any situation or environment,” said Ms Redmond.

Making their mark, this year’s Junior Committee initiated conversations surrounding new flooring in the junior social clubroom, which also doubled as storage. What resulted, was an unprecedented re-flooring of the entire clubhouse and a revitalisation of a completely drab storage room into a unique place of belonging for the juniors.

“The kids are really excited about the space. They’ve taken great pride and ownership of the zone and have made it their own,”

“They’ve got posters of their tennis idols on the walls, there’s table tennis, even a TV,” said Ms Redmond.

**Blue Gum Park Vice President, Penelope Martella** said that the club recognised the importance of creating a positive and relatable environment for the juniors whilst generating opportunities for the rising stars to contribute and give back.

“Kids are more than capable, and in so many different ways, the key is to identify what they’re good at and what they are passionate about, and engage them through the use of those skills” Ms Martella said.

Aiming to create a more positive and inclusive culture, juniors are involved in a number of different roles throughout the club

In addressing the large number of energised junior boys, it was decided to hand over the running of the Friday night Junior Social Club, to the Junior Committee. The result? Noisy? Yes. Chaotic? A little. How adults would do it? Absolutely not. But that's the point!

Young people relate best to each other, and if putting juniors in charge increases the relatedness between facilitators and participants, then perhaps there's method in the club's seeming madness! And the results really do speak for themselves - increased participation, juniors helping juniors, the development of young people's skills in organisation and commitment, and the very real need of teaching kids to give back.



BGPTC Junior Committee Members assist with Junior Club & Saturday Afternoon Adult Social

The booming music coming off the Blue Gum Park courts on a Friday night might break all typical tennis etiquette and rules, but the ultimate result of kids engaged in tennis, of kids engaged with each other, and of kids committed to a club is surely an insignificant price to pay for your classic 'quiet please' tennis standards that all but rules out kids by their very nature.

According to the *Australian Sports Commission's 2017 Intergenerational Review of Australian Sport*, the social capital attributed by club associations and volunteers is second to none, and one definitely worth going out on a limb for. And fight clubs must, against trends impacting a decline in participation, with reports suggesting that 81% of Australian children do not meet the recommend activity guidelines, in addition to the one quarter of children reported to be overweight or obese. The foundations of establishing an active, healthy lifestyle, in the combat of life long obesity and physical inactivity, are in serious jeopardy if we can't forge inroads to engaging our youth.



Blue Gum Park TC revitalized junior clubroom

Participation in sport improves academic performance, longevity, health and well-being, whilst the networks and sense of belonging harnessed within club environments, provides advantages for individuals and communities alike (Australian Sports Commission 2017).

*Better Together*, a South Australian Government initiative, describes engagement as a process that 'helps to develop strong communities and stakeholders; it gives them the confidence to participate and develops interests in being part of the solution. In turn, engagement builds cohesiveness and capacity of the community'.

Involving youth in organisational structure and decision making, is understandably a daunting concept and most certainly not something you'll find in the history books. Yet without question, research and evidence advocates for the involvement of youth in paving the way forward. Diversity in ideas and perspectives, brought forward by engaging youth, enriches whole club decision making and ensures the relevance of programs, projects and club direction.

The key however is in avoiding 'tokenism'. *Better Together* champions for continuous and meaningful representation that is appropriate, relevant, engaging, genuine, supported and in line with the needs and wants of young people. Understanding the barriers to young people's involvement and participation is critical, as is a strong appreciation as to why young people are being involved.

And the benefits, well, everyone's a winner. Clubs that make informed decisions build trust, respect and transparency amongst all stakeholders, fostering greater involvement and participation across the board. Anyone who feels valued will do more than what's expected, it's about building that capacity within the club from the ground up. When young people feel valued, their confidence soars, so too then does their commitment, participation and engagement.

The importance of engaging youth is far reaching and directly addresses the negative forecasts of failing to act. The Australian Sports Commission predicts that if club volunteers continue to decline in numbers, then so too will the operation of club and league systems across all sports. The degeneration of club structures, and trickledown effect to unsustainable competitions, is unnerving, with the ultimate price to pay in the permanent loss of social capital.

Despite the grim outlook, hope is not lost, with the Australian Sports Commission determined to halt declining trends and drive Australia to be the most active sporting nation in the world. In doing so, the Commission will push for thriving sports organisations that contribute to strong, more inclusive communities with a focus on offering more fun, flexible and modern products. And who better than to engage, than young people, who without question, ooze enthusiasm, vigor and a true sense of what fun actually means.

The challenge remains however in how best to engage the youth of today, and according to the International Association for Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2), the first step is in identifying the level of engagement required. From junior stakeholders informing club decision making with consideration given to the presentation of ideas and concepts, to formally involving them in the collaboration of outcomes; junior involvement is a fluid and dynamic mechanism with no hard and fast rules other than to be conscious about what's truly important to the significant group of relevant stakeholders.

Take for example, the **Esperance Tennis Club**, who made the most of celebrating the achievement of two of their junior players fortunate to be ballkids at this year's Mastercard Hopman Cup. The pair presented on their experience to club members and players, opening conversations between young and old. In this regard, the juniors have been involved in the club with respect to something that is important to them, so instinctively, what results, is a true sense of belonging and personal value within their tennis community.

The ripple effect of involving juniors beyond their playing capabilities, has the potential to extend further to the positive engagement of family members and friends, further addressing the Australian Sports Commission's agenda to deliver more modern products. It's about creating an environment that's more than just a tennis club where kids are dropped off for coaching and pennants, and parents are



Hopman Cup Ballkids from the Esperance Tennis Club  
(Source: Esperance Express)



nowhere to be seen. Generally speaking, when kids are explicitly involved, it's easier to build a community around that.

**North Beach Tennis Club** have harnessed this point effortlessly with the inclusion of their parent membership scheme which allows parents to hit with their kids at any time outside of dedicated court commitments.

Noting the clubs aging demographic, **Club President Len Horne** says the clubs focus is to harness a return to days when tennis was central to the family unit.

"Tennis was once a sport the whole family was involved in, we're looking to reintroduce that family vibe back into the club," said Mr Horne.

And the value in doing so directly addresses the Australian Sport Commission's findings that 81% of children do not meet the recommended physical activity guidelines and that over 50% of adults are living sedentary or low activity lifestyles.

Creating a club that's family orientated, positively reflects a sense of belonging for the whole family. Horne admits though, that the clubs journey in doing so is still in its infancy. The introduction of twilight tennis, market days, music concerts and open days targeting juniors, are just some of the clubs new introductions.

"We're an aging club trying to think young. It's not always easy but we're committed to bringing back that family vibe," said Horne.

Thinking young, it seems though, takes courage. Just ask **Ceri Wagnell**, Club President of **Alexander Park Tennis Club**, where the committee's focus to include a youthful approach, extends far beyond the scope of most clubs. The unorthodox example being the clubs willingness to allow juniors to run their own event demanding a much needed acceptance and understanding, that not everything always goes to plan.

"It's about creating a community, that offers more than just tennis and engages more than one audience,"

"Our junior representatives organised a 'Juniors Night'. The plan was for board games and music, yet by the end of the night, they were all out on the courts playing tennis and dancing to the music,"

"No one had planned for tennis, so we had to run around and find enough racquets so they could all play," said Mrs Wagnell.



Community Open Day at Safety Bay TC

Replicating this same direction is the **Safety Bay Tennis Club**, where attracting non tennis players to the club is of a priority. In doing so, Club President **Terry Fraser**, says the club looks to harness opportunities to the engage the wider community where ever possible.

"This year we held a Halloween movie night which attracted a large number of non-tennis players to the clubs facilities. Doing so helps to break down barriers between those that play and those that don't,"

“And our open day has become more of a festival than a traditional open day, with bouncy castles, market stalls and food vendors. In doing so we give people a reason, aside tennis, to come down to the club” said Mr Fraser.

Also boasting a festival approach to drawing non-members on to the court is the **Kardinya Tennis Club** who host an intergenerational doubles tournament where juniors sign up with an adult of their choice. Club secretary **Kath Sugars** said the focus of the tournament is on participation and fun where kids team up with mums, dads, aunts and grandparents. The point is fun, much the same as the clubs inclusion of Cardio Tennis, aimed at engaging parents to pick up a racquet.

“Our aim was to engage parents in a high energy, fun activity, welcoming of beginners. The results have been amazing with almost every participant joining as adult members,”

“The real bonus has been in the sense of family involvement,” said club secretary Kath Sugars.

Trending then, is the desire to make tennis fun for everyone, regardless of their skills and abilities and doing just that, is **Peppermint Grove** and **Allen Park** tennis clubs who joined forces recently to hold a Cardio Tournament. The play based activities earn points for worthy winners followed fittingly with the necessary awards and celebrations. Seemingly, the social aspect is of high priority when engaging a broader audience.

And if we look to our national Grand Slam, the **Australian Open (AO)**, then the sky’s the limit in embodying tennis as an all-inclusive sport, seriously disturbing the status quo of what’s on offer during events. With record breaking crowds of 780,000 attendees at this year’s event, the success of not only engaging, but also growing its audience base beyond just traditional ‘tennis fans’, most certainly speaks for itself.



From film festivals, music concerts and indulgent food and wine selections to attract the adults and non-traditional tennis fans; to the [AO Ballpark](#), a mini theme park complete with waterslides, a climbing wall and a Ninja Warrior course, for the kids, the AO certainly provides an experience that engages all ages and interests. And whilst the expectation certainly isn’t that local clubs try and replicate the efforts of the AO, rather, just that they look to the AO as a leader in diverse offerings that work to compliment and bolster the sport with a holistic approach.



Above Right: AO Live Stage; Above: The AO Ballpark

So the way forward must be a united, inclusive and diverse one. It's about thinking outside of the box and creating a disturbance to the norm. And the Australian Sports Commission agrees. Stating that developing thriving and engaging sports organisations is a critical element to the success of addressing the sustainability of local sports clubs, and the ultimate performance of Australian sport on the World stage.

It's about looking at the whole picture, considering all stakeholders and removing preceding boundaries that pose limitations to progress. The focus therefore in growing sports participant involvement, rests resoundingly with growing the involvement of participants.

**Want more information? Then please follow the links below:**

["Intergenerational Review of Australian Sport"](#). Australian Sports Commission 2017.

["Better Together"](#). South Australian Government.

[IAP2, Public Participation Spectrum](#). International Association for Public Participation.

**Does your club have a story or initiative they would like to share?**

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**References:**

Australian Sports Commission (2017). *Intergenerational Review of Australian Sport*.

South Australian Government (2019). *Better Together*.

International Association for Public Participation (2019). *Public Participation Spectrum*.