

The Elite 8 – The Future

What is “The Elite 8”

Touch Football Australia (TFA) in conjunction with various stakeholders including members of the National Events Commission (NEC) recommended an alteration to the current National Touch League (NTL) on a biannual cycle to embrace the requirement for a more **Elite** structure.

Importantly the recommendation took into consideration the need to recognise the various levels of development required to achieve such a goal and therefore ensured that there was no mandate to alter the current entity structures or boundaries.

The NTL entities which are Regions, Permits or States play a pivotal role at various levels within our strong pathway. The Elite 8 has been designed to compliment these structures and add a new pathway for the elite participant and therefore the progression of our game.

The Elite 8 is designed to bring the best players from across Australia into a new format which will take the sport forward. Worth noting is that the original NTL model designed in the early 90’s had a similar premise. Over time and debate this became what we now know as the NTL.

The Elite 8 will see a revised format of eight teams (four NSW, three QLD and one rest of Australia) compete in a high level structure at the NTL in March. There is no alteration requirement to any structure under the Elite 8.

TFA has subsequently liaised with the NSWTA, QTA and all other States to form the basis of the structure. This has been a cooperative and collaborative process whereby feedback has been taken on board throughout.

Why now?

The NEC and TFA took into consideration issues that had been presented from various stakeholders since 2003 which was the last NTL review. It was clear that change was needed and indeed demanded to ensure the sport progressed. TFA undertook a full review and indicated the need for the sport to embrace both aspects that had long plagued the debate with respect to our National event.

That was: Is the event Elite or Participation?

The fact of the matter is that as a sport we need both. Various bodies look to the NTL in differing ways and therefore the opportunity to set a clear mandate for what was indeed elite and what was participation, a pathway benefit or development occurred.

TFA views the biannual structure as an expanding and contracting opportunity for development at all levels.

The absence of elite players in one year opens opportunities to broaden the base. In the following period this should bolster the competitive capabilities around selection and ultimately provide opportunities for extensions or growth around the format offered at the NTL.

It has been evident throughout sport that participation at the highest level coupled with the ability to return to the development base ensures that such an experience is shared. This type of approach had great effect in the early days of the NTL and with an expanded base we can ensure the continuous pathway which we hold dear is enhanced.

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The Development Division

As stated above TFA has considered the impact of the implementation and reviewed the position of the removal of open level competition. This is a concession and has only been made with respect to the assurance that all parties will embrace its development nature.

All participants must make themselves available for the Elite 8 competition in order to be able to participate in the development competition which will exist underneath. There will be draft processes and other opportunities available for people desiring to play at Elite 8 level that are not selected. Therefore, those not selected have the opportunity to participate in the development division.

This division has been implemented biannually with the removal of the Under 20's in the same year and it is envisaged that this should be a breeding ground for all parties.

The original position of TFA and the NEC was there was to be no division other than mixed available in the Elite 8 year. Again, this concession has been made in the best interest of overall development.

The NEC and TFA will strictly monitor participation in this division.

The Transition

If Touch Football as a sport is to make the transition to a more professional and marketable product then it is imperative that change must occur. While 'change' can often be a difficult word to grasp it needs to be embraced to ensure we position ourselves appropriately for the future.

All those who hold this sport in the highest regard believe that we are capable of so much more and looking at the transition made by other sports to a professional platform all commence with the creation of the product.

TFA has reinstated strong competition internationally with the Trans Tasman Series now bedded down with our New Zealand partners. We have continued to work with both the NSWTA and QTA on the State of Origin Series and with the implementation of the Elite 8 we believe a strong suite of products will be developed to showcase the sport and drive the elite participant to new levels.

The Elite 8 will not only provide a high end product for the marketability of the sport but will also ensure that we continue to be strong at international level. Both TFA and Touch New Zealand (TNZ) have discussed the opportunities for the future in a franchise type space and remain committed to progressing international competition between our nations.

TFA will be looking to work with our partners both internally and externally to provide the best possible experience for those participating in the Elite 8. This has already resulted in levels of commitment from our current sponsors which will alleviate financial costs and professionalise the experience for the athletes.

The new event will not only be a shot in the arm for elite participation but our technical disciplines will be provided with a new avenue to hone their skills. A higher level of refereeing, opportunities for selectors to be involved in the composition of combined programs, our high performance structure involvement and critically an opportunity for coaches to advance to a high level more akin to National or State of Origin environments.

It is the view of TFA that the creation of the Elite 8 will provide an enhanced pathway across the entire structure. States will have programs that compliment this initiative and build over a two year platform to achieve success.

In conjunction with State of Origin Series and the NTL we will establish an escalating pathway which places the sport well for the future.

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The Future

Where to in the future?

That is the million dollar question. The Elite 8 is a visionary product whereby the sport is looking to position itself for television based products, an elite competition and a more professional environment for all concerned.

If we look at numerous sporting journeys that have had success including the AFL, NRL and more recently netball the creation of such franchises or elite environments is the starting point.

While initially there will be varying approaches to the development of the teams that participate in the competition the long term view must be to ensure a balance to the competition.

Many competitions have struggled with such a concept however; what has been clear within our own construct is that the top end teams are finely balanced. Our NTL has been extremely competitive through position one to six and then falls away. What is also evident is that this can move in cycles. It is clear that an approach which takes all of this into consideration will develop a strong competition for the future.

In time the structure will be managed professionally and independently to ensure we maintain a consistent product. When considering this type of approach it is evident we must look at the initial construct with a forward view on what we want for the future.

This raises many questions surrounding changing construct, geographic alignment and much more.

It is imperative that we create entities or franchises that are embraced and are marketable. The unified delivery of this elite product through the stakeholders (NSWTA, QTA and TFA) will ensure a major investment in the future. The franchises already have geographic alignment as they are state based in terms of location but consistency in belonging to such a franchise will also be important. All parties are encouraged to look at such factors to ensure we create a structure that is sustainable and successful in promoting our vision. It is our vision that these franchises will be carried by the participants desire to continue to represent them into the future.

The process is a journey toward professionalism and while that can be perceived in many differing ways it is about the culture we implement and the environment that all those involved create. The vision includes the establishment of truly professional franchises to which external investment will become a reality.

TFA has the long term view of creating a product which can exist beyond the current constraints of the funding available to run it, the availability of athletes or other areas of restriction. It is envisaged that the creation of the product will assist us to remove these constraints.

We see a day where the Elite 8 is truly used to market the sport and travels to events such as the NSW or QLD Junior State Cup, a developing State or Region to promote the game or even the Under 18 Championships to promote the pathway to our up and coming athletes. This would result in the creation of a professional calendar for the elite athlete.

In a professional format such as this constant review will be required.

Will eight be the number or will we look to venture into a collaborative approach with our New Zealand partners? All remains to be seen and therefore as previously indicated the NEC will review progress toward these goals. The Elite 8 is the first step toward the creation of a marketable, high end product for the elite participant in our sport.

Over 14 years ago the NTL was created to provide an expanded opportunity for elite participation which has served us well to date. It is now the time for the sport to look at how it progresses further down a path that creates something for our future.

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