



Touch football: *Touch Football Australia*

'In keeping with a "sport for all" philosophy, the objective of Touch Football Australia's policies are to ensure positive, enjoyable and safe activities are provided for people playing touch'.¹

From humble beginnings

The sport of touch football was developed in the 1950s to provide winter sports participants of rugby union and rugby league with a way to keep fit over the summer months. Touch has since developed into a truly national pastime and has become a sport in its own right.

Australia is one of 33 member countries to the Federation of International Touch which was founded in Melbourne in 1985.² Australia is also the clear leader among 19 nations competing for the World Cup, and the Australian women's team has never been beaten in international competition.

Touch Football Australia

Touch Football Australia (TFA) has overseen the development of the sport and takes a national unified approach to management. There are touch football associations in every state and territory.

The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) is a principal sponsor for Touch Football Australia (TFA). It has supported the TFA to develop new programs, such as the AusTouch program, and provides significant funding for its elite and development programs.

The first official game of touch was held in the traditionally strong rugby league area of South Sydney. The South Sydney Touch Football Association was founded in 1968 and ran a competition that year. Soon after, other associations were formed and interdistrict competition began in 1978.

In 1979, the Queensland Touch Association was formed, with four districts competing against each other. The game soon blossomed in New South Wales and in 1980 the inaugural National Championships were held. During the early 1980s touch football began to grow in popularity throughout Australia as a summer sport, with the participants from a variety of backgrounds.

In 1997, the National Championships was replaced with the National Touch League – a national tournament designed to be the pinnacle of domestic competition in Australia, allowing competitors to identify with a regional area.

Currently, there are 250,000 registered touch players with approximately 500,000 school children also playing the sport.³ The game has expanded overseas, with international events attracting teams from New Zealand, South Africa, England, Wales, Scotland, USA, Japan, Samoa, Fiji, Cook Islands, Lebanon and Papua New Guinea.

In addition to the TFA competition, it is estimated that as many as 700,000 other Australians play the game on a casual basis, including office teams playing at lunchtime, social clubs forming teams and friendly neighbourhood competitions.⁴

Who plays touch?

The 2003–2004 Sweeney Sports Report shows that the game of touch football in Australia is expanding, with an increasing number of men and women showing interest in, and participating in the game.

The report shows that:

- Touch football is played by 10 per cent of urban Australians; the highest percentage since the survey was started in 1995.
- Four per cent of Australians have attended touch football events; the highest recorded figure.
- Canberra has the greatest number of touch players per capita of all the major cities (16 per cent). Brisbane and Sydney are close behind with 14 per cent. Melbourne has the lowest participation rate.
- The 16–29 year age category for males and females is the most common demographic of touch players in Australia; 21 per cent and 16 per cent playing touch respectively.
- Overall, 13 per cent of males and seven per cent of females play touch in Australia.⁵

There were no available figures on the participation by Indigenous peoples or those from a cultural and linguistically diverse background in touch football.

Game development

The Federation of International Touch has recognised the resources compiled by Touch Football Australia and Touch New Zealand as the ‘official game development resources to be used worldwide and encourages other nations to utilise these models for development.’⁶

Touch Football Australia’s Strategic Plan 2005–09 has a goal to ‘increase the number of junior touch participants in organised community-based competitions through the implementation of a national junior program’.⁷

In 2002, TFA commenced work on a junior program that would assist clubs to introduce and recruit new participants to touch football. Seed funding was supplied by the Australian Sports Commission’s (ASC) Targeted Sports Participation Growth Program in 2003.

Over 2003–2005 the program was piloted, planned and then rolled out to all areas of Australia. In 2005, a formal evaluation of the program was completed in conjunction with the ASC and was formally and independently audited in 2006.

AusTouch

The Australian Touch Association's Targeted Sports Participation Growth Program focuses on a program called 'AusTouch', targeted to 8–18 year old males and females throughout Australia.

AusTouch provides a non-threatening introduction to the sport of touch by reducing the barriers of skill at the entry level. The program links young people from formal and informal school-based participation in touch football to registered membership with the association.⁸

The program is offered after school over 6–8 weeks at centrally located venues throughout metropolitan and regional areas. It includes skill development sessions which expand into a game format.

An AusTouch Leaders Resource kit has been produced and includes a DVD with 42 fun activities for kids, as well as a CD containing session plans, examples, templates, adjustable documents, flyers, logos and information. A Touch for Juniors book is also available which includes rules, game terms and code of conduct information.

Indigenous participation

Similar to the rugby codes from which touch is derived, anecdotally there is a large Indigenous population who play the sport. As mentioned, there are no accurate figures to confirm this, however the TFA are in the process of adapting their database to record this information.

High profile Indigenous players in the game include Northern Territory's Bo Delacruz, who won the 2003 National Indigenous Sportswoman of the Year after being named the Women's Player of the Series at the Touch Football World Cup in Japan that year (which was won by Australia). She was the only Indigenous member of the national women's team, as well as its vice-captain.⁹

De la Cruz has also recently accepted an invitation to join the national Indigenous Ambassador programme. She will work alongside rugby league legend Arthur Beetson and former Olympic hurdler Kyle Van der Kuyp to spread the word about government services available in Indigenous communities.¹⁰

One of the goals of the Strategic Plan is to '*increase the exposure of touch to the Indigenous community*'.¹¹ As part of this plan the organisation aims to: increase the participation numbers of junior and senior Indigenous players; increase the number of visits to Indigenous communities, and; increase the number of technically qualified people in Indigenous communities to coach, referee and officiate.¹²

It is not clear at this stage to what extent these objectives have been achieved. Further, while there are game development officers in TFA and the affiliated state organisations, there does not appear to be staff with a dedicated focus on Indigenous or multicultural development.

State initiatives

Under the Australian Sports Commission's Indigenous Sport Program, Touch South Australia undertook a development trip in 2003 to the Pitjantjatjara Lands in the north west of South Australia. In a follow up trip in 2004, Touch SA staff spent a week travelling to the communities to further promote the game as an alternative to the traditional sports of football and softball.

The tour was the start of Touch SA's Indigenous strategies and long-term initiatives for the game's development in the outer regions of South Australia. The trip covered nearly 2,700km and introduced over 350 children and young people to the excitement and challenges of touch football.¹³

Policies on ethical behaviour

Australian Touch Football's junior policy has been developed in line with the Australian Sports Commission's approach to junior sports delivery. The guidelines provide a setting for junior touch clubs, affiliated associations and other groups responsible for the development, organisation and conduct of junior touch. They also includes guidelines for a coordinated and complementary approach to touch in schools and the community.

In keeping with a 'sport for all' philosophy, the objective of the policy is to ensure positive, enjoyable and safe activities are provided for people playing touch. Relevant to this project is the objective to 'ensure equal opportunities are provided regardless of a person's gender, race, ability, cultural background, religion, geographical location or age'.¹⁴

An important part of this policy is the concept of 'Opportunity for all'. This is premised on the principle of social justice and the belief that sport, when presented and organised properly, provides important educational and developmental opportunities that benefit the individual and the broader community. In particular, it highlights that:

- 'Opportunity for involvement and maximum participation, to meet children's needs are to be ensured regardless of gender, race, age, geographic location, cultural background, religion or ability'.
- 'Racial and religious customs must be taken into consideration so as not to deny access to programs. For example, uniform codes may need to be relaxed to allow female Muslim children to participate in long skirts, stockings, and scarves'.¹⁵

Codes of Conduct

Parts of the junior policy codes of conduct which are relevant to this report are highlighted below.

1. *Coaches and teachers*: 'provide equal encouragement for all children regardless of gender, ability, cultural background or religion to participate, acquire skills, and develop confidence'.
2. *School and community organisations*: 'foster a 'sport for all' philosophy, including an awareness of groups with special needs' and 'encourage more coaching role models from specific target groups (Indigenous, other cultures etc)'.
3. *Parents/guardians/spectators*: 'support all efforts to remove verbal and physical abuse from sporting activities' and 'demonstrate appropriate social behaviour by not using foul language, harassing players, coaches or officials'.
4. *Referees*: 'discourage unsporting behaviour and promote respect for opponents'.
5. *Administrators and officials*: 'ensure that equal opportunities for participation in sports are made available to all children regardless of gender, ability, cultural background or religion children'.

6. *Media*: 'avoid reinforcing stereotypical views on the involvement of boys and girls in particular sports' and 'respect the rights, dignity and worth of every child regardless of their gender, ability, cultural background or religion'.
7. *Government at all levels*: 'conduct or financially support only those programs that encourage participation in sport by all young Australians and provide equality of sporting opportunity'.
8. *Players*: 'play by the rules' and 'control your temper. Verbal abuse of referees or other players, and deliberately fouling or provoking an opponent is not acceptable'.¹⁶

The TFA codes are drawn from the Australian Sports Commission and are reproduced in touch football resources with the ASC's permission.

Coaches and referees are encouraged to reinforce the TFA and ASC's codes of conduct and behaviour. They are referred to the ASC's Harassment Free Sport guidelines and Member Protection policies for more information on harassment issues.

Codes of Behaviour

As a member of TFA, a member association or an affiliated club, players, referees, coaches, administrators and officials, spectators, parents and the media must adhere by certain conduct requirements.

The codes that apply to administrators and officials seek to 'ensure that equal opportunity for participation in touch is available to all regardless of ability, size, shape, set, age, ethnic origin or disability' and state that 'a code of behaviour should be distributed to all participants'.¹⁷

It is also outlined in the code for spectators and the media to: 'Respect the rights, dignity and worth of every young person regardless of their gender, ability, cultural background or religion'.

Anyone found in breach of the codes may be subject to a judicial hearing convened by the club, affiliate or other affiliated touch body.

TFA promotes the *MyClubTouch* information, which contains all game development policies and procedures on its website to improve the effectiveness of touch administration policies and codes.

Endnotes

¹ Australian Touch Football's junior policy.

² <http://www.internationaltouch.org/page.aspx?pri=19&tpl=1>.

³ Touch Football Australia website at www.austouch.com.au.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 2003–2004 *Sweeney Sports Report* conducted by Sweeney Sports Pty Ltd at www.austouch.com.au.

⁶ <http://www.internationaltouch.org/page.aspx?pri=19&tpl=1>.

⁷ Touch Football Australia's *Strategic Plan 2005–09*.

⁸ <http://www.austouch.com.au/?id=694>.

⁹ www.austouch.com.au.

¹⁰ <http://news.sbs.com.au/livingblack/index.php?action=news&id=130846>.

¹¹ Touch Football Australia *Strategic Plan 2005–09*, P15.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ www.satouch.com.au.

¹⁴ Australian Touch Football's junior policy, P3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* P4.

¹⁶ Australian Touch Football's junior policy.

¹⁷ Touch Football Australia *Code of Behaviour*.

