

Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia

The health benefits, both physical and mental, of participation in sport for everyone are well documented. The fact that the proportion of women who participate in sport is considerably less than the proportion of men is also well documented. Successful ways and means of increasing women's participation in sport need to be found and duplicated across the country to address many current women's health issues, such as obesity, diabetes and depression.

An examination of the Canberra based organisation 'Females in Training' (FIT) suggests a range of successful strategies for encouraging women, including those with disabilities, to:

- try new and different sports such as canoeing, rogaining, abseiling and triathlons, as well as more usual sports such as running, cycling and swimming;
- enter or re-enter a range of sporting activities, for fun and fitness as well as for competition;
- compete in local, state and national competitions for all age ranges;
- become qualified coaches in a range of sports;
- take on leadership roles in developing and managing sports training, events and competitions;
- be active in administration of sporting organisations.

FIT strategies which increase participation

There are a number of constraints that discourage women from participating in sport and recreation activities including:

- Participation is often interrupted by pregnancy and childbirth, making it difficult to return to the level or amount of activity before the event.
- Many sporting clubs have mixed membership and many women are reluctant to expose their perceived incompetence in mixed company.
- The majority of coaches in sport are male and do not understand a woman's approach to sport or the concerns she may have in beginning a new sport or returning after a period of absence.
- Participation in team sports can be difficult for women who take prime responsibility for child care and household chores. So many women prefer individual sports but training individually for these sports can be isolating and de-motivating.
- Sports involving equipment, such as cycling, canoeing and abseiling, are often male dominated, partly because of a perceived lack of mechanical and technical skills of women. Women may be reluctant to take up such sports if they do not have confidence in their abilities to purchase, repair and maintain the required equipment.

Many aspects of the structure and management of FIT work to overcome these constraints.

- FIT is a women's only organisation, though male family and friends are welcome at specified events and activities or as support crew and helpers in managing events.

- FIT runs a number of weekly training sessions for running, cycling and swimming and catering for groups at different levels of skill and experience. This enables women to give each other mutual support and motivation to enter or re-enter sporting
- FIT has a program to support women with visual impairment to participate in cycling on tandem bikes (FITAbility). The program includes training members to be pilots and to train women with visual impairment in the stoker role on a tandem.
- Weekly training sessions are coached by qualified FIT coaches to develop essential skills for various activities.
 - This includes education about building fitness over time;
 - In cycling, women are taught how to use the full range of gears to best advantage; to corner safely; the importance of cadence in riding efficiently, avoiding knee problems and how to ride safely in groups/bunches.
 - Swimming, coaching is provided for beginners and advanced swimmers and
 - Running, including preparation for marathons, City to Surf and other community events.
- FIT encourages and financially supports members to become coaches; to advance through various levels of coaching; and to be active in coaching.
- Throughout the year, entry level courses are run over a number of weeks by FIT coaches so that women can learn the basics of running, cycling, swimming and triathlon.
- FIT runs leadership programs for members who then commit themselves to organise 'come and try' days in new and different sports such as rogaining and abseiling.

FIT members also gain experience by participating in the management committee and sub-committees which organise specific events such as FITAbility, the annual Women and Girls Triathlon, cycle training camps, a six week training course for novice triathletes.

I would be happy to provide further information or to appear before the committee if requested.

Yours sincerely

Phyl Crawford
 President
 Females In Training (FIT)
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