

**Submission to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information
Technology and the Arts References Committee
Inquiry into Women in sport and recreation in Australia**

In the first 20 years of television broadcasting in NZ Netball (Outdoor Basketball) had a sporadic but important representation on television, in conjunction with the major male sporting codes and with other so-called second tier sports. There appeared to be a qualified willingness from the beginning by the broadcaster, BCNZ, to include netball because of its status as the major women's sport in New Zealand. The 1960s saw a change to the structure of the game to enable more frequent international competition and a growing awareness, no doubt in part fuelled by feminist calls for the concerns and activities of women to be treated with more respect and be deemed worthy of a more equitable share of resources. At this time Rugby Union still commanded the major share of sports broadcasting investment and for a women's sport to call for more equitable distribution of broadcasting resources was a tough challenge on a financial and a cultural level. One of the key anxieties for netball during these two decades was the constant frustration of never having access to useable moving pictures of the game for archival and educational purposes. The importance of having film footage to cherish the history of the game in New Zealand and celebrate women's social history was an almost totally unobtainable dream.

In the 1980s the state broadcaster consolidated its investment in NZ broadcast sport by narrowing down the selection of codes to receive coverage as a form of sponsorship. It is noteworthy that netball was nominated to be in this group that became known as the 'Big Four', alongside Rugby Union, Rugby League and Cricket. This was a considerable advantage to Netball as the sport did not have to raise funds to pay for television coverage and even received a minimal 'Rights Fee' which was around 20 pounds per game with a total national income for the year rarely going above one hundred pounds. However, the coverage gained and the fee distributed was never comparable to that provided to the other male codes. Although in some respects this situation could be seen to be an enviable position for a women's sport and possibly unique in the western world, it was a fragile position which had to be continually fought for by the Netball executive at the time. Within this Executive body there was a small group of farsighted women such as Marjorie Jenden, who correctly assessed that if the sport didn't fight for a greater share from the broadcaster and demand greater respect for the value of the game, that it would be forever locked within a paternalistic relationship with the broadcaster and the sport would not flourish in the future.

They were unshakable in their belief that the survival of the sport depended on continued and increased exposure on television, and were realistic enough to recognise that the sport itself had to make changes making it more attractive the broadcaster. These women knew that it was crucial to move the sport away from the 'Back court' mentality which had nurtured it at the grass roots level for decades and start pitching the product in the mainstream in order to bring sponsorship money into the game. They knew they had to lobby at the highest level possible to promote the game and to do this they needed to get men to negotiate with men. The decision to hand over aspects of executive control was not an easy one and was not welcomed with universal joy from some of the provincial women in the middle management who had long nurtured the game despite the odds. One of the long term results of this decision was the appointment of a male chief executive, Alistair Snell, in the late 1990s

which signalled a considerable cultural attitudinal shift within the organisation as well as in the wider community where a career path for a male could be through a traditionally all women domain.

The third channel recommendations of the 1987 Royal Commission of Inquiry into Broadcasting and the fiscal environment fostered by the new right policies of the incoming Labour government led to a sweeping series of law changes which by the early 90s resulted in the creation of the most deregulated broadcasting environment in the western world. The establishment of SKY TV in 1990 and its increased capitalisation in the mid 1990s had enabled pay television to gain a foothold in the NZ broadcasting environment. Based on the aggressive model of Rupert Murdoch's BSKYB network in the UK and without the fire-wall of anti-siphoning legislation, live sport was the hottest bargaining property and the professionalisation of Rugby Union in 1995 kick started the process of moving prime time sport off free-to-air and into a pay structure. All three major male sporting codes were plucked rapidly into the pay domain where New Zealanders, or more precisely New Zealand males, capitulated with justifiable but resigned ire into paying to watch their sport live. They felt they had no choice.

During this period netball had worked hard to repackage itself as a more televisual sport, working more closely with the broadcaster and the small but committed group of commercial sponsors to ensure that it was adding value to its game and extending elite competition options. With the loss by TVNZ of the major rugby competitions, retaining only the four year Rugby World Cup rights, Netball found itself in the unique position of being the only major sport in the country live on free to air national television. Although the rights contracts were still far from satisfactory there was a constant conviction by successive Executive Boards that the sport must remain a free to air code to ensure it never lost contact with its grass roots. Pay TV had made early overtures to the sport but only if they would play over the summer holiday season to avoid any clash with the male winter codes and to pitch to the female audience over the 'silly season' to try and cut down on the summer 'churn rate' from subscribers who only wished to pay for the winter sport. It is notable that a type of Trans Tasman or Tri Nations competition was mooted at this point.

The 1999 Netball World Championships provided the long awaited moment which forced the recognition of netball as a ratings earner of worth when Australia snatched victory in the last 6 seconds of the game. This absorbed the nation's focus in a way that only rugby had been able to command in the past. The unprecedented ratings spike for the last quarter of the game gave the Netball Executive irrefutable statistical evidence with which to demand an early return to the negotiating table and attempt a re-evaluation of their product with the broadcaster. The outcome of this renegotiation could be considered a break through but it still cannot be placed in the same category as the male sporting codes. Netball was almost reluctantly re-valued by the broadcaster but it was a re-negotiation of rights which would not have happened in the past. Despite this advance it was certainly not ushered onto the level playing field shared by the male codes and the sport remained by necessity and to a certain extent by design, unprofessionalised.

The growth of the National Bank Cup competition (previously the Coca Cola Cup) was one of the deliberate strategies aimed to provide the broadcaster with more regular and quality product to showcase. Nearly ten years into the competition and due for a revamp next year, this is still not enough to match the frequency required and has lapses in quality. Not all games in the competition are televised and the quality still varies despite dropping one of the

weaker teams out of the competition. This was not without controversy where the dilemma of using the competition to showcase the sport at only elite level was conflicted with the desire to use the competition to nurture the sport and encourage a wider take of sponsors who would not participate in local areas unless the franchise was on television. The luxury of being able to do both is not available to a women's sport, not matter how high the playing numbers on a national basis.

Summary:

Netball continues to dominant a commanding position within New Zealand culture and occupies a unique space within NZ's highly deregulated broadcasting environment with increasing confidence. The ratings in the last seven years in particular reveal a wide following of the sport across all demographics. The male television audience is as significant as the female fan base and in fact males out rate females at times, particularly when the competition is fierce and top level games are on display. This ratings profile would not have been possible without the sustained coverage by the state broadcaster over the last 36 years.

Although the semis and the final games of the National Bank Cup attract impressive ratings, the highest raters will always be the games between Australia and the Silver Ferns. As has been proven in the male codes, these Trans-Tasman clashes are games of fundamental importance to a national audience and over the past decade there has been a steady acceptance of allowing a women's sport, netball, to share in carrying the burden of national sentiment. Netball could never have achieved this level of acceptance if it was still being played on the back courts, excluded from the dominant disseminator of popular culture; television.

In a qualified way, the belief by the visionary women of the netball Executive in the 1980s is now being realised. But with such a limited and very slow growing international base, the survival of the game is still highly dependent on the on-going strength of the sport in both Australia and New Zealand and the quality of that representation on their domestic television. The New Zealand experience proves that the more the resources and expertise the broadcaster invests in the game the better the outcome for both parties and the commercial sponsors. The quality of the televised coverage has improved markedly since 1999 and this intensification of the product has returned an important dividend for the broadcaster and the free-to-air audiences drawn to the spectacle.

Margaret Henley
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