

SCHOOL SPORT AUSTRALIA 12 & U and 15 & U NETBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS HISTORY

The Beginning

The championships trace their beginnings to the Australian State Schools' Basketball Association, which was initially developed for primary schools and played mainly on grass. Interstate carnivals began in 1923 and continued in 1924, with several exchanges taking place between individual states. That same year, visiting teachers from Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia travelled to New South Wales to investigate girls' sports with the aim of establishing interstate competitions. South Australia hosted an exchange in 1925, followed by New South Wales in 1926 and Victoria in 1927.

With the introduction of a perpetual trophy, the first officially recognised Australian State Schoolgirls Basketball (Netball) Championship took place at the Practising School in Brisbane in 1928. The final, held on the afternoon of August 22, drew a large crowd, where Victoria secured a decisive 23–4 victory over New South Wales. Following Victoria's win, the perpetual trophy was donated by Mr John Donald Howie, who served as a Victorian Councillor from 1922 to 1932 and as Mayor of Camberwell in 1927 and 1928.

Australian schoolgirls tournaments were organised to combine both a netball competition and an educational tour. When girls weren't playing they attended lessons at the local school or made educational day trips. In Brisbane the girls visited Toowoomba, the Olympic Tyre and Rubber Works in Geebung and took a trip to the South Coast of Queensland.

In its early years, netball's rules and attire reflected prevailing beliefs that girls should maintain femininity and modesty when participating in sport. Players wore loose bloomers gathered at the knees, stockings to cover their legs, blouses, and a hat or scarf tied at the back of the neck. The rules reinforced the notion that women should avoid overexertion, with strict positional restrictions—only the wing attack could move beyond their designated third of the court. Physical contact and active contest were limited; for example, missed goals could not be rebounded and instead resulted in a throw-in by the defender. Sideline throw-ins required the opposing player to stand beside the thrower (outside the court), and no player was permitted within nine feet of the thrower. To ensure "proper" conduct, the game was played in silence, with only the captain allowed to speak on court. Matches consisted of six seven-minute terms, with two-minute breaks between terms and a five-minute interval at half-time.

In 1929 the age group for the competition was the age of 15 in the year of the competition. For many years only four states competed (NSW, Qld, SA, Vic). In 1930 the following rules were altered:

1. The ball shall be bounced in the centre of the field with sufficient force to reach the head height of players.
2. Goal throwing – the goal thrower may alternate feet after catching the ball.

Breaks in the Competition

The competition has only paused three times: during the 1937 outbreak of infantile paralysis, from 1939–1948 due to the Second World War, and in 2020–2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the war ended in 1945, it took several years to revive the event. Efforts in 1947 saw Queensland travel to Melbourne and Victoria visit Adelaide, with all three states encouraging wider participation in 1948. That year, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia met in Melbourne, hoping for a fourth team the following year. The competition officially resumed in 1949 in Adelaide, with South Australia, Queensland, Victoria, and Tasmania—making its debut—competing.

Structure and Purpose

At the time, the Australian State Schools' Basketball Association consisted of:

- The Victorian State Schools' Amateur Athletics Association (later the Victorian State Schools' Girls Basketball Council)
- The NSW Public Schools Amateur Athletics Association
- The South Australian Public Schools' Sports Association
- The Queensland State Primary Schools' Basketball Association

Tasmania (The Tasmanian State Schools Sports' Council and Western Australia (The Western Australian State

Schools' Sports Association) joined later. The Association aimed to develop girls' basketball across Australian state schools and to run interstate contests that provided strong educational value. Each state had two voting delegates; tied votes (except on constitutional matters) were decided by the Chairman.

Post-War Growth and Records

From 1949 until the pandemic, the carnival ran without interruption. In 1950, at the suggestion of Mr R. McGregor (Victorian State Schools Amateur Athletics Association), a record book was introduced. That year, both junior and senior divisions competed over nearly two weeks. The Council met once annually during the carnival for its AGM, where rules and by-laws were reviewed.

Tasmania, in its second year, was officially recognised as an 'organised school body.' As no junior trophy yet existed, states contributed £1.1.0 each to purchase "The Interstate Girls Basketball Trophy – Junior Division." Seniors competed for the "Howie Cup." A senior and junior Australian team was also selected to play "The Rest," starting a tradition of selecting an Australian representative team that continues at today's 15 & Under Championship.

1950s–1960s: Expansion and Rule Changes

In 1953, a second meeting—the Preliminary Conference—was added to check eligibility documents and handle administrative matters. It was voted that only women teachers were permitted as team manageress's. By 1954, matches were four 10-minute quarters; by 1955, senior players had to be under 15 as of September 1, while juniors were under 14 in the year of the championship.

In 1954 the game consisted of ten minute quarters with intervals of three, five and three minutes. In 1955 the age limit for the senior girls was 15 years of age on the 1st of September in the year the carnival is held. The junior team comprised of girls who had not reached their 14th birthday and did not turn 14 in the year of the competition.

In 1956, Western Australia joined, making the competition fully national (all states, no territories). Travelling to Brisbane by train took them almost a week due to multiple railway gauge changes. They had to change trains at Kalgoorlie, Port Pirie, Adelaide, Melbourne, Albury and Sydney.

Uniforms evolved: bloomers, stockings, and hats were gone, replaced with sports tunics which closely resembled box pleated school uniforms which covered the blouse and were drawn in at the waist by a cord or sash. Regular checks were carried out by netball associations at the beginning of each season. Girls were required to line up, kneel down and have their hem length checked. Rules still restricted movement: games remained silent, no rebounding was allowed, and defences stood motionless when a goal shooter aimed. As the goalie could take up to five seconds the immobility of the defenders demonstrated the emphasis of no physical contest.

By 1960, six states competed regularly. In 1961, all fielded junior and senior teams—120 girls in total. In 1964, junior teams were withdrawn, a decision made by the Directors of Education; the junior trophy went to South Australia for having the most wins (8), where it remains today.

From 1965–1966, quarters increased to 15 minutes, and bibs displaying positions appeared. Seven positions were used: goalie, attack, attack wing, centre, defence wing, defence, and goal defence.

Administrative Shifts and Primary–Secondary Exchanges

By 1967, rising age limits made primary-level management difficult. Secondary school sports bodies took over, raising the age limit to 16. Queensland and NSW withdrew, wanting an open-age competition. Umpires increased to two per match. Primary-level exchanges resumed in 1968–1969, with South Australia playing Tasmania in Hobart, and later Queensland in football and basketball. The team size in 1969 was 10 players and their maximum age was 13 during the year of the exchange.

In 1969, secondary players required insurance, with parents signing a certificate certifying that their child was fully insured against injury with 24 hours coverage.

Netball Era and Joint Events

In 1970, "basketball" became "netball," aligning with international usage. The first Australian Netball Exchange was in 1971 in Launceston, Tasmania, alongside primary Australian Rules football (a pairing that lasted until 1995). In 1972, NSW won, and Assistant Director of Education Charles Ebert donated a perpetual trophy for the event.

In 1973, secondary netball and hockey were held together for the first time, with four states competing. By 1977, all states and both territories participated—a peak that lasted until 1989 when netball and hockey were hosted in separate cities.

Modernisation and National Presence

In 1974, Betty Bennett (Victoria) received a silver medallion for outstanding service, later becoming a life member in 1991. That year, private school students became eligible if state associations agreed. In 1982, three substitutes were allowed, but only at half-time; by 1987, player interchange was permitted at any interval, later adopted nationally by Netball Australia in the 1990s.

1990 was the final combined secondary hockey/netball championship. Julie Hewson (WA) became the first National Secretary for netball, overseeing the sport's own by-laws. For 16 years all eight affiliates had supported the combined championships - quite a remarkable record in women's sport. The first official Australian Secondary Schools' Netball Championship since 1972 took place in 1991. Tasmania withdrew from interstate school sport for eight years due to funding cuts. That year also marked Netball Australia's direct involvement, with National Coaching Director Jill McIntosh—herself a 1970 championship player—attending for the next thirteen years.

Strengthening the Link with Netball Australia

In 1991, Netball Australia (AANA/NA) became directly involved in the secondary championships through the presence of Jill McIntosh, then National Coaching Director. Jill, who later became the Australian National Coach, attended the championships for the next thirteen years despite a demanding schedule. She was herself a former player in the 1970 championship, representing the victorious Western Australia team and earning selection in the All Australia Schoolgirls' Team.

This partnership has grown steadily, with National Coaching Director Janet Bothwell conducting professional development sessions for state officials from 1997–1999.

Also in 1991, the Merit Award was introduced, recognising a skilful player who narrowly missed representative selection but showed strong potential.

Competition Developments

In 1992, finals were introduced for the first time in the 15 & Under Championship, giving all teams the opportunity to compete for defined placings and adding a climactic finish to the competition. That same year, Julie Hewson retired as National Netball Secretary after re-establishing the Australian Secondary Schools' Netball Championships as a prominent event in the Australian School Sport Council calendar. She was succeeded by former SA team coach Paula Nielsen, who continued until 2024, with a focus on strengthening ties with Netball Australia and introducing boys' competitions.

In 1995, the appointment of an Umpires' Convenor by Netball Australia brought the championships in line with other national events by ensuring neutral umpire selection. Chris Burton, then National Umpires' Director—and a former SA player (1959), All Australian Team member, and SA coach (1970)—was instrumental in implementing this change.

Changes from 1996

In 1996, the secondary Merit Award was replaced by the Players' Player Award, selected by the athletes themselves. After each match, players voted for an opponent who demonstrated skill, sportsmanship, and contribution to their team. Sponsored by Kea Designer Sportswear/Champion/On Track Sportswear, the award remains a cherished tradition with Struddy's taking over in 2024.

In 1998, team sizes increased from 10 to 12 players to match Netball Australia standards, giving coaches more tactical flexibility and more athletes the opportunity to compete at a national level.

The secondary championship in 1999 once again saw the return to a truly national championship with Tasmania rejoining the competition. The team coordinated by Netball Tasmania proudly represented their state. The secondary championship was officially renamed the 'School Sport Australia 15 & U Netball Championships'.

Primary Exchange Challenges and Revival

In 1995, the introduction of the National Junior Sport Policy meant primary-level interstate competitions required

National Sporting Organisation endorsement. As Netball Australia declined to endorse the primary exchange, it was disbanded until 1999. During this period, tri-state and territory competitions were held: one between SA, VIC, and ACT, and another between NSW, QLD, and NT.

In 1999, School Sport Australia approved the resumption of the primary exchange, held in Katherine, NT. To boost numbers, each state/territory sent two teams of ten players, and for the first time, school-aged umpires were invited, fostering junior officiating development. The National Netball Secretary attended to assist with operations and work towards gaining Netball Australia endorsement.

By 2000, NT was unable to send two teams, so SA fielded three. From 2001, the exchange returned to a single team of 12 players per state/territory, with ACT, NSW, NT, QLD, SA, and VIC competing in a double round-robin format combined with player development activities. The competition became officially named the 'School Sport Australia 12 & U Netball Exchange'.

Strengthened Partnership and International Expansion

After two years of planning, 2002 saw the inaugural secondary Australian team compete in a Trans-Tasman tournament in New Zealand. The 12-player team from four states faced the NZ Schools Representative team, a Maori (Aotearoa) team, and a Pacific Islands (Pasifika) team. In a thrilling final, Australia defeated New Zealand by one goal—the same day the Australian Diamonds beat New Zealand at the Manchester Commonwealth Games. The NZ players were, on average, two years older, making the win even more remarkable. The inaugural coach, manager, and umpire were Cathy Fellows (VIC), Marg Smith (SA), and Stacey Campton (ACT), with co-captains Julie Prendagast (VIC—future ANZ Championship and Australian player) and Joanne Sutton (NSW—former ANZ Championship and Australian player).

In 2002, a Partnership Agreement between Netball Australia and School Sport Australia formalised cooperation in promoting and developing school netball programs nationally. By 2003, all umpires for the secondary championships were appointed under Netball Australia policy, giving talent-identified umpires national-level experience and removing umpire costs from team levies.

In 2004, Adelaide hosted the International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge, an expansion of the Trans-Tasman format, featuring seven teams: Indigenous School Sport Australia, School Sport Australia, Netball New Zealand, Aotearoa, Pasifika, Cook Islands, and Bastion High School (South Africa). IFNA (International Netball Federation) expressed interest in supporting future editions.

A Long-Awaited Return

In 2005, the 15 & Under Championship returned to Launceston, Tasmania, for the first time since 1989—marking a much-anticipated homecoming after 16 years.

2006–2019: Growth, Partnerships, and Milestones in School Sport Australia Netball

In 2006, the *15 & Under Championship Players' Player Award* was renamed the Amy Safe (Gillett) Award in memory of Amy Safe, who tragically died in a cycling accident while representing Australia at the World Cycling Championship. Amy had represented South Australia in 1990 and 1991 at this event, and as a 15-year-old, described a top sportsperson as having "determination, ambition to succeed, ability to accept decisions and any failures and continue on." She embodied these traits, representing Australia in rowing and cycling, and South Australia in netball and triathlon.

That year, the International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge returned to Adelaide, with Singapore joining for the first time. The School Sport Australia team later won the 2007 grand final in Auckland, defeating Netball New Zealand by one goal under co-coaches Kristy Keppich-Birrell (VIC) and Joanne Macdermid (NSW), manager Bernie Toohey (QLD), and captain Ashton Hurn (SA). In 2008, Sri Lanka entered the Challenge for the first time.

Also in 2008, the draw format for the 15 & Under Championship changed: from 2009, team positions would be based on the previous year's results instead of a ballot. This ceased the long-standing tradition of the manager at the post championship meeting selecting a number by ballot that would decide the team's position in the draw. That year marked the launch of Australia's first semi-professional netball competition—the ANZ Championship, a joint venture between Netball Australia and Netball New Zealand. Over its nine years, an average of 35 past School Sport Australia championship players competed for one of the 10 franchises.

After an invitation to attend the 12 & Under Exchange was extended to Carol Byers (Netball Australia Coaching development and Participation Manager) in 2008, wheels were put in motion to gain the endorsement of Netball Australia for this exchange. Carol could view first-hand the many student-centred learning opportunities that all participants experienced throughout the week and could see the value in the exchange at this age level.

The 2009 competition saw the renaming of the Exchange to the 12 and Under Netball Championship to bring it in line with all other School Sport Australia events.

In 2009, Netball Australia and School Sport Australia signed an official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), formalising a cooperative agreement for both the 12 & Under and 15 & Under Championships. For the 12 & Under Championships, Netball Australia supported the appointment of student umpires, assisted in assigning personnel to coach these students, and requested that School Sport Australia ensure team coaches were accredited and that parent education sessions were held prior to the event.

At the 15 & Under Championships, Netball Australia agreed to manage and fund the appointment of umpires and the umpires' allocation panel, provide coach education, and appoint a selector for the Australian team.

At the international level, Netball Australia also committed to helping source suitable coaches, as well as managing and funding the appointment of an umpire to accompany the team. The MOU was renegotiated in 2010, again in 2011, and continues to be reviewed and renewed on an ongoing basis.

2010 saw the International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge return to Adelaide with Bukit Jalil Sports School in Malaysia entering the competition. The selected 2010 secondary Australian team competed in Wellington, NZ in 2011 and beat Netball NZ by 12 goals, an outstanding effort. Well done to coach Kristy Keppich-Birrell (VIC), assistant coach Leesa Gallard (VIC), manager Peta Maher (SA) and captain Kaitlyn Brice (NSW).

12&U Future Developments & Further International Expansion

In 2012, Western Australia returned to the 12 & Under Championship after a 48-year absence, prompting a shift from double to single round robin with followed by a "like-ability" second round robin was conducted with the player development activities. 2012 was also SAPSASA's 100 year celebration and as part of the celebration the 12 and under netball and Australian football championships were hosted at the same time. This gave the opportunity for both teams from the same state/territory to mix together as they did from 1991 – 1995.

Also 2012 saw the International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge hosted once again in Adelaide with Samoa entering the competition for the first time. It was once a gain a fantastic week of netball, networking and fellowship for all of the girls.

In 2013, officials reinstated the double round robin, shortened games to 8-minute quarters, and introduced quarter limits per player. That year also saw the first Indigenous Budgies Netball Team in the 12 & Under Championship, filling the competition bye with Tasmania not competing. Congratulations to Shane Ambrum, Deb Farrell and JoAnne Kelly (team officials) who did a fantastic job putting together the indigenous team which included girls from Queensland, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia. The indigenous team now known as the First Nations and affectionately the budgies have continued to fill the bye.

The International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge hosted in Adelaide in 2014 including Fijiana FANZ (Fijian's in NZ & Australia) and the Auckland Tonga Netball Association as first time competitors increasing the competition to 10. It was disappointing that Netball NZ in 2015 chose to withdraw from the International Netball Championships particularly as they developed the competition back in 2002 but it was with excitement that the International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge was hosted by Bukit Jalil Sports School in Malaysia - the first time outside of NZ or Australia.

At the 15s championship post championship meeting the length of quarters was reduced from 12 to 10 minutes to come in line with Netball Australia rules. In 2016 the International Schoolgirls was hosted in New Zealand for the first time by Aotearoa Maori and it was great to see the New Zealand Secondary School Netball team return to the competition for this one year.

In May 2016 saw the end of the ANZ Championship and the birth of Suncorp Super Netball, featuring three new franchises—Giants Netball, Magpies Netball Club, and Sunshine Coast Lightning—alongside the five existing Australian teams - Adelaide Thunderbirds, Melbourne Vixens, NSW Swifts, Queensland Firebirds and West Coast Fever. In 2025 37 past players competed for one of the ten franchises.

2017 the International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge was hosted by Netball Fiji in Suva, Fiji providing rich cultural exchanges. This was the first time that Netball Fiji had entered a team in the challenge and it was exciting for them to have the opportunity to host the event. A highlight of the week was visiting the Suva Methodist School playing netball against the school netball team and handing out netballs to the school.

School Sport Australia Next Steps

In 2017 this netball championship became part of the Pacific School Games (PSG), an international school sport event involving around 4000 students in 11 different sports. This was the first time in many years that the 12 & U and 15 & U championships competed together at the same event. There were no international teams in the 12 & U competition but in the 15 & U championship included the Budgies Indigenous team and India.

2018 saw the International Schoolgirls Netball Challenge hosted for the first time by the Budgies Indigenous Netball Team in Runaway Bay, Queensland. This was a great week of netball and congratulations must go to the School Sport Australia team that defeated the Auckland Samoa Netball team 44-37 in the grand final. Well done to coach Kate Gray (VIC), assistant coach Peta Trahair (NT), Manager Dian Sexton (NSW) and co-captains Maddison Ridley (VIC) and Reilly Batcheldor (QLD).

In 2019, the first boy competed in the 12 & Under Championship for Western Australia, reflecting the competition's inclusive policy for both genders.

2020 saw the third interruption of this championship when the COVID-19 pandemic spread worldwide closing the Australian borders and, in many cases, isolating families in their homes for months. This continued throughout 2021 which resulted in SSA ceasing championships until 2022. 2022 saw the return of the championships but NT still unable to take part due to ongoing issues with the pandemic. In 2023 all states and territories took part in the championships with the return of NT.

In 2023, the 12 & Under Championships introduced a Boys' Invitational Championship, initially held between invited teams. By 2024, it had evolved into a full championship featuring six competing teams—ACT, NSW, QLD, SA, VIC, and WA—with Victoria emerging as the inaugural winners.

That same year marked the launch of the School Sport Australia Games, a multi-sport event on the Gold Coast involving over 1,000 student athletes from eight Australian jurisdictions, as well as representatives from the Cook Islands and Fiji. The 15 & Under netball competition formed part of this event, which began with a combined opening ceremony and a championship hub where players and families could socialise, enjoy live music, and watch the Paris Olympics together.

In 2025, the first-ever 15 & Under Boys' Championship was staged in Brisbane at the City of Moreton Bay School Sport Australia Games. Six states and territories (ACT, NSW, QLD, SA, VIC, WA) competed, with Victoria again taking the title—going through the tournament undefeated.

Many of our Australian representatives in netball have had their first championship experience at this level and it is important to note that a number of our former competitors have been most successful at the international level. Current Australian squad members who have taken part in the School Sport Australia Netball Championship are Sunday Aryang (2015) WA, Kiera Austin (2010), NSW, Sophie Garbin (2012) WA, Georgie Horjus (2026/27) SA, Sarah Klau (2009) SA, Aalice Teague Neeld (2010/11) VIC, Liz Watson (2009) VIC and Jo Weston (2009) VIC.

From Tradition to Today: The Evolution of School Sport Australia Netball

Since 1923, there have been many rule changes and netball is under continuous reappraisal. Today's schoolgirls enjoy netball rules which encourage fast and vigorous play. The movement between thirds permits greater mobility. Rules allow, and rebounding from missed goal shots almost demands, much more physically demanding contests for the ball. Agility and freedom of movement is complemented by sports uniforms which allow this freedom.

While much has changed since the first official tournament in Brisbane in 1928, the School Sport Australia 15 & Under and 12 & Under Netball Championships continue to foster interstate rivalry, camaraderie, and the making of lifelong friendships.

Paula Nielsen

National Netball Secretary 1993-2020

(including extracts from "Netball Looking Back" by Jan Ryan, Western Australia)