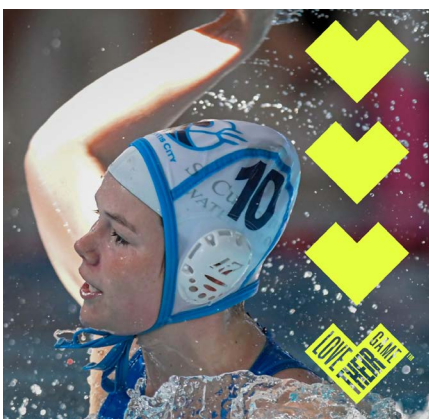




CASE STUDY

Auckland Water Polo's positive pool-sides



Water polo is a fast, physically demanding sport. Limited physical contact is allowed as players compete for position and possession. But while spectators can see what is happening above the surface, they may not understand everything taking place beneath it.

While referees are skilled at differentiating fair and foul play, the tough nature of the game can occasionally lead to parents interpreting lawful game play as their child being placed in danger.

Poolside support is generally positive, says Fabian Wanrooij, Community and Competitions Manager for Auckland Water Polo, but misunderstandings about the sport can occasionally lead to criticism of referees.

“When people come to watch for the first time, sometimes they don’t understand the physicality that’s part of water polo,” says Fabian. “It can make them anxious, and they’re saying to the referees ‘get them off my kid, they’re drowning!’”

“Your kids are looking back at you, going, ‘Why is my dad or my mother screaming at a referee? I’m just trying to play.’ That type of experience is not enjoyable for anyone.”

Setting a positive standard

Auckland Water Polo represents seven Auckland clubs, spanning from Hibiscus Coast to Mountfort Park, and with Waikato and Tauranga teams (which don’t have a dedicated Regional Sport Organisation [RSO]) when they enter competitions.

Across Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland Water Polo runs competitions from under 14 through to open grades, and helps College Sport Auckland with school leagues. It also supports referee and player development, and

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provides referees for matches who provide regular updates on what they're seeing and hearing pool-side.

"Our referees are not doing it for the money; they're refereeing because they're genuinely interested, and we want to support them in that."

Fabian says Auckland Water Polo signed up as one of the original members of Love Their Game – an Active-led initiative delivered with Auckland RSOs that promotes positive sideline behaviour across community sport – to promote the positive role that water polo, and sport in general, can provide.

"Being part of Love Their Game is an opportunity to focus attention on the positive experiences sport can create," he says.

"Instead of piling on and focusing on the negative, we want to set a positive tone and deliver good experiences for players, referees, volunteers and supporters."

Making the message visible

Auckland Water Polo has incorporated Love Their Game into the systems it uses to run competitions and communicate with clubs. At the start of each competition



window, technical meetings for clubs and volunteers cover the role and aims of the initiative.

"Before each competition starts, we explain what we're trying to achieve out of it," says Fabian. "That requires multiple catch-ups with the clubs, and reminders. We're trying to set the standard nationally, not just as a water polo organisation, but as a sports organisation."

Love Their Game also visibly stands out through printed material passed out to teams, referee and staff uniforms and signage.

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Fabian says more branding will soon be incorporated into referee uniforms, with a large logo planned for the backs of the white shirts worn by officials, while pull-up banners with QR codes linking spectators to information about the initiative are also in the plans.

For Fabian, these all act as “a visual reminder and an amplifier” for messages Auckland Water Polo is already sharing to make sure anyone entering a pool should feel welcome.

“If anybody walks in to the pool, they should be enjoying the atmosphere, they should be wanting to be part of it. That’s what Love Their Game is about for our organisation.”

Clubs taking responsibility

Fabian has seen positive signs that clubs are taking the message to heart, including being more willing to address unacceptable behaviour themselves.

“In one incident, a parent confronted a referee. Rather than leaving Auckland Water Polo to intervene,

the clubs communicated directly, apologised and made it clear the behaviour did not reflect their values,” says Fabian.

“It’s not all down to Love Their Game, but I’d like to think that our focus on keeping it positive over the last year has contributed to that... I can definitely say that I’ve had less and less difficult dealings with clubs or individuals.”

For other RSOs thinking about getting involved, Fabian says it’s a good step to take.

“[Being involved in Love Their Game] encourages you to continuously have your finger on the pulse and thinking ‘are we giving the athletes and the community the best sports experience possible? How can we make it better, how can we make it more positive?’

“Let’s work on the negatives behind the scenes, but let’s highlight the positives as much as possible. We want to flood the community with positive experiences.”

Love Their Game was launched by Aktive in March 2025 with eight RSOs. It has now grown to include 19 RSOs and community groups, reaching more than 220,000 participants across Auckland.

For more information visit www.lovetheirgame.org.nz