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CASE STUDY

Changing the norm on rugby sidelines

In New Zealand, rugby has always been a sport that people aren't afraid to share their views on, whether from the sideline or the couch – including in Counties Manukau, one of our proudest rugby provinces.

“Rugby is a sport where everyone grew up yelling at the TV, or yelling at the ref, or saying their opinion,” says Matt Megaw, Head of Community Rugby at Counties Manukau Rugby Football Union (CMRFU). “Kids heard their parents say it, and it kind of became the norm.”

But times change, and Matt and the CMRFU team are encouraging rugby supporters to change with

them through Love Their Game – an initiative that promotes the power of positive sideline support in creating better sport experiences and environments for everyone involved, especially young people.

Community rugby in Counties Manukau

Rugby in Counties Manukau covers a great deal of ground – literally. CMRFU has 320 teams across 17 clubs and 14 schools, with 160 games taking place on any given week in fields from Weymouth to Beachlands Maraetai down to Te Kauwhata in the North Waikato. Matt and his team look after “everything to do with Community

Rugby – from activations, player and club development, and support through to referee, coach and volunteer education.

“We deliver courses and workshops, manage competition formats and registrations, support clubs and schools, and ultimately ensure teams are organised, supported, and able to take the field each week.”



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Helping spread the word about positive sideline behaviour is an area CMRFU has been interested in for some time. It was quick to sign up to Love Their Game – an initiative facilitated by Active, in partnership with Auckland Regional Sport Organisations (RSOs) – when it launched in 2025.

For Matt, one of the main attractions of Love Their Game is that it brings RSOs together, rather than creating individual approaches from scratch. “I knew that we didn’t have to create a whole new campaign ourselves that we would probably spend a lot of time and energy on, when we have so many other things to do.

“It’s not something that’s going to just be a one-hit wonder, we can keep promoting it in different ways and using the resources that are already in place.”

Putting Love Their Game into practice

CMRFU has been putting Love Their Game into practice by building the message into its existing communication, education and game-day systems, including manager briefings, Small Blacks courses, club and school resources, and tournament activations.

“The main thing for us is that we need to be visible with the messages [about being positive on the sidelines],” says Matt.

That’s included partnering with sponsors to create Love Their Game sideline bibs for event managers, and investing in large field flags for tournaments, Matt continues.

“We partnered with PlaceMakers, and they sponsored 100 sideline bibs. We’ve given two or three to



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Matt Megaw, Head of Community Rugby,
Counties Manukau Rugby Football Union.

every club and school to use for their event managers on the day, because we knew visibility would be really important.

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Focusing on refs

Referees are a particular area of focus for CMRFU through Love Their Game.

Matt says the organisation assigns referees from Year 7 grade through to premiers, and gathers feedback through what it calls their Ultimate Game Day Experience where they provide a summary of how the day went.

“We’re doing a lot around referee education and supporting the referee. In turn, that’s having a good result, with people just letting the ref actually ref, then going up to them afterwards and saying, ‘hey, what a great game you just refereed.’

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“There’s always going to be work to do, but it’s going well. I feel like we’re still scratching the surface of it, but we’re building a greater awareness around sideline behaviour... what we are trying to do is change the norm, and Love Their Game has been so good for that.”

Future plans

Looking ahead, CMRFU wants to keep making the message part of normal rugby activity, including at its own events.

“When it’s [a CMRFU] event, we really need to make sure Love Their Game is front and centre,” says Matt. “We need to show what good looks like. If we can lead the way, and the [people on the sidelines] see our flags, our messaging, our bibs and sandwich boards, it shows what is possible.”

For Matt, the goal is for Love Their Game to become a normal part of how community rugby presents itself each week, and to be part of a wider movement with other RSOs.



“I think the more we all work together on it, the better. If people are playing multiple sports, as they are these days, and they’re crossing boundaries, the clearer we get this message across all sports, the more impact it’s going to have.

“I’d encourage anyone who’s not to jump on board. Active has been an awesome advocate for it and given

us some really good guidance and support wherever I’ve needed.”

Jo Redfern-Hardisty, Communications & Marketing Manager, Active adds: “Love Their Game is about shifting the culture of sport so that positive sideline behaviour becomes the norm, not the exception.

“We’re proud to work alongside organisations like CMRFU that are embedding these messages into their everyday environments. When athletes, whānau and supporters feel supported and respected, it creates better experiences for everyone – and helps keep more young people enjoying and staying in sport.”

Love Their Game was launched by Active 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

