

Futsal development in New Zealand

Recently, Futsal Focus wrote about the state of futsal in Australia. Well, just a 2.5 hour flight east from Australia lays the island nation of New Zealand. A member of the Oceania Football Confederation with a population of 5 million and a GDP of \$204b, New Zealand is one of the most populous, wealthy, and developed countries in the Pacific region.

In complete contrast to Australia, New Zealand Football (or NZF) the National Football Association, are very much in control of, and instrumental in directing futsal in the country. Futsal is one of the fastest growing sports in New Zealand, particularly in Schools and at Universities. Recent reports indicate an increase of almost 1000% in participation numbers since its formalisation under NZF in 2010. At that point, there was around 700 participants in loosely associated competitions nationwide, to over 7,000 participants in school competitions alone in 2019.^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5} NZF is not a self-sustainable organisation, and as such relies on funding from New Zealand High Performance Sport, Oceania Football Confederation, FIFA, and other Regional and National entities.

Football in the country is governed by seven Regional Associations, Northern Football, Auckland Football, Waikato/Bay of Plenty Football, Central Football Federation, Capital Football Federation, Mainland Football Federation, and Football South. Each of these seven federations have a certain level of autonomy from NZF, however, they are reliant on trickle down funding from OFC, FIFA, etc. via NZF. Each of the Regional Associations face different challenges to developing Futsal in their region, whether it be financial restraints, availability of venues and facilities, a lack of interest, or a vast geographic spread that makes centralising anything unachievable. We will explore what each of these Regional Associations contributes to the game of futsal individually. But, first....

NEW ZEALAND FOOTBALL - NATIONAL FUTSAL TEAMS

The Men's and Women's National teams (The FutsalWhites, for men, and FutsalFerns, for Women) are entirely funded, selected, coached, and monitored by NZF staff. However, due to budget constraints and a lack of meaningful competitions to participate in, coaching is limited to sporadic 2 & 3 day training camps, or occasional clustered training sessions with invited players. The current head coach of the FutsalWhites is still a FutsalWhites player, and captain. The very experienced player and coach, Marvin Eakins has worked fulltime in Futsal development with NZF and AFF for the past ten years. He has held this position as FutsalWhites head coach, and also as NZF Futsal Development Manager since he was appointed the interim in 2017 after Scott Gilligan left the role.⁶ The Futsalwhites have never qualified for a FIFA Futsal World Cup, instead they have been the perennial runners up to the Solomon Islands. Coming closest to qualification in 2019, they blew a lead in the final of the OFC Futsal Nations Cup to eventually lose to Solomon Islands on penalties.

The current FutsalFerns head coach is Nic Downes, who has held the role for over 4 years. He has had a large amount of success in both regional and international competitions and looks set to hold the role for the foreseeable future. The team has not played an official international fixture in over 2 years, with their last outing being an invitational competition hosted in China in 2018.

NZF historically also ran trials and camps for men's and women's U-18 teams who participated in the OFC U-18 Championship in 2018. The winners of this competition were to qualify for the Youth Olympics. A lack of support from the NZ Olympic Committee meant that the NZ U-18 Women did not participate at the Youth Olympics despite winning their competition. NZF has since scrapped the U-18 Futsal Program.

NATIONAL FUTSAL COMPETITIONS

Men's Futsal SuperLeague -

8 teams representing each of the 7 Regional Associations (With WAI/BOP being split into WAI & BOP), play

in a 2 round regional conference before all coming together for 2 national rounds (the last of which is also a finals series with SF, F). An approximate of 8/10 games played per team over a 3 month period in OCT/NOV/DEC. The winner of this competition qualifies for the OFC Futsal Champions League.

Women's Futsal SuperLeague -

7 teams representing each of the 7 Regional Associations + 1 invited overseas team (normally a State Representative team from Australia). This is played as a single round-robin, in one location and over one weekend. An approximate of 4/6 games played per team over a 3 day period in March.

Tertiary Futsal Championships –

Little is known about this event, except that it seems to always be won by either Auckland or Waikato based Universities. It runs for a one week period, often in September, bringing all participating Universities to a central location. From this competition, an unofficial 'NZ Universities' team is selected to participate at the FISU World Cup.

Youth Futsal Championships -

The 7 Regional Associations are represented by both boys and girls teams in the following age groups; U-12, U-14, U-16, U-19. They compete for one week in a central location during a school holiday period (Normally in July). A lack of enthusiasm and participation by certain Regional Associations in recent years has seen this competition lose some of its prestige.

NZSS futsal Championships –

Almost New Zealand's largest sporting event (by number of participating teams), the NZSS Futsal Championships brings together Schools and Students from all over the country to one location for a week of competition in March each year. This Competition receives more spectators, media attention and online viewership than any other NZF run futsal competition.

Region	League/Competition (Social/Development)	League/Competition (Elite)	Training Centres (Youth)	Training Centres (Senior)	Challenges	Achievements
NFF	Sporadic one-off events organised by NFF. No third party providers.	None.	- Irregular youth trainings once a year in preparation for NZF Youth Nationals. - Some Third party providers. - No schools in the Northern region running futsal programs, and only one University.	4 month Regional Association training program in the lead up to, and during the NZF SuperLeague	- Lack of Interest and/or investment from the Regional Association - Access and availability of venues - Geographic spread	None recently.
AFF	Sporadic one-day events for Girls and Women organised by AFF. For the most part, leagues and competitions in the region are run by independent companies or third party providers.	There is one "Mens Premier League" in the region run by an independent company that several regional and national representative players participate in.	1 week training program, once a year, in preparation for NZF Regional Youth Nationals. Only a handful of Secondary schools running futsal programs with contracted or employed coaches, and one University.	4 month Regional Association training program in the lead up to, and during the NZF SuperLeague	- Lack of Interest and/or investment from the Regional Association - Access and availability of venues - Political/Personnel difficulties	- Current NZF Women's SuperLeague Champions - High achieving Schools and University from the region in National Competition
WAIBOP	Several competitions run year-round from several facilities. - School Leagues - Social Youth Leagues - Community leagues - Special Olympics - Ethnic Engagement - Girls and Women's	Multiple "Senior/Elite" Leagues throughout the region, some run by WAIBOP, some run by independent companies or academies.	Partnership between WAIBOP and independent clubs and academies to ensure maximum exposure and opportunity for participants, and alignment across curriculums and delivery. Every Intermediate and Secondary School in the Waikato region participates in a form of organised futsal, with several secondary schools having employed or contracted coaches running futsal programs.	Regular Regional Association SuperLeague squad trainings throughout the year, intensifying in the lead up to, and during the NZF SuperLeague	- Geographic Spread Competition from other sports - Access and availability of venues	- High achieving Schools and Universities from the region in National Competitions - Current NZF Men's SuperLeague Champions - Cooperation and cohesion between independent companies/academies and Regional Association.

Central	Leagues for school age players (8yrs/18yrs) run by the Regional Association in each of the large towns in the region.	There is a "Senior League" played at the Massey University.	Sporadic youth trainings only in preparation for NZF Youth Nationals. There are a handful of schools that run trials and trainings in the lead up to NZSS Futsal Championships, and Massey University participates at the NZF Tertiary Championships.	3 month Regional Association training program in the lead up to, and during the NZF SuperLeague	- Geographic Spread - Lack of investment from the Regional Association	None recently.
Capital	Several Leagues for a variety of Youth, Boys/Girls, Ethnic groups, and schools. Most run by the Regional Association.	No elite or senior leagues.	Two independent academies/companies have a monopoly on futsal development programs in the region with an overlap in coaching staff and facility usage with the Regional Association. Very strong school scene, with most Secondary and Intermediate schools having either an employed or contracted Futsal Coach.	Regular Regional Association SuperLeague squad trainings throughout the year, intensifying in the lead up to, and during the NZF SuperLeague	- Political/Personnel difficulties.	- High achieving Schools from the region in National Competition.
Mainland	Several competitions run by the Regional Association all year round in several facilities. - School Leagues - Social Youth Leagues - Community leagues - Girls and Women's	No Elite Senior leagues currently.	Most Secondary and Intermediate schools have either an employed or contracted Futsal Coach, or an arrangement with the Regional Association to provide a form of support and coaching. Sporadic youth trainings only in preparation for NZF Youth Nationals.	4 month Regional Association training program in the lead up to, and during the NZF SuperLeague	- Geographic Spread - Access and availability of venues	- 2020 NZF Women's SuperLeague finalists - High achieving School from the region in National Competition.
Southern	The Regional Association runs many Men's and Women's leagues, predominantly for	New Elite senior league proposed for 2021.	Some Secondary schools have an employed or contracted Futsal Coach, and the Regional Association runs a one month training program for representative youth teams in for	Regular regional Association SuperLeague squad trainings throughout the year, intensifying	- Geographic Spread - Low regional population	- 2020 NZF Men's SuperLeague finalists

	senior aged players (18+). They also organise sporadic school leagues.		NZF Youth Nationals.	in the lead up to, and during the NZF SuperLeague		
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FUTSAL IN NEW ZEALAND – THE CHALLENGES

One of the biggest challenges for the sport of Futsal in New Zealand is its lack of recognition as a sport in its own right, rather than regarded as a “type of football”.

Until that changes the order of priority for funding, investment, resource, player/coach recruitment etc, from the top at NZF to the bottom at each of the Regional Associations will always be football.

The flow on affect of that is players, coaches and referees being coerced away from futsal, Regional Associations seeing less incentive to develop futsal in their regions, and the growth of the game stagnating or collapsing.

In some regions, the growth of the game has reached capacity. In Football South, the population base is very limited, and a high percentage already participate in some form of futsal, with venues booked to capacity most evenings. The same cannot be said for the Northern Region (which includes part of Auckland, New Zealand’s biggest city with almost 2m residents). With almost no regular futsal activity taking place in a city as large, wealthy and diverse as Auckland, it is not surprising to see the growth of the game stagnate in New Zealand.

The final challenge faced by most of the Regional Associations is access to venues, with the majority of venues being owned by Borough Councils, or privately owned by schools or colleges. Access to facilities is essential for the Regional Associations to deliver competitions, programs, and events that continue to drive the growth and spread of Futsal. There are no purpose built futsal specific facilities in New Zealand.

FUTSAL IN NEW ZEALAND – THE FUTURE

At Futsal Focus, we have spent time talking to futsal players and coaches from New Zealand or based in the country and they are all talking about the “New Generation” – a wave of players, coaches, referees who are focussing on futsal now as a sport, as a career option, who are trying to study the game and seek overseas playing opportunities in order to grow themselves. With a majority of this new wave of Futsal players and coaches coming from the WAIBOP and Capital Regional Associations, it raises some questions.

With all of this new talent, and a new wave of dedicated futsal players, coaches, and referees, why have the FutsalWhites still never qualified for the Futsal World Cup? Why is all of this new talent and the new wave of players coming from some of the smallest Regional Associations?

At Futsal Focus, we believe that it is only a matter of time before the new generation filter into the FutsalWhites squad, and we see New Zealand successfully qualifying for their first Futsal World Cup. But what happens after that? How will NZF or the Regional Associations (some of who are already operating at maximum capacity) deal with the influx of interest and participation in the sport? With New Zealand’s growing diversity and population, how will NZF and the Regional Associations satisfy demand? Only with a strong focus on developing infrastructure, particularly venues, increasing the marketability of events or creating new ones to increase revenue and media interest in the sport, and introduce stricter targets and objectives, specifically targeting the Regional Associations who are underperforming and delivering (Such as Northern Region).

1. <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/active-nz-survey-2018/>
2. <http://www.nzsssc.org.nz/School-Sport-NZ-Census-Data/School-Sport-NZ-Census-Reports>
3. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/bay-of-plenty-times/news/futsal-is-new-kids-on-the-block/RLYGS6TI2I6RNZL2L6W3UQMYNU/>
4. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/sport/396199/how-futsal-went-from-nothing-to-sporting-success-story>
5. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/football/87634756/futsal-experiencing-immense-growth-at-junior-levels-in-new-zealand>
6. <https://www.nzfootball.co.nz/newsarticle/57073>