

Reflections on 5 years of hockey development within a local club.

Underwater hockey has had a long and varied history in Cairns playing at the original Tobruk pool since around 1972. Cairns had previously hosted National titles and been historically a large powerful club and the supplier of quality world class players. We still have Andre Buck(voted best player in the world) putting his toes in the water every now and then.

In August of 2012 I discovered Underwater hockey. Cairns was hosting the state titles in late September and one of the club members asked me if I would be interested in playing, I had literally played about 6 games and the idea of playing at the state titles was more than a little intimidating especially considering that I was barely able to stay on the bottom....Cairns was a small club back in those days and over summer we would peak at about 14 players. My introduction to the sport was pretty typical with a bunch of what I viewed as experienced players all out playing for sheep stations. This meant very little puck action for me and lots of shouting at me to get on the bottom and do something with the puck(all whilst I'm clinging to the side sucking in lungs full of oxygen to try and stave off a blackout, sound familiar??).

I persevered due mainly to one or more friendly people. I probably saw about 10 people come along to try out the sport over the next 6mths and all of them would have a similar experience to me and melt away, you could almost see some of them thinking that it looked fun but they didn't get any time with the puck and so was not something that they felt they could engage with significantly.

Towards the winter of 2013 numbers had shrunk down to 6-8 showing up to play.

One of the players Warren and I formed a strong friendship and because we enjoyed the sport we came up with a 5 year plan for hockey in Cairns, he was an engineer and I am who I am part creative part scatterbrained but it was a good mix of skills and organisation and we roped others in along the way. We sat down and brainstormed what we wanted our club to look like at the end of each year and some strategies that we would implement along the way to help us get there. We wanted to increase the sports profile and grow the club by introducing and increasing juniors and females to the sport. We put the 6 players names down against some of these jobs and started our plan to grow our sport locally.

Sadly Warrens love of spearfishing saw him being killed by a crocodile in 2017, We now run a 4's comp every year as a memorial to him and his passion for growing the sport.

Unfortunately it's like most things in life you can have can have fast, good or cheap but you can only have two out of the three. In underwater hockey you cannot simultaneously increase junior numbers, women's participation and keep your regular players happy with a hard game. Choose one or two aspects and focus on them for a specified amount of time and reassess, sometimes you do get lucky and your initial efforts are rewarded with something that becomes self sustaining without a need for your further input.

What did our 5 year plan look like? Well looking back it was pretty amateur but it gave us focus...

[Link here to plan?](#)

Over the last 5 years we followed the plan and have grown the club from 12 players in 2014 to over 89 players, with 40% of them being female and 22% juniors. 6 of our players 3 male and 3 female have made their Australian teams and 20 of our players have represented at a state level at the latest national titles(2 of our juniors also picked up MVP at the latest nationals). A lot of the things we had on that 5 year plan were wish list stuff but amazingly enough a lot of those have been achieved.

What did we do in 2014?

We set up our facebook page and started sharing stuff and encouraging our players to like and share stuff so that their friends would see it. We also started fostering our links with the local dive shops to get a discount for club gear and to get them on board with promoting hockey to all the divers and spearfisherman. They have been great and as we have built up the relationship they now sponsor comps and direct interested players to us and we are good mates. We got our first newspaper article published, it wasn't large but it did put us in front of the Cairns population and it was about our club putting in a team to our Qld state titles. This was my first taste of higher level hockey, I wasn't ready for it and it smacked me in the face but I enjoyed it. The team was pretty much all of our club minus

about 6 players. 3 of our players made the QLD teams for nationals in 2015. The benefit of these 2 things was that whilst we weren't capable of implementing it we all came back knowing what hockey could look like.

Underwater hockey is a pretty social sport, attending comps means that you start to make friendships with people around the world, this is always handy cause you turn your comps into mini holidays, the friendships you make means that you get the inside track on the fun things to do in their local area. Socially speaking it's a great sport for your kids to get into as they make friendships with other kids that are well rounded. Going to the state titles also meant that I got to start building some of these friendships with other players from around the state.

What did 2015 look like.

We started letting recruiting juniors, initially this meant that juniors would be on strike and then when they had the puck adults would go easy on them, as we got more kids playing though the adults felt that we should separate them out so we extended our playing time and started giving them the first 20 minutes. Keen adults would jump in and make up the numbers.

Change and club culture, I'm going to sidestep here a little and talk about these 2 things, Change is one of the hardest things to implement, both in yourself and in others. For anyone that enjoys food and therefore gets a little fat you will know that getting rid of that fat is a **slow** not easy process(personal experience) you can see in a mirror that you are fat, the scales tell you the truth but making the effort to change and break habits is a hard slow process.

Club cultures are exactly the same. Everybody can see that a club is dying and everybody would like for new people to come and join in but nobody wants to change what they are doing because they think they will A)lose the competitive game B)realize that they aren't as good as they think they are(rough and bargy) due to lack of fitness or lack of skill.

I mean what skill does it take for a 100 kilo adult to swim through a 60 kilo junior/women???. Swimming to space what do you mean? who do you think I am? what do you take me for????

Changing our own club culture is still a work in progress and so far has taken from 2014 till now. The reality is however worth it. With the right experiences a new player can be giving you fun in the pool in 6mths or less ... the only other comment I would make is that if you fail to plan you plan to fail.

The first change in club culture we made was to ask players not to swim/punch the puck through another player, our second change was to say that any new player that was close to the goal was allowed to score a goal.

We also started keeping nightly attendance via a spreadsheet midway through the year. This helped us to move away from players paying nightly and also helped us to track players who dropped off and to ascertain why they had missed games this kept players more connected.

This spreadsheet has continually evolved becoming more and more useful and quick to fill out

We sent another team to the Qld state titles and placed third, we started running monthly training days and we ran our first comp it was a 3's comp in a crappy pool and we had no visiting players 19 of our players rocked up and it was a good exercise in what planning was required to run our next one.

We also had Sam Thomson arrive. He had been hanging around in Cairns for a couple of years and had repped for NZ. He was an interesting dynamic to have in the pool and everyone started measuring themselves against him. He was significantly better than us in skill level and it was not uncommon for him to have 3-4 players attempting to tackle him and have a player comment "Did you see how I got it past Sam". For the first 3-4 mths he was only interested in coming down for a game, however he is a natural coach/captain and I think after a while he found it hard not to get involved especially with me and Warren hassling him for coaching tips and asking him his opinion on things.

By the end of 2015 we had grown to 28 adult players and 10 juniors(most kids of playing adults)

2016

We started making ensuring that our players signed themselves up to our governing body the AUFQ, initially people were reluctant and asked why should they pay an extra \$70 to play hockey. Once it was explained that this covered

our public liability insurance for pool hire and that if they didn't pay they couldn't play it was relatively simple to get buy in.

We ran our first successful large comp, we resurrected some tvl vs cairns club rivalry and with the assistance of some players from SE qld ran a full day comp, everybody played 7 20 minute games and tvl won the trophy. We had enough ladies for a ladies game and by the end of the day players were cramping up after pushing off the wall. For us it was a raging success with 48 players in total 23 of them visiting cairns for a game. We got familiar with how to run a comp by working it out along the way. We ran four nights of hockey a week for a while which was super popular but too much to organise. We also morphed one of our nights into a training night as we wanted to upskill and improve our players. This has run in numerous different formats over the years but has been an excellent way for us to Segway new Players into the game

Training nights -a player is only as good as his base level of skill. When he is put under pressure that is the level of skill he will exhibit in a game. The only way that you can build up your base level of skill is to put the time into practice and training. This applies to both individual skills and team skills.

Games are not the same as training. Players can maintain and incrementally improve through games but generally the amount of growth and development that a player can do in a game is limited. It can be enhanced with more experienced players taking a coaching role but this is more around positioning and timing than basic skills. For example in a club 60 minute game you can probably expect to have the puck for about 2.5 minutes of swimming time in this time Person A might do 12 flicks. Over one year you will average 600 flicks. Alternatively Person B might practice their flicking for distance height or accuracy. Each of these will be intentional and give you the opportunity to improve you base level. If they spent 5 minutes flicking before a game you might get in 60 flicks + your 12 flicks. Over a year they will do 3600 flicks. This will have the inevitable result that person B is better at passing than person A at the end of 1 year. Its not rocket science to say that training makes a better player, however if it's not part of your club culture in some form then your players are only going to improve slowly. One of the best ways to consolidate your skills is to try and teach them, you will soon see the things you need to work on.

We ran our first 4's comp, it was by our standards pretty successful with 42 players. It was also our first time where we ventured seeking the support of the local cairns businesses. We asked them to sponsor a prize for our club to raffle off at an after function to help us fundraise. It was pretty amazing to see how accommodating the local businesses were and started some new relationships and friendships that have continued to this day. We make every attempt to redirect any local business we can to these guys and they have continued to support us regularly

This was also the year we started hanging out at different cheap restaurants around town after a hockey game, this was not intentional but organic and was started by 2 of our iconic players Hank and Ben. Hank is one of the friendliest players we have in the pool he also loves scoring goals. We created unofficial rules for our club and rule 1 was hank is not allowed to score a goal. This became a lot of fun frustrating him and then laughing about it over dinner. The dinners have been great for our club culture creating a safe friendly atmosphere for new players to integrate and develop new friendships

By the end of 2016 we had 52 players in the water over different nights.

2017

We sent two of our players down south to Brisbane to attend a level 1 coaching course to continue to improve our delivery of skills and training to our local players. This was more to tick some boxes than learning how to coach as we had been running skills and training sessions for quite a while, we picked up a few new tips and tricks and donated a few of our own. This also meant that if we were interested we could put our hand up to coach state level teams which we hope to stack with cairns players. We hoped to get around about 8 of our current players their level 1 coaching qualification. This would help us to streamline the process of upskilling and developing new players. Sadly there has been a significant breakdown in the actual qualifications being issued to players, I still have not received mine and other of our club members are still waiting on theirs.

Unfortunately our club suffered 2 tragedies and both of those people were players who had become close friends. Both were players who were also very active in participating and growing our club. Warren was killed by a crocodile in Cairns in March 2017 whilst spearfishing and the other Ben was killed when his trawler rolled over and sank killing

him and 5 others in the greatest maritime tragedy in Qld in October 2017. The loss of these 2 players impacted our club very hard as we have really focused on the social side of the club and they had built up strong friendships with many of our players. Otherwise 2017 was a year of steady growth.

2 of our players expressed interest in playing at the world titles and started training and attending training camps in preparation for selections at the 2018 national titles to be held in Cairns.

This was also the year that the media started taking us seriously, we managed to get the local tv channel down and the story that they ran received 30,000 views on social media within a week, we shared and promoted it and they realized that the sport that we played had a good human interest angle and have been happy to come down and do a story for us when we have an event on or players representing at an event. Unofficially we promise them 3000 plus views on social media which given their average story they run gets between 3-700 is pretty good for them. It also gives us great local exposure which turns into a few new players.

By the end of 2017 we had 68 players over the 3 different nights

2018

Representative hockey- we have built up enough players in our club now that some of our players are beginning to aspire to play higher level hockey, 2 of our players did attend Worlds in Quebec which was an enormous amount of fun and one of them came back with a bronze medal(yay for Cairns). Nothing prepares you for 3m hockey and initially you question your own sanity however it turns out to be as much fun if not more than 2m hockey. 4 of our juniors also represented Australia at Trans-Tasman and had the greatest time playing the best hockey of their lives. Having players work up to this level of hockey is great for your club and something to be aspired to as the players come back and bring the experience skills and fitness back to their local club. Everyone lifts their game and plays at a slightly higher level because of it. Cairns has since seen a notable increase in players ready and in the water up to 40 minutes before a game practicing skills and drills.

Competition wise it was a busy year as we hosted our first QLD State titles as well as our Fours comp and Nq titles. These comps have started to pay dividends as outside players come to see Cairns as a place for a great holiday and some great hockey as well and the local tv exposure gets interested people down to the pool to check it out.

2018 was a year where we consolidated a lot of the systems we have come up with that we believe encourages our club to grow in numbers commitment and participation. Volunteer wise it has been great as well with a number of our players/parents and playing and helping out with running club nights, organising events and hosting visiting players.

By the end of 2018 we had 79 players over 3 nights a week.

2019

This is a junior world's year and 5 of our juniors have expressed an interest in trialling for selection to Australian teams again. This year we are moving away from scratch team games to dedicated teams. This is the first step towards a pennant system. Our hopes are that this will improve player understanding of position and shift the emphasis from individual to team play.

We are now in a position where people look forward to their hockey game this means that we are looking to move towards a pay for a season model. This means players nominate how many games they will play in a week and pay in advance, if they choose not to show up for a game they forfeit the money they paid. This has been shown to improve club participation as people have this rational problem of wanting to get the maximum value out of their money and therefore do not miss a game they payed for when it is raining etc. Research has shown this to increase commitment by up to 15%.

We want to be a club with equal numbers of women and men playing and a wide range of ages. Holistically this gives us the best chance of looking like a club where anyone can get a good game have fun and make new friends. It also gives us a good base to encourage players who wish to play at higher levels and bring the experience back to the

club. mini juniors is the age group we are currently missing however we are also in a position this year to start up our mini juniors players. For us this is the 8-12 age group, our local players have contributed 2 kids and word of mouth over the last 6 weeks has bought us another 8. This is the age group we want to recruit and have fall in love with the game as they will pick up experience and skill, bring their friends and become our future junior and adult players. We have given over a small area of the pool on a training night and one of our experienced players runs this, the kids do about 15 minutes of a skill and then play a game for about 35 minutes.

Recap:

So what does it take to recruit players and grow a sport that is unknown? In Cairns we have a population of 160,000. We figured that at least 1 percent of the population would love the game if we could get it in front of them. The reality is that there are heaps of people who would love to play underwater hockey(I was one of them) our sport just doesn't get exposure, Put it in front of people give them a great experience and they will come back for more.

These are the things that we have done that you can do.

Convince your players that a long term growth plan that sees some more relaxed games will ultimately be more fun for them than super hard hockey where the players slowly melt away as they move on. It also helps refine skills as players can work on technique, positioning etc...

Create a club training night. This gives you the opportunity to run training sessions that improves player skills and gives you the opportunity to run beginner sessions/games. We now regularly get 2-4 new players trying out the sport every Wednesday, we run a pretty structured session with some theory behind diving reflex and breathing and basic skills. Over an hour we have about 30 minutes of teaching with about a 20 minute game.

If you have beginner players in a game, have someone to mentor them and keep an eye out for them. Beginners do not know where to be or when to get out of the way of someone when they are curling and therefore are most likely to be injured, having someone keep an eye out for them, encourage them and give them feedback helps them to come back.

Spend time building quality relationships with pool staff, invite them to play regularly, buy them a coffee before your game every now and then and find time to connect with them. This is a long game approach and definitely pays off in the long run. For us we are in the pool 3 nights a week this means that we see our pool staff 3 hours a week. We are on first name basis with most of them and we always have a friendly hi ready. For us this means that we get lane ropes out 15 minutes early and that they are always ready to help us out any way they can.

Get a set of different colour bats made for your newer players. It makes them easy to identify in the pool. The bats don't walk off and the new players are happy to buy their own bats early on to homogenise with the group. We got several styles made by hydro in pink and green, this has allowed our beginners to trial different bats to work out what they think they like.

Make one of your nights a social night, we go out to dinner after every Thursday game. It could be every fortnight, sometimes the whole club comes sometimes its only 12 or so people. Whatever it is it's a nice friendly way to get to know new people and for them to get to know you. It also gives your regulars opportunities to invest in relationships.

Build up relationships with your local sports reporters, tv and newspaper, it does take a bit to get their details and initially its quite hard but once they realise you are serious and can deliver on your promises(we told them we would give them a minimum of 3000 views per story(you get this by posting your story on every hockey site you can)) They are pretty happy to come and do a story on you. Having juniors talking helps as everyone loves a story about kids in sport.

First impressions really count, if you have someone new come to play, make sure you introduce them to a number of identified welcoming people. Even better if everyone in the club is welcoming. You are 65% more likely to retain a player who felt welcome and part of the group on their first night regardless of skill level.

Make sure that new players score goals in their first three games. They are that focussed on how out of breath they are and how close the goal tray is that they will never notice that you are letting them put a goal in, remember your first goal?. Congratulate them and make them feel special. Down the track they will realise what you were doing but by then they are hooked, levelling up as fast as they can and doing the same for newer players.

We also created a club shirt, everybody loves a freebie right? so any person who comes 3 times gets a free shirt, Plus when they wear it out and around which amazingly they do others comment about it giving your sport more exposure. Wearing a part of the club helps them to buy in to the sport. Players get a free game credit for photos submitted to the club page that were taken in the shirt in an exotic location.

Identify people who are capable of one on one coaching. Get these people working/showing individual skills to newer players, the time you invest in this will also help retain new players and also help them become better players quicker.

Get your club registered on the underwater hockey tourist page, you will pick up some tourists who usually enhance your game along the way.

Whilst players are keen get them to buy gear, this will change as they improve but the financial investment they put out will keep them involved in the sport if or when the enthusiasm wanes a little 8-).

Improve the skills of your long time players, if they are rough the people you retain will be rough, if you teach them to play skilfully they will become the people that your beginners try to imitate. If they are incapable or unwilling to change protect your newer players from them.

Get someone who is good with social media in your club to smash this, it's free promotion and advertising, For us we use facebook and Instagram. Any local who likes a post on our facebook page gets an invitation to come and play a game with us and mostly people continue the interaction and come and try it out. Put photos and interviews of your local players on social media as they will share it and their friends will like it and other people will see these likes. Make sure your players share your relevant club posts.

Promote comps that happen to your newer players, this gives them little micro holidays(who doesn't like these?) and helps them to get to know how friendly and fun the wider UWH community is and exposes them to higher level hockey. We try and subsidise a small part of the travel component to encourage newer players to go and have fun.

Run your hockey games at a slight profit it helps to cover low number nights, winter games and sometimes there's some money left over to invest in club development.

Apply for any and all grants to set your club up with quality equipment, you win some you lose a lot. Nobody enjoys playing with dodgy gear so this is a worthwhile investment.

Run your own comps, Initially numbers will be low because your comp is relatively unknown, if you can take this on board and run a good show the word will get out and this gives people an opportunity to travel to your awesome destination, your players get to play higher level hockey and exposure to different players/friends etc.

Put a little bit of pressure on players to bring a friend. Pyramid selling can be used in hockey if you run a good show. New people who come and enjoy it usually know someone else who they think will love it. Word of mouth is the best advertising you can have.

Keep an attendance tracker

An excel spreadsheet is good for this,

- no one really notices bill hasn't played lately and a quick email can help keep bill connected to the club and ascertain what has happened to him, social connection, competition and exercise are all reasons people stay connected.
- You can identify attendance trends
- It can make transitioning to cashless hockey easy as you know who was here over a set time period and how much they owe

- It can help with budgeting and working out how your club is going seasonally (numbers can drop over winter) do you need to charge more seasonally? etc
- you get some useful data you can use to help with planning.