



The Sense of Team Sport

Story Michelle Meehan

Most people spend their childhood playing one kind of sport or another. For some kids however, joining a team is about tackling their own anxieties rather than learning how to tackle an opponent.

Sydney-based paediatric occupational therapist, Carlien Parahi, has spent years working with children who, for a range of reasons, find it difficult to engage in various aspects of life – including sport.

She realised that opting out of the team environment because of the challenges it posed meant these children were also losing out on the social, emotional and physical benefits sport can also provide.

Determined to give them back the opportunities they were missing, Carlien and her husband Jesse, an Australian rugby sevens Olympian, created Sense Rugby, a first-of-its-kind program providing occupational therapy through team sport.

Launched on the Central Coast in October 2015, the program is now running in around 10 different locations across the state including the Hunter, with plans to expand into more areas this year.

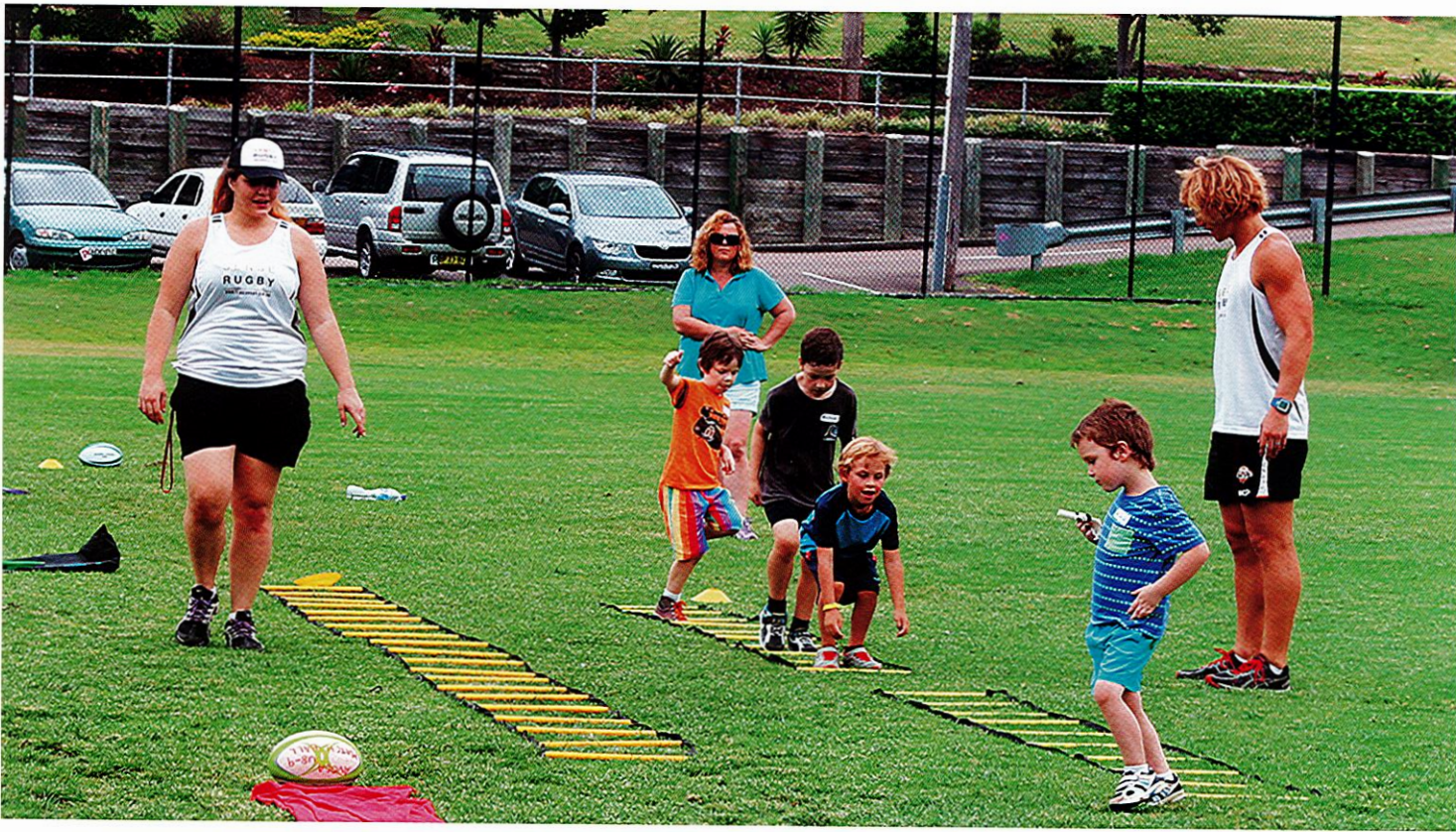
The program operates in line with school terms, with sessions running for one hour each week teaching a variety of basic rugby skills.

Drawing on both their strengths, the couple recognised the parallels between the often physical-based nature of occupational therapy treatments and the skills involved in a team sport such as rugby union or league.

"I'm a paediatric occupational therapist and my role is really to help kids who have conditions like autism or ADHD or anything that is stopping them from doing what they want to do every day," Carlien said.

"When working with those kids I found a lot of them were missing out on being part of a sports group because they were finding it hard to concentrate in a group, or socialise with their friends, or stay calm enough to actually listen to the instruction.

"At the same time, a lot of the work we do in occupational therapy has a really physical nature to it. We might do things like jump and crash into cushions or push and pull, that kind of activity which obviously went along so well with rugby. >



"We realised that we could get some therapeutic benefits out of it, as well as give the kids an opportunity to actually be part of a team, where of course you get a whole range of benefits; from the social experiences of being in a group to learning to compromise with your friends, taking turns and knowing when to pass and when to kick the ball.

"It is a little bit new. We've had a look around into what other kind of things there are and a lot of people use dance or martial arts, more individual sports. But I think we're the first of this kind, in terms of using a full team sport in this way."

The uniqueness of the program has attracted the interest of researchers from around the world, with a US-based occupational therapist looking to study the social and emotional impacts of Sense Rugby, while a sports scientist from the University of Canberra is keen to explore the program's physiological and biological benefits.

While there are various reasons children join Sense Rugby, many of its participants suffer from autism, ADHD, Down syndrome, dyspraxia, sensory processing difficulties or behavioural difficulties. Carlien said this is why every group includes an experienced paediatric occupational therapist, who works with trained rugby players to help the kids achieve success. While this can make it difficult to find the personnel required to expand the program into new areas, it proved an easy affair in the Hunter, with Carlien calling on a former classmate to take the reins.

Sense Rugby was launched in Newcastle towards the end of last year with local couple Jamie and Tyne Owen at the helm. Carlien and Jamie had lived together while studying occupational therapy at the University of Newcastle and had remained friends after graduation. Jamie later married Tyne, a former Newcastle Knights under-20s player who also spent several years playing rugby union with Merewether Carlton.

"I knew Carlien had been working on this for quite some time and wanted to reach out into other areas, but only so much is possible with two people," Jamie said. "She thought a paediatric OT and somebody who has the rugby skills and knowledge would be perfect, so she said, 'Do you want to give it a go and reach out to the people in the Hunter?'"

"We just thought what a great opportunity to be involved in something so new and different and using both our skill sets. We love the program, we said we'd give it a go to see how it went and we're just keen to keep going now we've started it."

The Newcastle group is held in Merewether, although Jamie said she hopes they will be able to expand into Maitland and Lake Macquarie this year. Both Jamie and Carlien said the changes they have witnessed within the program's participants have been amazing.

"We had a lot of children that had sensory processing disorder, a lot of children with autism, Asperger's, ADHD and just anxiety," Jamie said. "They had tried team sports with other groups and it had just been unsuccessful for a number of reasons, but mainly because the groups were very large and they disengaged."

"We have a lot of supports in place, we have a very positive approach, nothing is forced and if they want their own time they are encouraged to have their own time and join when they are ready. I guess in bigger groups where the trainers don't have that initial special needs training they sort of get a bit lost."

"A lot of the kids were coming to increase their co-ordination skills, be part of a team and listen to a referee. Some of them wanted to work on their social skills, being aware of others - concentration, attention and emotional regulation were probably the main reasons that we saw kids.



At the beginning some of them couldn't even really catch a ball or attend to a task that was about three minutes long; by the end they were engaging in the whole program from start to finish and that's an hour.

"I think above all it was definitely their willingness to do it without being pushed or forced. One kid walked away saying 'This is the best day of my life' and just seeing him and then seeing others engage with their peers, seeing their parents watch them engage, was just very rewarding as well. Every single one who came regularly is coming back and I guess that's the best feedback we can get."

Jesse has also been amazed at the success of the program. While he is stepping back from his active coaching role in 2017 to concentrate on the final year of his current rugby sevens contract, he said being involved with the program has had a profound effect on him, as well as its participants.

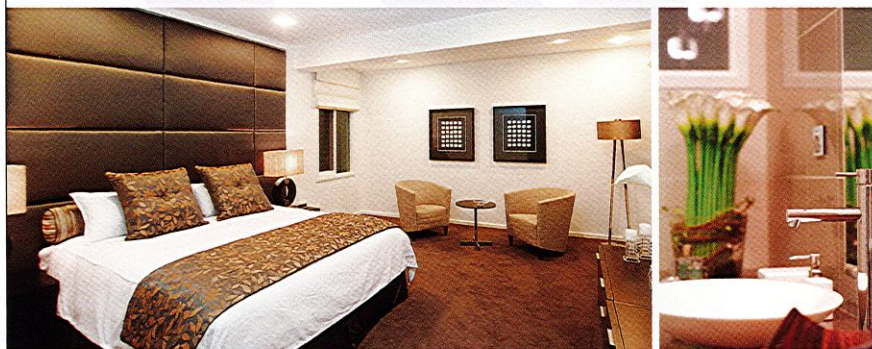
"It's been amazing. The whole process and what the kids have taught me about myself has been massive in itself," Jesse said. "It's really going to be tough to step away. I'm going to try and stay involved as much as I can, especially at Avoca, which is where we started."

"We had a group of about 10 kids there and we've gone from not being able to get them to stand in line, to being self-sufficient and playing full games of rugby with each other at the end of the session."

"It's just amazing what they do when they feel like they can actually do something and they just come along in leaps and bounds ; and I love that I have been able to influence these kids in a positive way." 📱

Parents interested in finding out more about Sense Rugby can visit www.senserugby.com.au or contact the group via their Facebook page.

design with a difference



Our services include:

- Residential & Commercial Design
- Interior Design & Decorating
- Curtains, Blinds & Soft Furnishings
- Exclusive Fabric & Wallpapers
- Comprehensive Building Selections
- Colour Consulting

If you require a design and quotation please contact Carmel Gibson MDIA to arrange an on site consultation.



Carmel Gibson MDIA
Managing Director

 **CarMél**
INTERIOR DESIGN

M 0419 254 008

E enquiry@carmelinteriordesign.com.au

Loft Studio: 6 Bean Street, Wallsend

carmelinteriordesign.com.au