

Central North Island Quarterly Newsletter

Third Quarter 2026



Matt de Jardine

Central & Upper North Island
RSC Team Lead



Thank you Kym!



Welcome Hayley!

Message from your RSC

Kia ora CNI whānau,

The third quarter of this year has been a great one for our region - full of the connection, competition, and community spirit that makes this job so rewarding, with a couple of stories later in this newsletter that really capture it.

On the leadership front, our CNI Athlete Leader Connects continue to go well. These sessions bring together our club-level Athlete Reps and our Athlete Leaders (those going through, or who've completed, the SONZ programme). We're currently in the process of appointing two new Athlete Leaders to the Athlete Input Council — a national council where two Athlete Leaders from each region come together to discuss a wide range of topics. Those two leaders then bring all the "juicy stuff" back to their region, so clubs and other athlete leaders and reps can stay in the loop and support relevant tasks and korero coming out of it. One of our new CNI reps is Hayley Little. Hayleys energy and non stop advocacy will see her be a natural successor to Kym.

*Head down one page to read more about
our CNI Athlete Input Council.*

CNI ATHLETE INPUT COUNCIL

A FAREWELL AND A WELCOME



A Tribute to Kym Allan (née O'Grady), Outgoing CNI Athlete Input Council Rep

Kym has a long and impressive history with Special Olympics Waikato and SONZ — one that spans two decades, multiple sports, and a leadership journey that has quietly shaped the pathway for so many athletes who will follow in her footsteps.

FROM ATHLETE TO ADVOCATE

Kym joined Special Olympics Waikato in 2005 in Equestrian, and represented New Zealand at the 2007 China World Summer Games, winning gold in dressage. She has also competed in swimming for many years and continues to coach both swimming and basketball today.

In 2011, Kym completed the Athlete Leadership Programme, going on to serve as athlete representative on the Special Olympics Waikato Committee, then on the SONZ board for two years. She currently represents the Central North Island on the Athlete Leadership Council, alongside her ongoing coaching, which she will continue.

MOMENTS THAT SHINE

Highlights include speaking at the Dunedin National Games and representing SONZ as a Global Messenger at the 2018 Global Athlete Congress in the Dominican Republic, where she was mentored by Simone Kokaua. Together, they focused on supporting athletes to transition from athlete to coach — fitting, given where Kym has ended up.

A MESSAGE FROM HER MENTOR

"Kym may not know the seeds she has sown, but the best is yet to come. She brings the lived experience lens that coaches don't have, sensing athletes' needs before we do." — Simone Kokaua

PASSING THE BATON

Kym steps down as the CNI's AIC representative, her leadership continuing to support Hayley into the role. Thank you, Kym, for the pathway you've paved.

CNI ATHLETE INPUT COUNCIL

A FAREWELL AND A WELCOME

THANK YOU, KYM

After a long, successful time representing the CNI on the Athlete Input Council, Kym is stepping down from the role - and we want to take a moment to say a huge thank you for everything she has brought to this mahi.

Kym, your voice, your commitment, and your advocacy for athletes across our region have made a real difference. Thank you for representing the CNI with such heart.



Thank you Kym!



WELCOME, HAYLEY

Stepping into the role is Hayley, who many of you will already know from her involvement across the CNI.

We're excited to see Hayley take on this role and bring her voice - and the voices of athletes right across our region - to the national table.



Welcome Hayley!



GETTING THE STRUCTURE RIGHT

As a region, it's our responsibility to make sure the CNI Athlete Input Council works the way it's meant to - not just as a national-level role, but as a genuine pathway for every athlete's voice to be heard. That means building strong connections between Hayley and club-level Athlete Reps across the CNI, so information, ideas, and concerns can flow both ways - from clubs up to the AIC, and from the AIC back down to clubs.

Getting this structure right now needs to be a priority for the CNI, and we'll have more to share on how clubs and athlete reps can connect with Hayley directly in the near future.

SCHOOL SCENE

TOA TAHI



What is Toa Tahi?

Toa Tahi is our refreshed school programme, and it's shaping how we support schools across the motu in a much more flexible and fluid way. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, Toa Tahi lets our RSCs meet schools where they're at - whatever that looks like for them.

In practice, that could mean supporting mainstream P.E. teachers with their teaching of our students, helping schools with funding requests for new sports gear, or getting stuck into the everyday work of removing barriers between mainstream students and our students to create new friendships and opportunities. It also means showing up - getting in front of Principal Connects, building awareness with Regional Sports Trusts, and making sure Special Olympics is front of mind wherever decisions about inclusion are being made.

A big part of Toa Tahi is also about the transition from school into club life. It's not enough to build great relationships with students in the school environment - we want to make sure that connection continues once they leave. That means working closely with each individual club to set up open days, whether that's a specific sport session, a broader showcase of everything the club offers, or simply a low-pressure recruitment opportunity for school students, leavers and their whānau to see what club life looks like and feel welcomed into it.

It's a long list - but an exciting one, because this is how we best support our school communities to truly thrive, from the classroom right through to the club.

SCHOOL SCENE BASKETBALL



Term 3 in Schools

Term 3 brought two brilliant regional Secondary Schools Basketball events to the CNI - Bay of Plenty in Tauranga and Waikato in Hamilton - and both were full of the moments that remind us why we do this mahi.

Bay of Plenty - Tauranga

The energy on the court was infectious all day, and Monti from Papamoa stole the show with an endless run of three-pointers - and celebrations to match every single one. On Court 3, the inclusive environment created with the fantastic support of the Tauranga Boys' College student volunteers stood out as a real highlight, with students settling in, cheering each other on, and building genuine connection throughout the day. Across every court, it was the spirit of the teams and the new friendships being made that made the day so special.

Waikato - Hamilton

Over in Hamilton, Thomas from Rototuna took to the mic during an intermission to belt out a song for the crowd - an absolute highlight of the day. Meanwhile, one young man from Matamata College went unbeaten all day in his own arm wrestling challenges, taking on all comers and coming out on top every time. Harper, from Goldfields, brought the celebrations every time he scored, and just like in Tauranga, it was the spirit of all the teams and the friendships formed on the day that really summed up what these events are about.



**40 Star of the Day certificates
handed out over the two events!**

CLUB SCENE

TAUPŌ BOCCE HAVE-A-GO DAY

What an awesome evening in Taupō! The team joined Special Olympics Taupō to share one of our popular sports - Bocce - and the turnout said it all. Around 30 athletes came along to give it a go, alongside a few potential new faces keen to join in the fun.

Bocce is a brilliant sport for building social connection while enjoying a slower, more relaxed pace - perfect for chatting, cheering each other on, and just enjoying being part of a team. Watching everyone line up their shots, with laughter echoing around the hall, was exactly what community sport is all about.

A huge thanks to everyone who came along, tried something new, and made the night such a success. Bocce might be quiet on the court, but the energy in that hall was anything but!





SPECIAL OLYMPICS
WORLD
GAMES
SANTIAGO 2027

Congratulations to Brendon Smith and Kara Blakiston from Special Olympics Waikato, and Tina Maitland and Kiri Hema from Special Olympics Tauranga, who have been selected to represent New Zealand Special Olympics on the coaching team for the 2027 World Summer Games. Brendon will be Head Coach for Athletics, Tina will be Head Coach for Basketball with Kara also coaching Basketball, and Kiri will be coaching Powerlifting. All four are incredibly knowledgeable and passionate, and we're so proud to see them representing our regions on the world stage. Congratulations, Brendon, Kara, Tina and Kiri!

Ka mau te wehi! (How awesome!) Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou (Big congratulations to you all).

2027 WORLD SUMMER GAMES - ATHLETE NOMINATIONS NOW CLOSED

With our coaching team locked in, the next big step towards Chile 2027 has been and gone too - club nominations for athletes closed on 30 September.

Clubs across the motu were invited to nominate athletes who trained regularly and competed at the 2025 National Summer Games, in the same sport they competed in at Nationals.

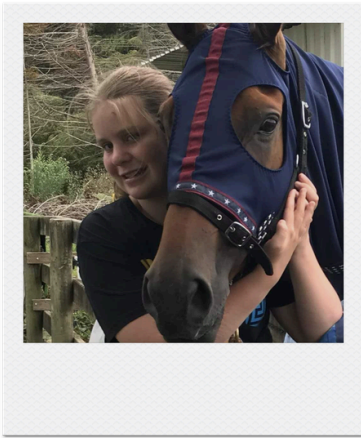
Sports New Zealand will be sending athletes in:

- 🏃 Athletics (100m, 200m, Long Jump, Mini Javelin, 4x100m relay)
- 🏀 Basketball
- 🟡 Bocce
- ⚽ Football
- 🏌️ Golf
- 🏋️ Powerlifting
- 🏊 Swimming (50m Freestyle, 100m Freestyle, mixed 4x50m relay)

Now that nominations are in, provisional selections will be made by the Selection Panel, with selected athletes invited to a Final Selection Camp before the team is confirmed. We'll keep you updated as the team takes shape on the road to Chile 2027!

ATHLETE SPOTLIGHT

ELLA YARNDLEY



Ella has been a familiar face at Te Awamutu Special Olympics since 2013, making her mark in the pool as a dedicated swimmer, team player, and Athlete Leader. Off the deck, she balances work, hobbies, and a real love for animals - with a Queen's Guide Award to her name and a swimathon PB to be proud of.

Which club and sport(s) does Ella compete in, and how long has she been involved with Special Olympics?

Ella swims for Te Awamutu Special Olympics and has been part of the programme since 2013.

What are some of her standout results or achievements?

Ella dead-heated for first place in the 200m freestyle at the Summer Games in Hamilton, clocking a personal best time. She's equally proud of becoming an Athlete Leader through the Special Olympics NZ Athlete Leadership Programme.

What does Ella enjoy most about her sport?

Being part of a team - her teammates are her friends.

What does Ella get up to outside of Special Olympics?

She works four mornings a week at a rest home in Te Awamutu and sells jibbits at weekend markets. In her downtime she enjoys LEGO, cooking with her Thermomix, and hanging out with friends - especially at the movies.

Who's been a big support for Ella along the way?

Her coach Shelley, who taught her to swim in the first place and has supported her ever since - including her development as an Athlete Leader. Ella's family have also been there every step of the way, driving her around, coming to swim meets, and sponsoring her swimathons.

If Ella could have any superpower, what would it be?

Teleportation - so she wouldn't have to rely on others for transport and could take trips overseas, anywhere at all.

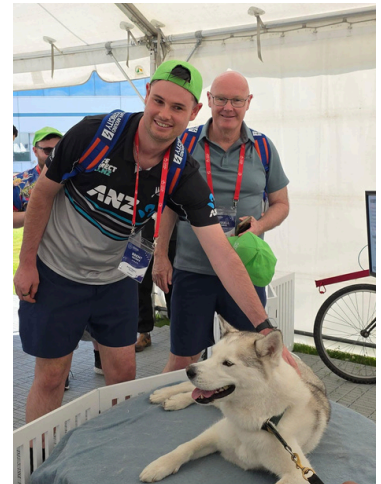
Anything else people might not know about Ella?

She grew up on a horse farm and has always loved animals. One of her proudest achievements is completing her Queen's Guide Award, which she received in person from the Governor-General at Government House in Wellington.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

RUSSELL GEORGE, ROTORUA

For Russell, volunteering with Special Olympics Rotorua started the way it does for so many of our best volunteers - through his son. What began as showing up to support his own son has grown into eight years of coaching football, and now basketball too, with Russell becoming one of the steady, committed faces behind Rotorua's programme.



Which club do you volunteer with, and how long have you been involved with Special Olympics?

Rotorua. Football coach since 2017 and basketball coach since 2025.

What first got you involved, and what does your role look like day-to-day?

My son is a very keen Special Olympics athlete playing football, basketball and tenpin bowling. I have taken on coaching roles as required, as I enjoy seeing their enjoyment in playing sport and also to ensure that the athletes have opportunities to play sport. We have football on Tuesday nights and basketball on Saturday mornings. We have a number of committed volunteers who share the workload, so it's not an onerous role.

What's a moment or memory that's stuck with you the most?

I have been to the last three National Summer Games and really enjoy seeing the athletes competing, hanging out together and genuinely enjoying themselves, regardless of their results.

What's the thing you love most about volunteering with the club?

Watching the athletes being very supportive of each other and making friends with athletes from other clubs at tournaments. We also have a great group of trustees and volunteers in Rotorua who do a lot of good work to ensure athletes are safe and enjoy their sport.

What do you get up to outside of Special Olympics?

I have worked in local government for the past 26 years. I have two adult sons and enjoy mountain biking, walking our 13-year-old Labrador, and reading.

Anything else you'd love to share?

Special Olympics is a great way for athletes to not only play sport, but to meet other athletes and create lifelong friendships. I would encourage parents to get involved as a volunteer, as it is very rewarding to see the enjoyment of the athletes.

Thanks so much to Russel for eight years and counting, of showing up for Rotorua's athletes.

Upcoming Activity in the CNI

School Programme

Sport for all @ The Peak

20,27 October

3, 10 November

Club Programme

Te Awamutu T1 Swimming

Sunday 18 October

Question....do you know our Athlete Oath?



Do you have a story you want to tell in this newsletter?

Contact Matt de Jardine

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Special Olympics New Zealand

Strong Minds Big Feelings Strong Connections

Free inclusive webinar

Wednesday 14 October 6.30pm

Recognise big feelings. Support yourself and others. Stay connected.

Register today!

We're proud to be taking part in **BELONGING Matters** Mental Health Awareness Week

with Educational Psychologist Cathy Robson

Special Olympics New Zealand