

Why having fun at Taekwon-do matters and how this approach can help with student retention.



Our organisation does care about student retention. We need to. The 2022 Annual Report compares student numbers between 2019, 2021 and 2022. Here are some of those numbers.

Membership	2022.	2021.	2019
New.	1033.	1149.	1236
Existing.	2034.	2201.	2479
TOTAL.	3067.	3350.	3715
Retention Rate.	60.7%.	67%.	50.1%
Female.	37.1%.	37%.	37.7%
Male.	62.9%.	63%.	62.3%
Adult 18+.	685.	719.	881
13-18.	598.	665.	671
Less than 13.	967.	1045.	1100
Kubz/Mini.	817.	921.	1063
Instructors.	65.	72.	51
Assistants.	53.	57.	53
Black belts.	396.	396.	462

Clubs 100+ members.	6.	9.	7
50-100.	16.	13.	14
Less than 50.	34.	41.	53
TOTAL.	56.	63.	74

These statistics show we have 82% of the members that we had in 2019. Of those members the female and male percentages remain steady at 37 and 63% respectively. Our adult membership is worryingly only 77% what it was in 2019 and 77% of members are under 18. We are a youth based organisation.

In the 2022 report from The Chair and Chief Executive they state 'It is easier to retain rather than recruit new students. This is one key pivot of our strategic plan – putting our members at the centre of everything we do.' They also note that according to Sport New Zealand's 'Active New Zealand Survey 2021' which compared participation patterns from 2017 to 2021 that organised sport participation has declined in general, and time spent in informal activity has increased. 'Those most negatively impacted are youth rather than adults, and it has increased inequities in the system for young Maori and Pacific, those from high deprivation areas, and young males more than females'.

This statement would support the situation we find ourselves in today. Personally I suspect that as people gain confidence in classes and events being on regularly and not being cancelled, post COVID lockdowns, the desire to be involved and to 'take a risk' and commit to attending anything regularly will improve.

As we strive to flourish in 2023 and beyond what strategies do we need? I refer to our Annual Report that has identified '**develop and support existing and future instructors**' and '**retain more students**' as two of the five actions our organisation will be taking to help meet this challenge. Under '**develop and support existing and future instructors**' there are four goals. They are, '*develop and make transparent pathways for black belts to progress within organisation*', '*develop and implement instructor training on pedagogy*', '*develop instructor and dojang agreements/expectations*' and '*develop a mentoring succession programme*'.

Under **retain more students**, the actions are '*develop and make transparent member and volunteer pathways*', '*develop communication strategy to improve approach in all media*', '*develop system to analyse and use data better to diagnose problems*', '*undertake a review of events offered and develop cohesive events approach*', '*review (and map) new member journey to support development of an induction approach*'.

As we take on these strategies to grow our organisation I encourage us all to remember the part that fun can play in helping us achieve these goals.

Why should we have fun?

Having fun is an essential part of your well-being. It fights burn out, creates positive attitudes, helps us to connect with others and encourages creativity. (The Guest House 7.11.21).

Shukla says ‘Using more senses and social interactions while learning creates a deeper encoding of information which is represented by stronger neural connections’ and “Having fun, having social interactions, and sensory engagement while learning promotes plasticity (neural changes) and activates various brain regions to encode an experience with a high amount of detail”.

Shukla also says that ‘having fun and being excited about learning increases brain activity of neurons that use oxytocin (pleasure hormone), dopamine (reward, motivation, learning senses, thinking hormones), and norepinephrine (energising attention hormone) which improves learning and memory.

“With having fun comes engaged learners”, “dopamine release leads to memory stimulation”, “games can motivate students to take risks”, “having fun enhances motivation and learning outcomes”. Blog post from Ginelle Testa 11.10.22.



Catherine Price says “We really trivialise fun and we are so casual and sloppy about how we use the word” but it is “essential for our happiness and health”.



Mike Rucker, says “fun is relatively easy to achieve. Even if you’re not happy you can have fun even if that’s just having coffee with a friend”. “Fun generally involves doing something active and intentional (as opposed to mindlessly watching TV), often includes other people, is something you choose for yourself and can give a thrill that transcends the ordinary”.



WHY FUN ENVIRONMENTS MATTER

Associate Professor Amanda Vivek says, “the number one determinant for kids dropping out of sport is not having fun” and the three areas that made the biggest difference in fun according to kids were **TRYING HARD, POSITIVE TEAM DYNAMICS, and POSITIVE COACHING.**

My essay will be expanding on Dr Vivek’s recommendations for creating environments that encourage students to stay involved in their sport. Whenever you ask Taekwon-do instructors how they include fun in their teaching they will almost always talk about the games they play with students. Mostly with young students.

This essay challenges our view of what fun is and who it is for.

Visek’s study gets us to think about fun as supporting an environment that will provide good athlete development. This happens in five areas.

PHYSICAL – getting playing time and competing

- Being active and hardworking
- Getting time on task (eg touches on ball)



VERBAL – positive feedback and encouragement

- Clear communication and guided learning (rather than explicit direction)
- Officials that make consistent calls



EMOTIONAL – active listening

- Creating psychological emotional safety around learning eg is it safe to try and fail
- Building player confidence



SOCIAL – facilitating a supportive environment

- Team rituals, such as high fiving fist bumping, hugging, cheering
- Doing things outside of competition and training as a group or team



- **ENVIRONMENTAL** – well-organised practices, practices that are age and stage appropriate; practices that use games



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- Good facility conditions
- Competing against evenly matched opponents

“When people are having fun they will stay/keep training for longer” Sport New Zealand. Sport New Zealand’s Active NZ survey tells us the lead motivation for children staying involved in sports is fun at 76%, and for adults it is physical well-being at 72%.

Andy Boyens, former All White and current New Zealand Football Technical Director said “The focus should always be on enjoyment. Of course kids want to get better but ultimately it’s about creating an environment that they can get better in”.

Silver Fern legend Temepara Bailey said winning comes in different ways. Winning for a child can be ‘oh I caught the ball, or “I managed to pass to someone’.



In 2015 Amanda Visek and her colleagues introduced the fun integration theory. In this paper they outlined FUN MAPS that contain 81 fun-determinants, which could be further categorised into 11 fun factors. The 11 fun factors are **being a good sport, trying hard, positive coaching, learning and improving, game time support, games, practice, team friendships, mental bonuses, team rituals and swag.**

Being a good sport, trying hard, and positive coaching have been shown to be the most important fun-factors. What would implementing these three fun factors in our clubs look like? I encourage all instructors to consider these questions and reflect on what they're currently doing and what they could change about their own practice to include more fun in their classes. Remembering, that change is uncomfortable so we need to expect to feel that as we are growing new skills and trying new things.





The fun factor is **BEING A GOOD SPORT**, the fun determinants are **playing well as a team, being supported by my teammates, supporting my teammates, when players show good sportsmanship, getting help from teammates, and warming up and stretching as a team.**

The questions I asked myself about **Being a good sport** were **1. Playing together well as a team**, how well do I support classes and events in my class, club and region? No one can get to everything and life gets busy but am I regularly unavailable? Do I cherry pick which events I'll attend and support? **2. Being supported by my teammates** and **3. Supporting my teammates**, do I feel like they've got my back? Do I have theirs? Am I a person that my fellow black belts can rely on to help them reach their goals? **4. When players show good sportsmanship**, do I encourage and model this? Do I praise it when I see it? **5. Getting help from teammates?** Sometimes we have to ask for help. If we have put in some effort to create a positive culture within our circle then this should be easy. **6. Warming up and stretching as a team?** This was a strange one for me. My instinct was 'of course we do this' but when I thought more about it I realised that we have two completely different types of warm ups/cool downs at class. There are the ones that are completely instructor directed in lines with no interactions. They are functional and meet a purpose. Then there are the warm ups/stretching that happens with students interacting with each other, perhaps having some fun, perhaps in a circle, perhaps with music. There is room for both types of warming up and stretching in my opinion. In fact this is a perfect place to include some fun in your classes.



The fun factor is **TRYING HARD**, the fun determinants are **trying your best, exercising and being active, working hard, playing well during a game, being strong and confident, getting/staying in shape, competing, making a good play by scoring or making a big save etc, setting and achieving goals, playing hard.**

The **TRYING HARD** fun factor questions are **1. Trying your best**, this reminded me that we need to be praising EFFORT not just excellence. It's so easy to notice the excellent student. Let's remember to notice the student trying hard to improve as well. **2. Exercising and being active**, the physical activity guidelines for school children is at least one hour of moderate to strong physical activity daily. As Taekwon-do instructors we can play an important part in helping them to achieve this. It's also helpful for us to remember that most adults choose physical exercise to improve their well-being not to become Olympic athletes. So let's be mindful of that if we're lucky enough to have adults in our classes. **3. Working hard**, people feel proud of themselves for working hard. We can acknowledge our students for this. **4. Playing well during a game/class**, notice it and acknowledge it! You will get more of what you praise. **5. Being strong and confident**, model this in your own way. Quiet, loud, humble. Be yourself. There is room for all sorts of leaders at Taekwondo-do. If we live the tenets we can't go wrong. **6. Getting/staying in shape**, TOP TIP – children will naturally build strong muscles and bones when they run, jump and play! **7. Competing**, model it. Encourage it. Promote it. Train for it. Be positive about it. Help people navigate our jargon. Another top tip – 8-9 year olds like competition and games. **8. Making a good play**, acknowledge good, and great and excellent. Many people thrive on frequent feedback, especially today. Let them know what they're doing well. **9. Setting and achieving goals**, do we model this? Do we help or hinder our students to do this eg do I set grading dates and distribute paperwork in time for families to prioritise the date and pay the fee? **10. Playing hard**, I think this is the same as number three.



The fun factor is **POSITIVE COACHING**, the fun determinants are **when a coach treats players with respect, when a coach encourages the team, having a coach who is a positive role model, getting clear consistent communication from coaches, a coach who knows a lot about the sport, a coach who allows mistakes while staying positive, a coach who listens and considers players opinions, a coach you can talk to easily, a nice friendly coach, getting compliments from coaches, when a coach participates with players during practice, when a coach jokes around.**

The **POSITIVE COACHING** fun factor starts with **1. When a coach treats players with respect**, we have so many wonderful examples of this in our organisation. Let's look to our leaders and follow their example. **2. When a coach encourages the team**, we have many students join Taekwon-do that are there because their parents are looking for discipline or for self-confidence for their child. Perhaps the child finds school difficult and is frequently being told off. We can make a difference for that child if we can connect and encourage. **3. Having a coach who is a positive role model**, we can all reflect on this. Do I arrive at class excited and ready to teach and learn. Remember we're teaching people as well as a syllabus, let's let our human side shine. **4. Getting clear consistent communication from coaches**, I think this is a strength of our organisation. I can do my part to 'be this' by attending class and seminars regularly, being up to date about syllabus and events. **5. A coach who knows a lot about the sport**, our organisation has standards that help us achieve this. In class I can watch out for things like ensuring a particular group of students don't always have the most junior instructor teaching them. It feels very special when they receive instruction from your most experienced instructors. **6. A coach who allows mistakes, while staying positive**, I need to understand that sometimes students are not ready to take on what I'm wanting to teach them that day. A new green belt respectfully told me the other day he could not learn the hands and feet of Won Hyo at the same time. I changed my expectations accordingly. **7. A coach who listens and considers players opinions**, I've started letting my young children set up the challenge course for our

warm up. It's a struggle! I want to change it to 'make it better' BUT they love to do it, they feel heard, and everyone gets warmed up anyway. Goal achieved, even if there are 50 cones on the floor when four would have been enough. **8. A coach who you can talk to easily**, within our organisation we encourage students to ask questions. We need to be approachable. **9. A nice friendly coach**, I think it helps but there's definitely a continuum for this. **10. Getting compliments from coaches**, we all need them from time to time. Constant growling, criticism and disappointment directed at anyone will lead to an ex-student. I have complimented some of my most challenging students for standing up! **11. When a coach participates with players during practice**, I always recommend/do this. I find it raises the energy of a class by 100%. **12. When a coach jokes around**, we all enjoy being in those classes with a little humour and TOP TIP the brain will actually decide to pay more attention to information when humour is involved. (Lee, 20.10.21, Young Engineers, Singapore).

Fun is so much more than just games and when we create an environment that supports athlete development in the physical, verbal, emotional, social and environmental domains more students will stay more engaged for longer. When we concentrate on strategies that prioritise being a good sport, trying hard, and positive coaching the outcomes improve for everyone.

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