

# How the Perth Wildcats became one of the most successful franchises in Australian sport - ABC News

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There are few bigger success stories to come out of Australia in recent times than The Wiggles.

With their catchy tunes and multicoloured outfits, they have captured the imagination of kids across the world since forming in 1991 and, despite a number of line-up changes, their popularity has endured.

They are a strange choice for a sporting organisation to use as a blueprint for success, but that is exactly what the Perth Wildcats did back in 2009 when the NBL club came close to bankruptcy and the league itself was in disarray.

"We couldn't give away tickets, the club wasn't in a great place," explained former chief executive officer Nick Marvin, who arrived at the club around that time having not worked in sport before.

They needed some help to get back on track, namely from their owner, Perth businessman and philanthropist Jack Bendat.

Australian businessman and Perth Wildcats owner Jack Bendat helped the team get back on track.(AAP)

But if the Wildcats were to survive beyond this, it was clear things needed to change.

"The way I explained it to the players back in 2009 was, 'Hey guys, we are The Wiggles of sport, that is our niche'," Marvin said.

The Wildcats focused on being family-friendly and engaging with kids in Western Australia.

## **Gap for male sporting role models**

The evolution started with the team being banned from swearing during games, at training, or while at the club.

The players were not allowed to wear headphones in public while representing the club to show they were always open to speaking with fans

They were also told to make eye contact and acknowledge supporters.

The Wildcats squad members would spend 350 hours in the community per year — 200 hours above what the collective bargaining agreement required.

The team has become the most successful franchise in NBL history.(AAP: Hamish Blair)

"We realised we couldn't compete with [AFL clubs] the

Eagles and Dockers, we were never going to get there, but there was a gap for male role models," Marvin said.

"We tripped over something that I called the defining moment.

"That is, if you get an athlete or a sporting brand to have a significant impact on a person's life — usually it is primary school age — they are a fan for life."

That meant engaging with children from a young age and the easiest way to do it was through schools.

## **More engagement, more fans**

In 2009, instead of doing 20 school visits per year, the Wildcats started doing 100.

In 2010, this increased to 200 school visits and the year after it rose again to 220.

It has remained at this level ever since.

It was a simple equation — the more engaged the Wildcats were with the West Australian community, the more fans they accumulated.

But it wasn't just about getting people to the games. The club was also doing hospital visits and even attending prisons to speak with the inmates.

It started in 2013 with former import James Ennis, who

now plays in the United States with NBA side the Philadelphia 76ers.

"He [Ennis] said, 'I have never been to a prison before but I grew up in tough circumstances', so we took him down to a juvenile detention centre," Marvin said.

"He spoke with them and it had a massive impact, to the point some of the staff and I ended up coaching two prison teams that ended up playing in a social competition."

All members of the team, including star imports like Bryce Cotton, focus on engaging with children. (AAP: Richard Wainwright)

## **The most successful franchise in history**

The Wildcats also engaged strongly with the local media, something they have maintained to this day.

In the club's view, it wouldn't survive without media interest and being on TV, radio and in the newspaper was essentially free advertising.

Every training session was open for local journalists to attend, most requests were met and the players and coaching staff were instructed to always tell the truth no matter what the situation was.

The off-court transformation had the desired effect.

Perth is now the most successful franchise in NBL history and one of the most competitive professional sporting teams in the world.

The club has won eight NBL championships and is taking part in an incredible 33rd consecutive playoff appearance, after finishing the regular season top of the ladder.

They have remained profitable and relevant in Western Australia despite basketball's ebbs and flows nationally.

The crowds at Perth Arena are the best in the NBL and have been for most of the past decade, and they boast some of the best television viewership in the country.

The Wildcats' story is living proof that what happens away from the playing arena impacts what happens within it.

The more the team engaged with the community, the more fans they accumulated. (AAP  
*Image: Tony McDonough*)