



WHITSUNDAY SPORTSPARK

CREATING A COMMUNITY SPORTING HUB

As a kid, what did Saturday morning mean for you? For the majority of Australian households, it meant frantically finding a footy boot, spot-cleaning last week's uniform that forgot to be washed and scrambling to pack everyone into the car to make it to the game on time. Sport is synonymous with the Australian culture. It's the very fabric of our society and as a nation, we champion our talented heroes who triumph on the world stage.

Yet, without the appropriate infrastructure and facilities at grassroots level to support sport and physical activities, many of the associated opportunities for sporting achievement would be left unaccomplished. And those who do have the opportunity to partake in their chosen sport will attest that community sport infrastructure can be much more than just a place to play sport, it's a place for the community to gather, to rally behind each other and to socialise under a common bond.

In Airlie Beach and the greater Whitsunday region, understandably tourism is a huge driving force behind the economy. But what can be forgotten, is that while everyone works toward building Airlie as a party

town, there is a community of families in the background who live here every day. A community who would like their children to be able to grow up with those same Saturday morning ambitions as other kids throughout Australia, without necessarily having to drive a couple of hours to Mackay to achieve it.

The Whitsunday Sportspark is about giving the community a state-of-the-art sporting hub to train, play and watch top-level sporting action; with the bonus of a family-friendly bar and bistro where profits are injected back into the community.

At the head of this charge, is Justin Butler, president of the Whitsunday Sportspark, who has had an interest in local sporting committees since the 1990's and has a strong sporting presence locally with his family.

"I have been on the touch footy committee for 20 years and play with my son Tate. I kicked off junior touch six years ago which my daughter Noelle now plays and I coach junior touch. I also coach junior rugby union which Tate plays and hope to get back to playing soccer over the next year or two as

my son moves into seniors. Tate previously played AFL and Noelle is keen to try Netball in 2020 and will hopefully inspire her sister Sabine along," Justin commented.

He first joined the Whitsunday Sportspark committee in 2006 as treasurer, but had to step down in 2008 as the Global Financial Crisis put the financial world into a tailspin. As the founder and director of Eclipse Financial Services, the GFC his business especially hard and he had to direct all of his time toward supporting his clients through the crisis.

He went back to the executive committee in 2014 as secretary, by this stage he now had three young children and his focus went toward junior sport.

"As a committee, we realised that the current one oval and one field just couldn't handle the level of use from all the different sports. The growth of junior sport in Airlie had virtually stopped. This is what sparked the catalyst for changing the layout of the bottom section to add in another field.

"We met with Council and they commissioned a thorough report into sporting field requirements across the Shire.

This showed that with our strong population growth, Airlie needs a large sporting complex out in Cannonvalley to serve the future needs. Council agreed that adding an extra field onto the current Sportspark was a good first step and would 'bridge the gap' for several years until the large facility is developed," Justin commented.

The idea for the licensed club and bistro came from enjoying a beer at the grounds watching footy one Saturday morning.

"I remarked to the bloke beside me, 'how good would it be if we were drinking schooners instead of bringing our own cans.' Growing up in Bundaberg, I'd seen the huge impact that successful community clubs had on local sporting infrastructure and community groups in general. There's no reason why we couldn't establish a multi-use venue here in Airlie where the profits go back into the community, whilst encouraging more of the community to get engaged with a local sporting club," he added.

Thanks to the work of Justin, the Whitsunday Sportspark committee and countless other volunteers, this vision is taking shape. Stage one of eight has been completed, with the bottom field realigned, the addition of the second field with first-class playing surfaces, state-level lighting and a new canteen.

In February, the tender will be awarded for stages two and three. Stage two will see the completion of the modern changerooms

and public toilet facilities with an estimated completion date of May, then stage three is the construction of the club, bar and bistro; with gaming room, dining areas, terraces and a grandstand. Hopefully this stage will be completed by the end of 2020.

Justin added, "Further stages after that, subject to funding, revolve around renovating the top oval, building a new netball facility, moving the bowls green and club up beside the new club and then developing the bowls and fire station block with indoor sport facilities and an aquatic centre."

Through his local business, Eclipse Financial Services, Justin has invested greatly into the Whitsunday Sportspark, both with financial contributions as well as countless hours of time to attract local, state and federal funding.

"I've been averaging about 15 to 20 hours per week into this project for the last four years. There are times when it can take 30 hours out of a week and I'm fortunate to have the support of my wife Susan, our kids and my team at Eclipse Financial Services to facilitate me chasing this dream for the community."

Grants of \$8.35m have been awarded to facilitate this project so far, and on top of their \$750,000 seed capital that got it all started, the Whitsunday Shire Council have provided a loan of \$1m for 12 months to provide working capital for the construction.

Post Council elections in March, we will be calling on Council to extend this loan facility for a further two years to help with fitting out the kitchen, bar and club; and providing operating capital to get the facility up and running," Justin said.

Justin understands that attracting grants and building the facility is only half the battle. For the venture to be a true success for the community, they need the right team to manage the club in a competitive hospitality market.

"We have the right mix of Directors on the Sportspark committee to employ the right people to provide a top-quality hospitality experience, this is essential to be successful. Ultimately, we need the support of the locals. All profits will go back into the community and not just the five sports (soccer, rugby union, touch footy, netball and AFL) that call the Sportspark home, but also other sporting and community clubs across the Whitsunday Shire. When people sign up as members of the club, they will nominate what Not for Profit clubs they support and this way we can use this info to decide how money is awarded to community organisations."

The Whitsunday Sportspark is set to become a major regional boutique sporting venue with the capability of attracting top-level sporting events. With community support, it won't be long before the Reds, Roar, Suns, Firebirds and Cowboys will want to stay and play in the Whitsundays.




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