

Netball on the net

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THE FIRST CENTRE PASS

State Netball Centre
Friday, March 13

- Southern Saints v North East Blaze
- Geelong Cougars v Ballarat Pride
- Yarra Valley Grammar Ariels v VU Western Lightning
- Peninsula Waves v Monash University Central
- Boroondara Genesis v Hume City Falcons

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The talk is over



Kim Klaver, from Yarra Valley Grammar Ariels (front and centre), joins her nine rival skippers in launching the new Victorian Netball League last week.

Picture: MARK STEWART. s36wh999

David Turner

VICTORIAN netball will take a bold step forward when a new elite club competition takes to the court this Friday night.

After more than a decade as the state's premier netball competition, the State League has been replaced by a revamped competition format – the Victorian Netball League – and 10 clubs are positioning themselves to claim the inaugural championship.

In 2007, when it was announced that Australia's national league was to be replaced by a Trans-Tasman competition (with five Australian and five New Zealand teams), Victoria went from two teams at the elite level, the Phoenix and the Kestrels, to just one, the Vixens.

Most at the time felt that, if it was to remain the underpinning competition for Victoria's elite

team, the State League needed revamping.

A State League Advisory Group was established and, after months of careful consideration, it was decided that a 10-team competition, with each fielding a Championship Division, Division 1 and 19&under team, would be the best way to maintain a smooth pathway from grassroots netball to the elite level.

Clubs would be expected to meet rigorous criteria with greater emphasis on the off-court support structures needed for players and coaches to perform at their best. When the initial dust had settled, the first 10 licences were awarded.

And, Ballarat Pride, Boroondara Genesis, Geelong Cougars, Hume City Falcons, Monash University Central, North-East Blaze, Peninsula Waves, Southern Saints, VU Western Lightning and Yarra

Valley Grammar Ariels signed-on as the Class of '09.

A hectic pre-season tournament has just concluded and the 10 clubs are fit and ready for action.

After reaching the finals in the past two seasons, the young Yarra Valley Grammar Ariels outfit is setting itself to take a couple of big steps this year.

Coach Christina Puopolo, like most, is eagerly awaiting the inaugural season.

She has retained the majority of the squad that lost to VU Western Lightning in the elimination semi-final last season.

And, the young Ariels line-up now believes it belongs at the pointy end of the state's elite competition.

"(We're) still a fairly young squad (19 or 20 of the 30-strong list are in their teens) but they've had another year (under their belts)," Puopolo said.

"People forget we're still, largely, 16 or 17-year-olds.

"But, they're stronger in the body, mentally stronger.

"I really do believe the girls have learned a lot from last year. We really want to finish top-two and make the Grand Final."

Media partner

LEADER Community Newspapers will maintain its commitment to local sport after signing-on as the media partner for the Victorian Netball League.

As Victorian netball takes this exciting step forward, fans of the new competition will be able to follow the action both in the pages of their local Leader and on-line at leadernews.com.au

A QUICK GLANCE AT THE DEBUTANTES

BALLARAT PRIDE

Colours: Navy and sky blue

Coach: Jo Dash

They say: "It's very exciting. A lot of work went into getting one of the 10 licences. Putting it all together has been a very interesting experience. Our plan is to be there on August 12 (Grand Final day). But, realistically, our very really goal and ambition and desire is to, at the very least, be competitive." (Jo Dash)

We reckon: Ballarat will punish sides that take it lightly, but the step up to Championship Division will be a tough test initially.

BOROONDARA GENESIS

Colours: Silver, teal and navy

Coach: Richelle McKenzie

They say: "We've been coming together nicely. It's (the Genesis squad) a good blend of young players and experienced. To work with experienced players and to have experienced players about on the court will help the young ones develop." (Richelle McKenzie)

We reckon: After signing a top-shelf coaching staff and some impressive off-season recruiting, Boroondara looks likely to be the season's big improver.

GEELONG COUGARS

Colours: Navy, white and silver

Coach: Leah Wilson

They say: "We're a new group. They (Geelong squad) are so keen, so talented and they seem to be so tall and athletic these days. We'd like to win more games than we lose, I always aim for that with my coaching. Where that leaves us on the ladder, who knows?" (Leah Wilson)

We reckon: If it can harness the brilliant talent from Warrnambool through Colac to Geelong, there is little doubting the Cougars will soon be a force to be reckoned with.

HUME CITY FALCONS

Colours: Red, royal blue and white

Coach: Marg Lind

They say: "There's been a lot of changes in the off-season, but the whole club is coming together really well. To have the youngsters training with the senior girls, I think everyone is going to be a winner out of that." (Marg Lind)

We reckon: The Falcons have unfinished business after losing the last State League Grand Final and, if pre-season form counts for anything, Hume will, again, be a force. Finals are a formality, top two is likely.

MONASH UNI CENTRAL

Colours: Black, white, blue and red

Coach: Kristy Keppich-Birrell

They say: "It's a little bit daunting, they are big shoes to fill (taking over from Gillian Lee). But, in the main, Gill and I have a similar approach. We have a few new players and the older players have been very receptive to the changes." (Kristy Keppich-Birrell)

We reckon: Arguably, the best support structures, off-court, and loads of coaching talent around the club. Throw in a mix of seasoned campaigners and classy youngsters and it's hard to go past a Monash v Hume final yet again.

NORTH-EAST BLAZE

Colours: Black, orange and pink

Coach: Karen Worland

They say: "The players are very keen to learn. They are a very motivated group. But, at the moment, they really want to learn what is required to play at this level and I couldn't ask any more of them than that." (Karen Worland)

We reckon: Tapping-in to Melbourne's rapidly expanding north-east, the Blaze is positioning itself to be a future force. Likely to be a season of finding its feet in the top flight.

PENINSULA WAVES

Colours: Yellow, navy blue, hot pink and pale blue

Coach: Robynn Pym

They say: "Peninsula, just by history in the past three years, has been in the bottom two on the ladder. I believe we can beat four teams above us now. So I believe we are going to be midfield for the first year. And, in the second and third years, we rise and go into the top four." (Robyn Pym)

We reckon: With a good mix of young guns and experienced performers, the Waves could well surprise some of the top teams this season.

SOUTHERN SAINTS

Colours: Black, red, white and yellow

Coach: Debra Armstrong

They say: "We hope (Chelsey Nash) is playing full time for the Vixens and not us, (but) we'll be thrilled to have her on the court. We have a good side. The girls have had a phenomenal pre-season." (Debra Armstrong)

We reckon: A blend of the most successful club in State League history (Eastside) and a recent star of Division 1 (Bayside Stingers), the Saints will be competitive this season. Some handy signings make the Saints a bit of a dark horse.

VU WESTERN LIGHTNING

Colours: Royal blue, white and red

Coach: Joy Grubb

They say: "We're a new side this year and we know we're going to take a few weeks to gel together, but our aim has to be to make the finals and then see how we go. I'd love us to be able to go one better this year. (Joy Grubb)

We reckon: Preliminary finalists last year. An injury-plagued pre-season hasn't given the squad a lot of confidence. But, if it can, consistently, get its side together the Lightning could push towards the finals again.

YV GRAMMAR ARIELS

Colours: Yellow, black, red, royal blue, silver.

Coach: Christina Puopolo

They say: "(We're) still a fairly young squad but they've had another year (under their belts). But, they're stronger in the body, mentally stronger. I really do believe the girls have learned a lot from last year. We really want to finish top-two and make the Grand Final." (Christina Puopolo)

We reckon: Now the pre-eminent team in Melbourne's netball-rich outer-east, Ariels will be desperate to deliver on its potential. A make-or-break season ahead.

