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Voice of the Diaspora

AUSTRALIA

Western Australia's Young Basketballers Take Center Stage as National Championships Open in Newcastle

SB
By SAH Australia Bureau
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Western Australia’s Girls 12s basketball team at the opening ceremony of the School Sport Australia Games in Newcastle on October 25, 2026. From left: Akshi Kohli, Zoe Keene, Isabella London-Campos, Amelia Hurle, Evie Moran, Penelope Hopkins, Amaya Ballantyne, Piper Johnson, Azalea Keating and Sienna Irving. PHOTO: SAH AUSTRALIA BUREAU

Flags of every state and territory, a sea of team colors and a packed grandstand filled the opening ceremony of the School Sport Australia Games in Newcastle on Sunday evening, October 25, 2026, as student athletes from across the country gathered for a week of national championships in seven sports, among them the School Sport Australia 12 Years and Under Basketball Championships.

City of Newcastle Councilor Peta Winney-Baartz said the city was “delighted to host over 1,500 student athletes from across Australia for six days of competition” across basketball, cricket, football, golf, hockey, softball and touch football, before declaring, “Let the games begin.”

School Sport Australia President Graeme Jennings reminded the athletes that “wearing your state or territory colors at a national championship will be one of the proudest moments of your school years,” adding that the Games were about “friendships you develop, the challenges you will overcome, the respect you show your opponents, and the memories that you will take home.”

Dual Olympian Simon Orchard, a London 2012 bronze medalist with the Kookaburras and now Hockey Australia’s national pathways coach, shared his three keys to sporting success: “a wishbone,” “a backbone” and “a funny bone.” He recalled that he began playing hockey at 12 and scored no higher than three for any skill at his first talent camp. His advice for the week: “Effort is free,” and “comparison is the thief of joy.”



Scenes from the opening ceremony of the School Sport Australia Games in Newcastle on October 25, 2026, including Western Australia’s Girls 12s in the team parade, dual Olympian Simon Orchard addressing athletes and the lighting of the Games cauldron. PHOTOS: SAH AUSTRALIA BUREAU; COURTESY ROD, NEWY.COM.AU (SIMON ORCHARD AND CAULDRON)

As the teams paraded around the field, Western Australia’s girls’ and boys’ basketball teams marched in black and gold alongside rivals from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. A message from School Sport WA, read as the team passed, urged its athletes to “wear the black and gold with pride” and “enjoy every moment of representing Western Australia.”

During the ceremony, a combined group of students with hearing loss from public schools across the Central Coast and Hunter regions performed the national anthem in Auslan before the Games cauldron was lit. The Hunter School of the Performing Arts marching band opened the evening, filling the field with a performance in front of the assembled teams.

More Than a Century of Sending WA’s Best

For more than a century, School Sport WA has been sending the state’s young athletes to compete against the best in the country. Tracing its beginnings to around 1909, the organization today runs competitions in more than 20 sports for about 90,000 students, according to School Sport WA, supported by a network of volunteers, many of them current and retired teachers who coach and manage its state teams.



Athletes from every state and territory gather as City of Newcastle Councilor Peta Winney-Baartz declares the School Sport Australia Games open in Newcastle on October 25, 2026. PHOTOS: COURTESY ROD, NEWY.COM.AU

According to School Sport WA President Peter Rickers, this year's Western Australian contingent, organized by School Sport WA with financial support from the WA Department of Education, is made up of 140 athletes, overseen by 40 coaches, managers, tour leaders and medical personnel. He said Western Australia is competing in six of the seven sports, including 15 and Under touch football, and a number of sports also feature Indigenous representative teams.

Rickers said "many weeks of selections followed by a three-month preparation has culminated in the fantastic WA contingent we see here in Newcastle." He thanked "the coaches, managers, Tour Leaders and medical personnel for the enormous commitment they have made to the young Western Australian athletes in their care," adding that School Sport WA continues "to provide wonderful opportunities to Western Australian school children to compete at a National Championships against like minded individuals in high level competitions."

According to School Sport WA, next year the national stage comes to the West, with the organization bringing national championships in tennis, golf and girls' cricket to Western Australia, including girls' cricket in Bunbury in February.

In Their Own Words

In its parade message, School Sport WA reminded the crowd how far its athletes had come, describing Western Australia as "Australia's largest state, covering more than 2.5 million square kilometers," roughly a third of the continent, and a place "built on big landscapes, big distances, and most importantly, big community spirit."

Earning that walk out is no small feat. According to School Sport WA, about 50,000 students registered for its state team trials over the past 12 months, and only about 700 were selected across all sports. Just ten girls made the 12 and Under basketball team, drawn from nine primary and secondary schools across Perth and the Peel region.

The girls shared what selection means to them. Evie said she felt "very privileged to be able to represent my state playing a sport I love," adding that her favorite thing was "my teammates and the great bonds we have formed."

Piper said she was proud to represent Western Australia "because it shows how hard I have worked over the years," calling it "a really big achievement" and adding that "being able to make some lifelong friends along the way is

also a bonus!”

Amelia said she was proud of the hard work and dedication it took to earn her place among the ten players selected, and that she had loved training alongside her teammates, improving her skills and building stronger friendships with the other girls.

Bella said her favorite moment so far was the team building day, where she discovered the unique strengths of each teammate and loved seeing how the girls supported and encouraged one another, working together to overcome challenges and succeed as a team.

Akshi said the thought of putting on her WA uniform and representing her state was “just so exciting,” and that she was proud of the friendships she had made with her teammates along the way.

The team’s coach said tournaments like this give young athletes “a fantastic opportunity” to get a taste of national competition, describing it as “a wonderful privilege to be able to represent their state doing something they are passionate about.” She said the girls had worked hard in the lead up and were “looking forward to getting on court together and seeing what they can achieve as a team.”

Game Day

Competition begins on October 26 at the Newcastle Basketball Association stadium in Broadmeadow, with four days of round robin play before the finals and closing ceremony on Friday, October 30. Midweek, the players will also take part in a Championship Team Experience at Newcastle City Hall.

Western Australia’s boys’ 12 and Under team, also selected by School Sport WA, begins its campaign on October 26 against the same six states and territories.

Every game is livestreamed on SSATV, School Sport Australia’s streaming service, with results posted daily on the School Sport Australia website, so families across Western Australia can follow every basket.





Western Australia’s contingent marches in the team parade at the opening ceremony in Newcastle on October 25, 2026 (left), and the Western Australian Boys 12s basketball team (right). PHOTOS: SAH AUSTRALIA BUREAU (LEFT); SSWA (RIGHT)

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