

Darwin Competition & Participation Survey Key Findings

NT Rugby Union | March 2026

Introduction

During March 2026, the Northern Territory Rugby Union (NTRU) conducted the Darwin Competition and Participation Survey, receiving a total of 282 responses from across the rugby community.

The survey was designed to capture feedback on competition structure, participation, and communication. It was conducted anonymously, with respondents given the option to provide their name if they wished.

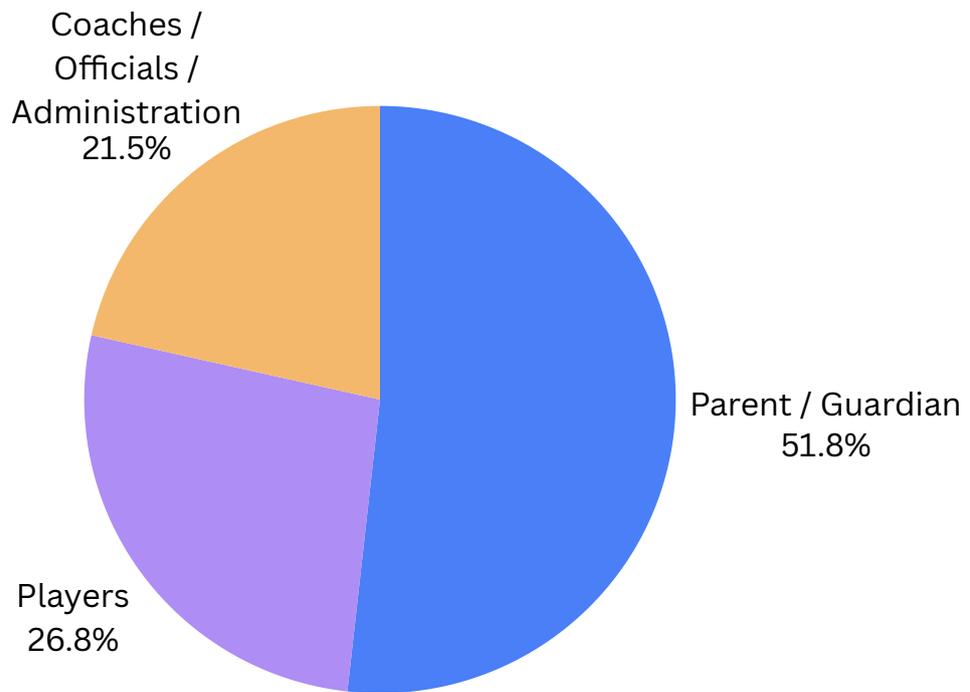
The insights gathered through this process are playing a key role in shaping the future direction of rugby in Darwin and ensuring the competition continues to evolve in line with the needs of players, families, clubs, and volunteers.

Survey Overview

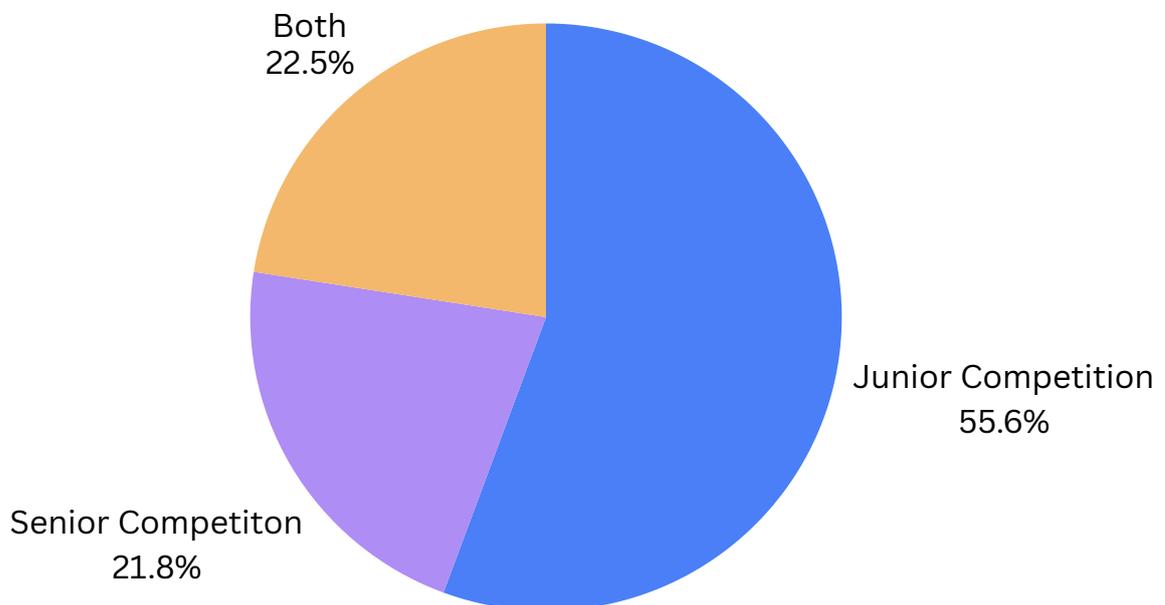
The survey focused on competition structure, participation, and communication. While the results will inform future planning of the Darwin competition, responses were strongly influenced by junior rugby stakeholders, particularly parents.

This context should be considered when interpreting the findings, as the senior competition was significantly less represented in the respondent group.

Survey Respondent Groups

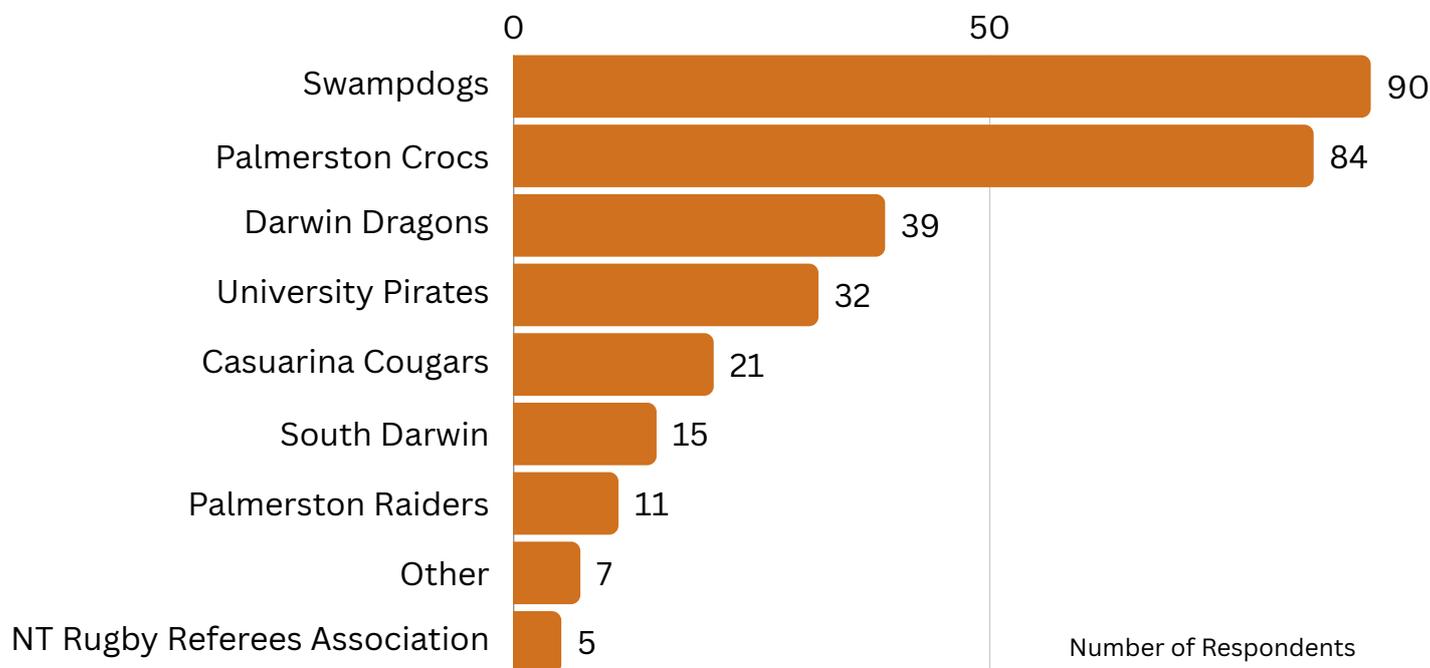


Competitions Represented



Responses were primarily from Swampdogs and Palmerston Crocs, which aligns with the strong representation of junior rugby stakeholders in the survey. This is expected, both clubs hold a large share of junior participants within the competition, resulting in a higher proportion of responses from their membership.

On a positive note, overall, this represents strong family engagement in the Darwin competition.



Participation Snapshot

Participation data indicates that Junior Boys (U13–U17) represent the largest playing cohort within the competition, forming the core of the current playing base. Non-competitive mixed junior grades (U5–U11) also demonstrate a strong participation foundation, highlighting healthy early engagement with the sport and a solid pipeline for future competitive grades.

Senior Men’s participation remains relatively steady, providing stability at the senior end of the competition. In contrast, Senior Women and Junior Girls currently represent smaller participation groups, however participation in these categories is showing positive growth trends. This presents a clear strategic opportunity for the NTRU to further invest in and expand female participation pathways, supporting both junior development and progression into senior women’s rugby.

The challenge of expanding the women’s and girls’ competitions must be considered within the broader participation landscape in Darwin, where AFL is currently the dominant sport for female participants. As a result, girls often enter rugby later than boys, typically during their high school years when they form friendships with existing players or seek an alternative sport.

This later entry point can create a significant disparity in skill level and rugby knowledge between experienced players and newcomers. For first-time participants, this gap can lead to reduced confidence and uncertainty during gameplay, particularly when players feel they “don’t know what to do.” The physical and contact elements of rugby can also be confronting for new participants, further impacting their comfort and retention in the sport.

Anecdotally, this challenge appears to be more pronounced in the girls’ competition, where peer perception and acceptance can play a significant role in participation confidence. In contrast, the women’s competition often provides a more supportive and inclusive

environment, where greater maturity among participants tends to foster encouragement, patience, and a stronger sense of welcome for new players.

To support increased participation and retention, there is merit in structuring girls' and women's competitions with greater consideration of skill level rather than strictly age-based grading. A tiered approach would allow new participants to develop fundamental skills and confidence before competing against more experienced players. Additionally, women- and girls-only training environments and introductory competitions could improve accessibility and comfort for those new to the sport.

A key structural constraint remains that players are unable to compete against opponents with more than a two-year age difference, which limits flexibility in competition design and must be considered when developing future participation models.

Preferred Competition Structure

Survey responses indicate strong support for a competition season longer than 10 weeks, with 81% of respondents favoring seasons exceeding this duration. The most preferred format was a season running between 10–15 weeks followed by finals, reflecting a clear preference for a traditional competition structure that allows for adequate rounds and a meaningful finals series.

A smaller portion of respondents (17%) indicated support for shorter competition formats, such as a 10-week season plus finals. Commentary from this group suggested that a shorter season may be more attractive when recruiting players, as individuals may be more willing to commit to a defined period of participation, particularly in the lead-up to Christmas.

Respondents also noted that shorter seasons and varied competition formats could provide greater flexibility, allowing players to enter and exit the sport more easily without the perception of a long-term commitment. This flexibility may help make the playing experience more accessible and enjoyable for participants who have competing work, family, or seasonal sporting commitments.

This creates an opportunity to continue evolving the competition while protecting the spirit of the game.

The strong support for a 15-week season plus finals indicates that stakeholders value a competition structure that provides sufficient time for teams to develop and improve across the season, ultimately contributing to a stronger and more competitive playing environment.

In future planning, maintaining a stable competition format should remain a priority. However, consideration should also be given to the fact that a “one-size-fits-all” approach may not be the most effective model, as different grades may require tailored structures to ensure both consistency and competitive integrity across the competition.

While members value traditional competition structures, there is also openness to new ideas.

Most respondents indicated they would consider modified competition formats if they support participation and sustainability. This creates an opportunity to continue evolving the competition.

Preferred Game Days

Friday evening rugby was the dominant preference, reinforcing its role as a key feature of the Darwin competition calendar and an important community and social event within the rugby environment.

For junior grades, Saturday mornings was indicated as a secondary option for Get into Rugby (U5 & U7) reflecting the suitability of this timeframe for younger players and families. Saturday afternoon and evening fixtures were identified prime option for senior rugby.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of maintaining Friday night rugby as a central element of the competition schedule, while aligning junior fixtures with family-friendly timeslots.

Participation Barriers Identified

Lack of teams in certain divisions

This was the most commonly identified barrier in response to the question, “What are the biggest barriers to participation in rugby for you or your child?”, with 148 respondents nominating it as their primary concern.

A contributing factor is the limited number of teams within several junior competitive age divisions, where some grades consist of only 2–3 teams, resulting in repetitive match-ups throughout the season. While junior participation numbers are comparatively strong, the distribution of players across clubs is uneven. Some clubs are unable to field teams in certain age groups, while others are able to field multiple teams within the same division.

This imbalance can reduce the overall appeal of the competition, particularly where there is a small pool of teams and clear disparities in team strength, with one team often dominating. As a result, players are exposed to fewer varied and competitive experiences, which can limit both enjoyment and development opportunities across the season.

Impacts: Forfeits, not all grades hosting competition or inability to maintain division.

Cost of participation

The cost of participation was identified as a secondary barrier, although it was not cited as frequently as the lack of available teams. Key themes raised included overall family costs, registration fees, and the impact of competing sports, particularly in relation to the use of sports vouchers.

Competition organisation and scheduling

Season length, game times, and communication/organisation were all identified as equally significant factors by respondents. Key themes included late changes to draws, a need for clearer and more consistent communication, and game scheduling that does not always align with family commitments.

Additionally, the impact on volunteers was highlighted, particularly in relation to very early or late junior game times, which can place added pressure on those supporting match-day delivery.

Communication Insights

Survey results indicate that club-level communication is performing strongly, with respondents expressing a high level of satisfaction in this area. In contrast, NTRU communication received more mixed feedback, highlighting an opportunity for improvement at the central level.

Key areas for enhancement include the centralisation of competition updates and the provision of clearer, more timely communication regarding draws and scheduling. Strengthening these areas would support greater consistency, improve stakeholder confidence, and enhance the overall participant experience.

Facility Context - Rugby Park

Rugby Park remains a critical asset for the delivery of rugby in the Northern Territory. Unlike most facilities within the Marrara Sports Precinct, which are owned and maintained by the Northern Territory Government, Rugby Park is owned and managed directly by NTRU.

The only other facility in a similar position within the precinct is Hockey NT.

This distinction creates unique challenges. While NTRU receives annual government funding, these funds cannot be used for facility maintenance, meaning ongoing upkeep must be funded through alternative revenue streams.

As the peak body for rugby in the Territory, NTRU actively seeks grant opportunities to support infrastructure improvements. Recent successes include:

- **Major Community Benefit Fund Grant** – upgrades to lighting on Field 2
- **Minor Community Benefit Fund Grant** – paving and pathway improvements
- **Events Community Benefit Fund Grant** - improvements in conjunction with the Hottest 7's

It is important to note that most grant funding is allocated for capital improvements rather than maintenance, limiting the ability to address ongoing wear and tear.

The facility has also experienced significant setbacks following Tropical Cyclone Fina, which caused extensive water damage to the main building. Remediation works are still ongoing, and the impacts of subsequent wet seasons have compounded these issues.

Maintenance of Rugby Park remains a priority and is the subject of ongoing planning and discussion.

Conclusion

NTRU would like to sincerely thank all participants who contributed to the survey. Your feedback provides valuable insight and plays an important role in shaping the future of rugby in the Territory.

Planning for the upcoming season is already well underway. On Sunday 15 March, NTRU hosted a competition planning session with Darwin clubs and Rugby Australia. Following this, club presidents have met twice to work through the finer details.

A summary of these discussions, including meeting minutes, is available on the NTRU website.

NTRU remains committed to working closely with clubs and the broader rugby community to build a strong, sustainable, and inclusive competition moving forward.