

## The question male-dominated sports clubs struggle to truly answer



By [Melanie Whelan](#)

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 SALT founder David Burt says many men still have a fear of what they might lose in bringing more females into traditionally male sporting domains. Picture by Morgan Hancock

WHAT does it mean to be a good man? David Burt has found when you begin drilling down, the question can be quite disarming in male-dominated sporting clubs.

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Only, when it comes to challenging forms of disrespect, particularly towards women, Mr Burt said 14 per cent would take action. Awkwardness and discomfort are big barriers to speaking up.

Mr Burt is the founder for Sport and Life Training, a not-for-profit better known in sporting clubs as SALT, an organisation getting club members to tackle the uncomfortable issues: alcohol, gambling, mental health and suicide.

This time it is about educating men to become better allies for women. Part of this is the changing landscape for what have traditionally been male sporting domains.

But there is the glaring fact in Ballarat that of the three known women's deaths police allege have been at the hands of males this year, two accused perpetrators were young men who had clear links to grassroots football clubs.

Mr Burt said there would be many who wondered what, if anything, clubs might have done differently and what might have been prevented. He urged them to consider the club culture.

"We've been aware for a long time that a hyper-masculine model can have a negative effect on men in the long run. We also know the outcomes of this on women, children and men who don't fit in," Mr Burt said.

"...Not all disrespect leads to that [violence] but all violence starts with disrespect."

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Football clubs, cricket clubs, soccer and rugby: Mr Burt said there was often resistance in the form of apathy, fear or anger when faced with change for what has long been perceived as a "safe" space for men.

He said this was about acknowledging an older, different era of bonding, while also looking to what responsibility the older guard had for juniors coming through the ranks.

Women's Health Grampians chief executive Marianne Hendron has said the deaths of Samantha Murphy and Hannah McGuire [allegedly at the hands of young men was particularly concerning, given they were of a generation that should have been better educated](#) in respect for women.

She said this had likely stemmed from "a deep inequality that still exists in terms of how women are treated".

For Mr Burt and SALT, sporting clubs can educate without finger pointing but in constructive ways to uncover the best in men. Even when they might have the best intentions.

## **The Vultures' culture clash**

Victoria Park Football Club has one of the latest sporting entities in the region to start building a female program from scratch.

The Vultures spent 2023 focusing on training before putting women's and under-12s girls' soccer teams on the park for the 2024 season.

And it had not been easy.

New infrastructure, including female change rooms, had been added in 2023. There were subsidised playing fees to help build the program.

But they lost a coach and the women's team had been left with four players weeks out from the season-opener.

Victoria Park female promotions and recruiting manager Meg Craddock said the club culture had needed to change.

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It was the women who had rallied to find a way to keep females on the pitch.

Experienced soccer player Catherine Toro-Bernal stepped up to oversee the women's and under-12 girls teams with an assistant in a former player from premier league (the equivalent to what is now state league division one).

Eighteen-year-old Zara, new to the sport, put up her hand to learn the coaching caper because she so desperately did not want the program to fold.

Other women had been drawing on their strengths and what they could best offer the team off the field.

Ms Craddock said the women's team had players starting from all different ability levels - some had been learning the rules and how to best kick the football for the first time.

She said [committing to team sports was typically harder for women](#), especially when they were juggling children or re-entering sports for the first time in a long time.

Women's squads generally needed more players than men's squads to ensure a team.

Ms Craddock said the program could not be run in the same way as men had been running the club.

The Vultures under-12s had been bolstered with the Matildas international success spurring more girls to take up the game.

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With a squad of girls aged six to 12 years old – and a few younger sisters joining in training – the girls take turns to be a mini-assistant coach for the week. This aims to help boost game knowledge and the female coaching pathway.

Against Creswick, the only other under-12s team with a female coach, the Vultures had a draw in an athletic and fun encounter.

Ms Craddock said there was still a long way to go but women and girls could at least feel they had a place on the pitch in a friendly, supportive environment.

## **Nothing to lose, plenty to gain for the better: Burt**

In SALT training, Mr Burt said the biggest fear men had in bringing more females into traditionally male sporting clubs was the fear of what they had to lose.

Mr Burt said when a club could overcome this fear and bring in women and families, it made the whole place better in facing and tackling a range of social issues.

“*Everyone's an ally until action is required.*”

- David Burt, SALT founder

To truly take this step, Mr Burt said clubs needed to educate on the reality and then collectively take responsibility for behaviours within the club. This demanded accountability.

"Everyone's an ally until action is required. How you have that conversation – to hold people accountable and don't take offence – is important," Mr Burt said.

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"...Once members take responsibility and are educated there are no excuses for behaviour. That creates accountability without surprising everybody.

"We know it will be awkward. When it comes from a place of care and done in the right way, it's powerful."

SALT's Allies of Change program is created to break the stigma for men to talk openly and have the influence to change Australian cultural attitudes via football and sporting clubs. Details: [sportandlifetraining.com.au](http://sportandlifetraining.com.au).



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