



Whole new ball game

Pictures Lee Griffith

Things that go jump in the night are slam-dunking bad behaviour. **Belle Taylor** heads courtside.

“A LOT OF THEM are this far from falling off the edge for good,” Ian Westmore from the Office of Crime Prevention (OCP) says, holding up his thumb and forefinger. “The only place you’re going to see them is in the court system, many of them are well known to police.”

He looks across the Swan Park Leisure Centre full of teenagers playing basketball. “We want those kids to get back up to the playing field, back up to scratch and take a positive path.”

Close to the edge? Known to police? And he thinks a few games of basketball are going to help? Well, yes.

This isn’t any old basketball tournament, this is Midnight Basketball, and it’s having a big effect on teenagers in the Midland area.

Held on Saturday nights from 7pm to midnight, the tournament is aimed at 12 to 18-year-olds who are “at risk” — either wards of the State, known to police, or simply in danger of falling in with the wrong crowd.

A joint initiative between the OCP, WA Police, the

Midland PCYC and the City of Swan, Midnight Basketball ran during the second school term and was so popular it’s running during term four, starting on October 17.

It’s proving a success in more ways than one. Crime rates in the City of Swan are not good — assault offences are 14.8 per cent higher than the State average, burglary offences 25.8 per cent higher and the incidence of stolen cars is 65 per cent higher. During the tournament, however, almost all suburbs in the area reported either a reduction in, or no offences, on a Saturday night.

Not only is it positive for the community, the players are more than willing participants in the program. These kids are sports crazy, so there is no difficulty in convincing them to turn up, and because they are playing sport there is no incentive to drink or take drugs. By the time they are bussed home at the end of the night they are too tired to go out and do anything else.

“On a Saturday night, or even Friday nights, there’s not much (to do), not at their age,” says PCYC worker Mark Hardwick, who helps run the tournament. “We always find with these kids if they have an option between doing something like this, which is going to be fun and keep them out of trouble where there isn’t going to be any dramas, or going into Northbridge, they will choose the good option ... and that is what is happening.”



The concept of Midnight Basketball started in the United States in 1986 when the town manager (similar to a mayor) of Glenarden in Maryland realised most crime in the town was occurring between 10pm and 2am and was perpetrated by young men aged between 17 and 25. He started a late-night basketball tournament to get them off the streets.

In the first three years of the program the crime rate in the area dropped 30 per cent. The concept soon spread throughout the US and eventually to Redfern in Sydney and across the east coast of Australia. After a successful run in Geraldton, the OCP in Perth decided to bring the concept to Midland.

There are a few rules at Midnight Basketball — all the players have to attend a workshop, be provided with a healthy meal and bussed home at the end of the night. The workshop on the night *West Weekend Magazine* visited was based around train safety, and the teenagers sat spellbound as guest speaker Jonathan Beninca talked about how he lost an arm and a leg and three fingers after being hit by a train in 1999.

“The workshops have been really good,” Mark says. “We were all a little bit concerned that it might be a little bit difficult for them to sit down and stay focused and not play up in the workshops, but it hasn’t been an issue.

“Those of us that work with a lot of these kids closely are just really impressed, really blown away by how well things are going and they are leaving things at the door. In the community there may be different people having different beefs with other people at different times but they are leaving it at the door when they come in here so that’s fantastic.”

Darryl Garlett, 18, has been going to Midnight Basketball since it began. He is shy when asked about why he attends. “Just something to do so I don’t ...” he stops and decides to say something else. “Um, get out of the house. Just keep fit that’s all ... I meet people yeah, make more friends. When you get home you go straight to sleep.”

Darryl studies business at TAFE and plays football

and basketball in his spare time. Like many of the players here tonight, sport is his favourite pastime. There are 97 teenagers registered to play and between 50 and 60 turn up every week. “We had 48 turn up on the first night and we had kids here at quarter past six kicking the footy around the car park waiting to get in, so we had a really strong turnout,” Ian Westmore says.

A side product of the tournament is the community involvement it has inspired. A local charity group has donated the use of the buses; “Wendy from ‘round the corner,” as Ian calls her, put her hand up to do the tea and coffee; and the basketball coaches are from the local TAFE.

“It’s all about building that whole community,” Ian says. “You don’t get a lot of that these days. You sit at home and complain about your neighbour playing their music too loud, with this you get everybody out and it gets them mixing with kids.”

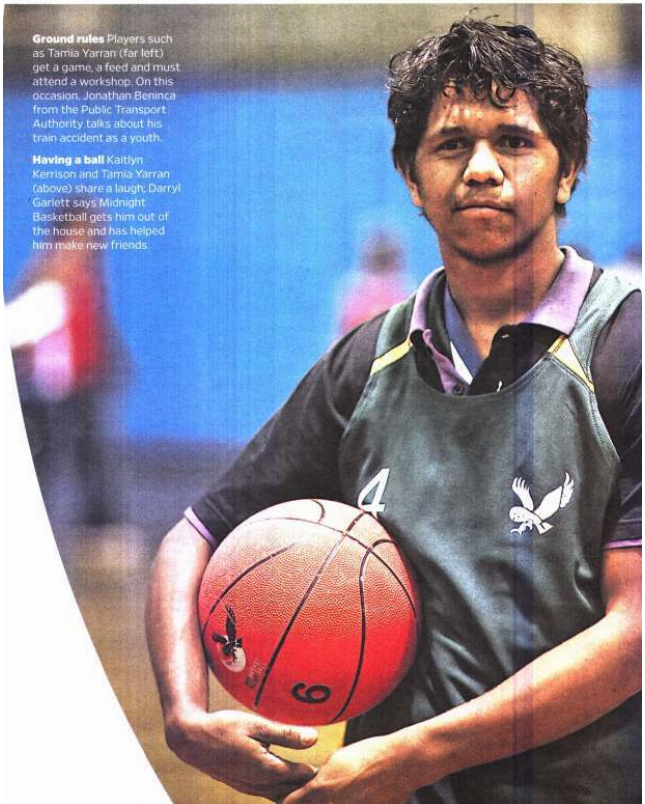
First Class Const. Robyn Cottman from the East Metro Crime Prevention Unit has also been heavily involved in the program. She is at the leisure centre in police uniform, but is far from an intimidating presence as she wanders through the crowd chatting with players, parents and social workers. “These kids see police on a very different basis most of the time,” Robyn says. “And they have so many police here helping out and being part of it, it’s just fantastic.”

She says one player, a young man who had not been at school for two years, recently asked to return to the classroom. “The boy had won a best player award at Midnight Basketball and the sense of achievement made him motivated to return to school,” Robyn explains. “That to me is enormously satisfying. It is these moments that are the life-changing ones.”

“It’s all about building that whole community.” Ian Westmore



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Ground rules Players such as Tamia Yarran (far left) get a game, a feed and must attend a workshop. On this occasion, Jonathan Beninca from the Public Transport Authority talks about his train accident as a youth.

Having a ball Kaitlyn Kerrison and Tamia Yarran (above) share a laugh. Darryl Garlett says: 'Midnight Basketball gets him out of the house and has helped him make new friends.'

