

Balance is better

Developing athletes to realise their potential in sport and in life —
winning in the long run



The Sport NZ approach to talent development

sportnz.org.nz/talent

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The challenge

“The world’s most successful sporting nation”: that’s our vision, here at Sport New Zealand.

Most Kiwis would say we’re not far off already, but—as all of us in the sector know well—winning on the world stage gets tougher every year. Let alone more expensive. If we’re to achieve our goal, we have to work smarter.

One of the ‘work ons’ we can see is the way we identify and develop those we hope will be our future high performers. The more effectively we can do that, the greater our return on the precious time and money we invest. And it is something we can improve: across the sector, we can all think of instances where the outcome wasn’t what we hoped for. We also know that—for every potential star we identify—there are others we miss.

There must be more to this process than we have previously understood... and there is. Sport NZ has been interviewing athletes, coaches and administrators across the sector as well as researching best practice around the world. Applying what we’ve learned will pay dividends. However, there is a problem...

“What gets us into trouble,” Mark Twain famously said, “is not what we don’t know. It’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so.” To do a better job of identifying and developing our future high performers, then—as a sector—we must let go of some stuff we know for sure that the research tells us just ain’t so.

**There's nothing especially hard about what we should be doing.
Much harder will be accepting that our conventional wisdom
needs to change.**



The myths

There are three great myths of developing and identifying high performers that the research exposed...

- 1. Early specialisation is good** ✗
Conventional wisdom is that the earlier athletes choose their sport and focus on it, the better. And there are examples that convince us that this is true. In fact, earlier is not necessarily better. Burn-out, over-use injuries and declining motivation: these are the more likely outcomes of early specialisation. What we now know is that when young people have diverse sporting experiences they develop transferable skills, greater creativity and better decision-making capabilities.
- 2. Childhood success leads to adult success** ✗
Conventional wisdom is that talent can be identified early. Again, it ain't necessarily so. It's true that some athletes' gifts are obvious from childhood, but every athlete is different and progress is non-linear. Some only develop and emerge much later. What we now know is that how someone performs at a young age is not a reliable predictor of their future potential.
- 3. Successful athletes focus on winning** ✗
Conventional wisdom is that you get what you think about, so think about winning. In fact, the most successful athletes, teams, coaches and administrators don't focus on winning at all. Instead, they focus on their development: how well they perform. And they regard winning as an inevitable outcome of being the best they can be.

CASE STUDY

Ruby Tew's day

Another early start for Ruby Tew¹, training at Karapiro. New Zealand has qualified for the 2016 Olympics Women's Eight and Ruby has been selected for the team. So, she's had a busy morning: practising starts, team meeting, weights. And then the afternoon off, but that—for Ruby—means work on a university assignment...

After Ruby, 18 at the time, won bronze at the 2012 Junior World Championships, she and her Mum had a bit of a talk. What next? The Under-23 trials were coming up, but what about university? What about life after rowing? "But what about now?" thought Ruby, and discussed it with Rowing New Zealand. "They understood," says Ruby and so she put rowing aside for a couple of years, moved to Dunedin and started a double degree in Accounting and Finance.

She's back now, sights set on Rio...and Tokyo in 2020. Still studying, though, and grateful for her Prime Minister's Scholarship that makes it possible financially. "I don't yet know exactly what I'll do, after rowing. Something on the business side of sport, perhaps. But it makes a big difference, doing the study. It gives me a better perspective... unlike some others, I can see exciting opportunities to come once my rowing career does come to an end."

'Catch your dreams, before they slip away,' goes a line from the song. Ruby Tew is determined to do that... and has a firm grip on the rest of her life as well.

"Catch your
dreams
before they slip away"



* Ruby Tew - fourth from right

1 NZ Rowing Women's Eight High Performance athlete. Silver medal, 2015 Women's Eight. Bronze medal, 2012 Junior Women's Quadruple Sculls

Balance is *better*

In a nutshell, what we've learned is it's better to play the long game. By focussing on helping athletes achieve their potential—not just in sport, but in life—we're much more likely to achieve the outcomes we want.

It's all about balance.

Young people need balance. Rather than pressuring them to perform, they'll do better if we encourage them to play; to explore a range of sports, to develop a range of skills, creativity and decision-making. If they are to become high performance athletes, they need time and encouragement to develop more than their physical ability: we must also support their social and emotional, cognitive and spiritual needs. At Sport NZ, we call this physical literacy².

Talent development needs balance. Talent alone does not deliver sustainable success: when we're looking for future high performers, we should be looking for talent and character. Critical to fulfilling their athletic potential will be their commitment, their willingness to learn, and their mental toughness.

Athletes need balance. If we are to develop athletes who perform consistently as senior athletes, for longer, our development programmes have to be more holistic. They must recognise and cater for all four physical literacy quadrants: develop the person as well as the athlete.

² Some call this the '4 Corners' approach. To learn more, go to sportnz.org.nz/physicalliteracy.



CASE STUDY

Get a life

“There was this whole mindset that developed,” says Phil Tataurangi³, talking about Tiger Woods’ precocious talent and the myth that mastery requires ten thousand hours of practice. “Everyone got drunk on that idea. Tiger was

a poster child for early specialisation. But I had the benefit of being there and observing and the reality is Tiger was a once-in-a-lifetime athlete, with exceptional talent.”

“If I had my time over again,” says Phil. “I like to think I would have delayed my focus on becoming a professional golfer. Then, I had this dream of making it come hell or high water and so if I thought anything was negatively impacting my golf, I’d shut it down. But, looking back, I may have done it differently. Certainly my wife and I are encouraging our kids to stay balanced in all facets of their lives.”

“I think the injuries that impacted my career may have been one of the consequences of early specialisation. If I’d allowed my body to fully develop I think I would have played longer. You’re in such a hurry when you’re young you don’t think about how long your career could be. That’s the physical side, but it’s really important that athletes develop every aspect: mentally and spiritually and personally. You train to be the best you can be, but life outside your sport also needs some priority.”

“We should be creating opportunities for kids to grow up in a balanced lifestyle: inside the classroom and in the outdoors, playing a range of sports and other extra-curricular activities. I had some great, positive, role models when I was a kid, but I thought I knew best. Now, looking back, I can appreciate what they were actually saying. I have few regrets, but many learning experiences I can share with the next generation.”



³ Member of New Zealand’s winning Eisenhower Trophy team, 1992. Turned professional in 1993. Won the 1996 Australian PGA Championship, the 1996 Nike Tri-Cities Open and the 2002 Invensys Classic.

What we believe

At Sport New Zealand we believe we will achieve balance if everything we do aligns with these five core beliefs:

1. Athlete's needs come first

All decisions about an athlete's development are informed by an understanding of their physical literacy needs, both in the short term and the long term.

2. Working together for collective impact

All partners (including parents) put their own interests aside, align policies and practices and collaborate in the best interests of the athlete.

3. Effective pathways

Sports pathways are clear, underpinned by evidence, and identify the opportunities and the expectations of individual athletes at every step.

4. Continuous learning

Continuous learning and a growth mindset underpin success for the athlete, for the people who support the athlete and for the organisations that enable them.

5. Quality coaching

Quality coaching is critical to long-term athlete success. Quality coaches understand the performance needs of the athlete and influence the people and the environment around the athlete.



CASE STUDY

Identifying talent

“Auckland Cricket did some research a few years ago,” says Paul MacKinnon⁴. “We tracked players from three successive Auckland U13 boys rep teams to see who had progressed. What we discovered was that hardly any of them had progressed to senior rep and most of them weren’t playing cricket at all. Hawke’s Bay Rugby did a similar exercise and found the same thing.”

That research led to a change in philosophy. One change has been to give players a few more years to develop. “We’re better to wait until their mid or late teens,” says Paul. “Let them play other sports, develop some transferable skills. One of our young cricketers is also a good basketball player and that’s really helped his hand-eye coordination when fielding.”

More than that, however, Auckland Cricket has adopted a holistic approach to talent identification and development. “We look at their performances, of course,” says Nick White⁵. “The talent has to be there, but then we consider their potential. I’ll talk to their coach, their teachers and parents: find out about their work ethic and their willingness to learn. And then we have a six-pillar programme. We’re developing not just their technical and tactical skills, but their leadership and mental abilities, physical conditioning and nutrition.”

And the benefits? “For us, we want consistent high performers: that’s the secret in professional sport: the ability to replicate a great performance, like we see with the Black Caps and White Ferns. And for the players this approach means they not only become better cricketers, but more rounded people who do better in life as well.”



Auckland CRICKET

⁴ High Performance Manager at Auckland Cricket

⁵ Talent ID Manager at Auckland Cricket

Sport New Zealand's *role*

Sport NZ wants to build a world-leading sporting system.

Our **vision** is developing athletes to realise their potential in sport and in life – winning in the long run.

Our role will be to:

Provide strong leadership, so that the talent plan is understood and supported by the New Zealand sporting system.

Grow capability, by developing our partners' knowledge of talent development as well as their capability and capacity.

Lead, support and advocate for effective talent development pathways, so that all aligned national sport organisations have evidence-based stage-appropriate athlete development pathways, demonstrating best practice and understanding.

Assist with the deployment of quality talent development coaches, so that we increase capability and capacity of talent development coaching expertise at a national and regional level.

To learn more about how Sport NZ can help your organisation develop athletes to realise their potential in sport and in life—winning in the long run—email talent@sportnz.org.nz





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