

TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN THE NEW ZEALAND SPORTING CONTEXT

New Zealand sportspeople and teams achieve great success on the international sporting stage. For New Zealand to continue to perform well, it is important to understand elite athletes' development pathways and the factors that contribute to their success.

To address this question, Sport NZ¹ funded a study on talent development, from the perspective of athletes, parents and coaches involved in elite sport in New Zealand. The study, led by the University of Otago, aimed to understand the process of talent development, as well as the 'performance factors' that influence talent development in elite athletes.

Talent development is providing an environment that helps realise an athlete's potential to excel in a particular sport. Talent identification is the process of recognising athletes with the potential to excel.

KEY FINDINGS

This study provides useful insights into elite athletes' development pathways and performance factors that influence talent development.

IN SUMMARY:

- Elite athletes' **development pathways are diverse**; most play a range of sports when they are young and many do not take up the sport they excel in until their late teenage years.
- **Social support** plays a crucial role in athlete development; competitive support from teammates and training partners is particularly important.

- **Psychological skills** such as self-belief, commitment and motivation, are critical; development of psychological skills should be a focus throughout all stages of athlete talent development.
- **Challenges** and set-backs are normal and should be prepared for; dealing with challenges can help athletes develop the psychological skills they need to excel.
- **Tall Poppy Syndrome** occurs at all stages of athlete development. What is important is how the athlete responds to the potential threat. Some athletes use Tall Poppy Syndrome as added motivation to work hard and succeed.

THE STUDY

The study involved interviews with current and former elite athletes, and coaches and family of elite athletes. 'Elite athletes' are athletes who have represented New Zealand at the international level.

Athletics, cycling, rowing, swimming and netball were represented. See *About the Study*.

WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW?

Previous research has identified a range of performance factors that influence the development of talent in elite athletes. These include:

- Involvement of parents and coaches
- Development of psychological and life skills
- Systems for identifying talented athletes
- Involvement in a range of sports.

¹Formerly SPARC.



WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THIS STUDY?

Interviews with elite athletes, parents and coaches identified six key themes relating to talent development among New Zealand's elite athletes.

1. DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS ARE DIVERSE

Elite athletes' development pathways are diverse.

- Elite athletes are often involved in a range of sporting activities when they are young. Many do not get involved in the sport they ultimately excel in until their late teenage years.
- The time it takes athletes to excel is variable. Some achieve international success within 2-3 years of getting involved in their sport; others take 10 years.
- Many elite athletes do not show 'early talent' but develop and progress because of their strong work ethic and key psychological skills.

2. SOCIAL SUPPORT IS CRUCIAL

Elite athletes receive support from a range of different people. Different types of support can be important at different times in athletes' development pathways.

- Emotional, financial and logistical support from parents and family is critical throughout an athlete's development. As an athlete develops, the focus of parent and family support often shifts from financial and logistical support to emotional support.
- Competitive support from teammates and training partners is important. Training in a competitive environment provides motivation and a way for athletes to gauge their abilities against others. When competitive peer support is not available, athletes' performance can suffer.
- Emotional support from support staff (coaches, medical staff) is particularly important during challenging times such as relocation or injury. This support relies on good communication between athletes and support staff.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS SET ELITE ATHLETES APART

Psychological skills and characteristics such as self-belief, commitment and motivation, are crucial for elite performance.

- Psychological skills and characteristics are developed through reflecting on, and learning from experiences.
- Psychological skills, such as training motivation, become more important as athletes progress and the quantity and quality of their training changes.
- An ability to actively enjoy their sport is central to elite athletes' motivation and commitment.

Psychological characteristics important to the development of elite athletes include:

- Self-belief / confidence
- Determination and commitment
- Work ethic / training motivation
- Competitiveness
- Mastery orientation
- Independence / autonomy
- Personal responsibility and discipline
- Coping skills.

4. CHALLENGES ARE NORMAL AND NECESSARY

Elite athletes experience a variety of challenges throughout their development pathways.

- Challenges and set-backs help athletes develop the psychological skills they need to excel.
- The way in which an athlete responds to challenges is more important than the actual challenge itself.
- The challenges athletes experience when trying to stay at the top are different, and often more difficult, than those experienced when trying to get to the top.

5. PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS EQUIP ATHLETES FOR INCREASED TRAINING DEMANDS

When training demands increase, psychological skills such as work ethic, commitment and training motivation become more important than physical skills.

- Training volume increases at certain times, such as before a major event, when athletes get a new coach and when athletes are selected into the high performance system.
- When training becomes more demanding, athletes who are already used to working hard may have an advantage over those who rely more on their natural abilities.

6. TALL POPPY SYNDROME IS A NEGATIVE FACTOR FOR MOST ATHLETES

Tall Poppy Syndrome (where people who achieve well are cut down or criticised) is present at all levels of sport. However, it appears to be strongest at youth sport and high school levels.

Tall Poppy Syndrome can have a negative impact on athletes' perceptions of themselves and their abilities. Some athletes use Tall Poppy Syndrome as added motivation to work hard and succeed.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY?

The study identifies a range of implications for talent development of New Zealand's elite athletes.

DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

- Athletes should be encouraged to play a variety of sports during their school years and not forced to specialise.
- There should be avenues for 'late starters' to get involved with sports.
- Resources and support services should be specific to development stage, rather than age.
- Opportunities and support should be provided to athletes who show determination to overcome weaknesses through hard work.
- If an athlete does not 'make it' early in their career, effort should be made to identify and, where possible, address the factors holding them back.
- Opportunities for athletes to experience training and competition overseas should continue; international experience is important to the mastery / maintenance stages of athletes' pathways.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

- Athletes who wish to reach elite levels should surround themselves with peers who will provide them with competitive motivation.
- Athletes and support staff should ensure open lines of communication so that support staff can provide the emotional support athletes need, particularly during challenging times.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

Development of psychological skills and characteristics should be a focus of talent development. This includes:

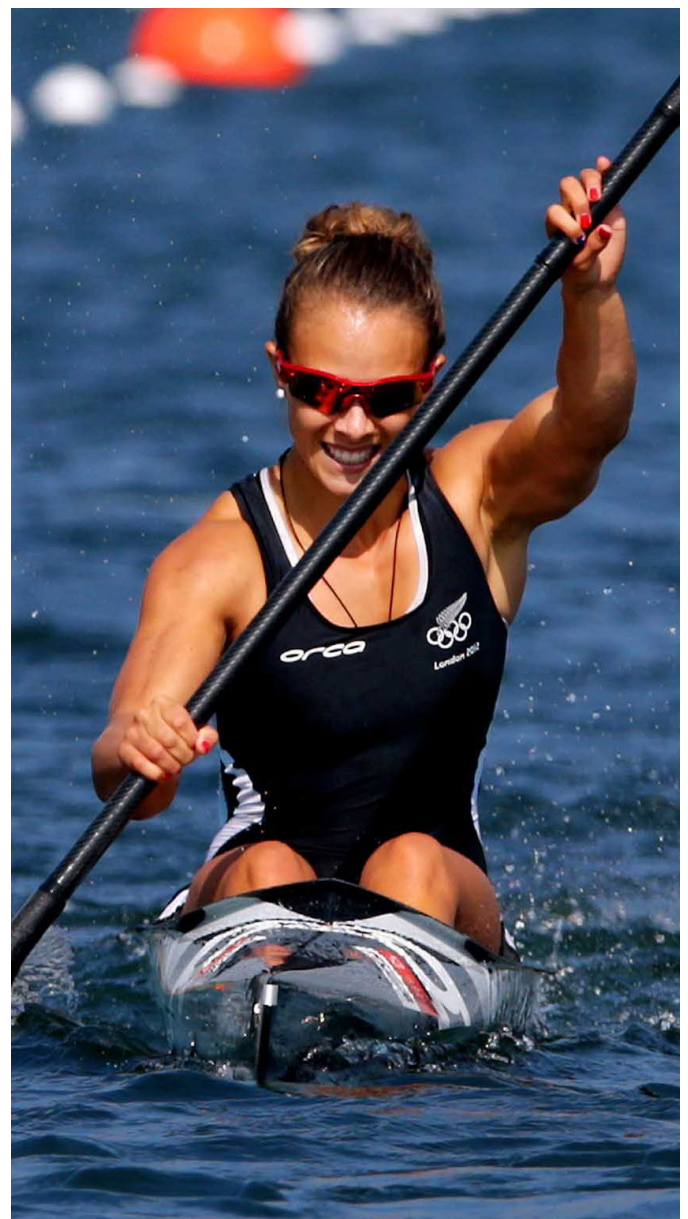
- Understanding what psychological skills athletes need to develop, and identifying the experiences that will help develop these skills.
- Ensuring training environments, including coaches, are equipped to support the development of psychological skills.
- Ensuring resources are sport-specific.
- Ensuring support for psychological skill development is available at challenging times in athletes' pathways (eg. transitioning from youth level to elite level sport).

CHALLENGES

- It is important that athletes develop a range of psychological skills that will help them cope, manage and move through any challenge; challenges should be viewed as learning experiences.
- Challenges along the athlete pathway should be viewed as opportunities to develop key psychological skills, such as a resiliency.

TALL POPPY SYNDROME

- Sporting organisations should take steps to prepare athletes, particularly junior athletes, to cope with Tall Poppy Syndrome; this could take the form of an awareness and education programme.



ABOUT THE STUDY

The study used qualitative research. This type of research provides an in-depth understanding of behaviours and why people think and behave in particular ways. Commonly used qualitative research methods are interviews, group discussions, observation and analysis of documents and other materials.

In this study, qualitative interviews enabled researchers to explore participants' perspectives on, and experiences of, athletic talent development in New Zealand. Participants were purposefully selected from the seven sports identified in SPARC's High Performance Strategy 2006-2012.² Researchers interviewed 20 athletes (9 current and eleven former), 6 coaches and 13 family members of current and former elite athletes. Athletes represented swimming (3), rowing (6), netball (5), cycling (4) and athletics (2). For practical reasons, triathlon and yachting did not take part in the study.

LIMITATIONS

As this is a qualitative study, with a small and purposefully selected sample of athletes and sports, the findings provide rich insights into the experiences of those who took part but cannot be generalised to all athletes or all sports.

FULL RESEARCH REPORT

Hodge, K., Pierce, S., Taylor, M. and Button, A. 2012. *Talent development in the New Zealand sporting context*. Dunedin: University of Otago.

The full report can be downloaded from the Sport and Recreation Knowledge Library:

www.srknowledge.org.nz/research-completed/talent-development-in-the-new-zealand-context/

CITATION

Milne, K. 2013. Talent development among New Zealand elite athletes. In Fact. *Sport NZ Knowledge Factsheet Series (2)*. Wellington: Sport NZ.

²SPARC became Sport NZ in 2012, and High Performance Sport NZ (HPSNZ) was established. HPSNZ has since released the High Performance Sport New Zealand Strategy 2013-2020: http://hpsnz.org.nz/sites/all/modules/filemanager/files/Pubs_strats_reports/Strategic_Plan_2013_FINAL.pdf

RELATED RESEARCH

Abbott, A., Button, C., Pepping, G-J., and Collins, D. 2005. Unnatural selection: Talent identification and development in sport. *Nonlinear Dynamics Psychology and Life Sciences* 9: 61-88.

Bloom, B. S. (1985). *Developing talent in young people*. New York: Ballantine.

Bruner, M.W., Erickson, K., Wilson, B., & Cote, J. 2010. An appraisal of athlete development models through citation network analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 11 133-139.

Côté, J. (1999). The influence of the family in the development of talent in sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 13, 395-417.

Jones, M. I., and Lavallee, D. 2009. Exploring perceived life skills development and participation in sport. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* 1(1), 36-50.

MacNamara, A., Button, A., and Collins, D. 2010a. The role of psychological characteristics in facilitating the pathway to elite performance Part 1: Identifying mental skills and behaviours. *The Sport Psychologist* 24, 52-73.

MacNamara, A., Button, A., and Collins, D. 2010a. The role of psychological characteristics in facilitating the pathway to elite performance Part 2: Examining environmental and stage-related differences in skills and behaviors. *The Sport Psychologist* 24, 74-96.

OTHER RESOURCES

Sport NZ website:
www.sportnz.org.nz/

Sport and Recreation Knowledge Library:
www.srknowledge.org.nz/

