

## Managing High Performance Sport in New Zealand: Athlete Perspectives

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Presentation (25-minute)**

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Athletes are continuously assessed on their performance; if they do not make the grade they are not selected in national teams and if they do not win medals ultimately the sport's funding may be affected. Everything they do is performance oriented and if goals are not met there are consequences. But how do these criteria apply to the national organisations responsibility for providing support to athletes? What do these organisations know about the athletes' perception of the services provided to them and their link to performance? Unless it can be demonstrated that the services provided have an impact, it cannot be claimed that the money invested in support services is making a difference. This research considers the view of a selected group of carded athletes receiving services from the New Zealand Academy of Sport- Central.

New Zealand introduced a new high performance structure with the introduction of the New Zealand Academy of Sport in 2000. The NZAS was set up to provide support for up to 1500 athletes across 21 sports. The athletes would be 'carded' by their National sports organisations and would then have access to a range of support services depending on their level of carding. The support services include applied sport science, medical services, athlete career and education (ACE) advice and access to tertiary education scholarships, as well as specific training facilities. The services are centrally co-ordinated and delivered through 3 regional academies - NZAS-North in Auckland, NZAS-Central in Wellington and NZAS-South in Dunedin (Dyer, 2006). To identify what impact the NZAS has had on athletes in the central region research was carried out in 2006 to identify athletes' perceptions and use of the NZAS-Central support services. Previous published research on elite athletes' perceptions of support services has been limited to a few studies conducted in Germany based on their Olympic Development Centres akin to the NZAS regional centres (Emrich, Pitsch, Froehlich & Guellich, 2004; Emrich, Froehlich & Pitsch, 2006). The German research surveyed athletes on their perceptions of support services provided by the Olympic Training Centres. The Australian Institute of Sport contracted the University of Southern Queensland to conduct longitudinal research on the impact of ACE services on elite athletes (Albion & Fogarty, 2003). Using Oakley and Green's (2001) characteristics of elite sport development systems the research sought to gain an insight into how the NZAS-Central rated on certain items. Oakley and Green identified the following characteristics as important: clear delineation of roles and understanding of the agencies; a culture of excellence; comprehensive planning; targeted resources; well developed facilities; structured competitive programme; lifestyle support; effective administration; recognition that excellence costs and talent identification. This paper will focus on the support service provided to athletes via targeted resources and lifestyle support, and how these are integrated with the other characteristics to provide and elite sport system in New Zealand.

The New Zealand research was conducted during May 2006, with the questionnaire adapted from the German and Australian survey instruments. 153 questionnaires were sent out, covering all athletes in the NZAS-Central (NZAS-C) region. The questionnaire was hosted on-line via SurveyMonkey, with 25 out of the 153 questionnaires being sent as hardcopy, due to athletes either not having an email address or the email address being invalid. A response rate of 25.5% was achieved, which is similar to the German and Australian studies.

The results suggest that athletes had been receiving services from NZAS-C for between 1 and 5 years, with 52% of the athletes having been carded at the same level during their time with the Academy, 37% having moved up and 11% having moved down. 23% had also been decarded at some stage. 46% were currently carded at Level 1, 20% at Level 2, 23% at Level 3 and 11% at Level 4. Overall the athletes were satisfied with the services provided to them through NZAS-C, with 74% being either satisfied or very satisfied with the services. However there is still room for improvement as 18% chose a neutral stance and 8% were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Detailed results will be presented in terms of awareness, usage, reasons for non-usage, accessibility, tailoring and availability of all the support services. Other data with respect to training facilities, complimentary services and coach involvement with NZAS-C service providers will also be discussed.

Similar to the German findings, athletes were in general satisfied with the overall support services provided to them. However, there is some concern that a number of athletes are not satisfied with specific services provided and that there is little evidence that athletes are moving from being carded at Level 4 to Level 1, as was originally intended. In terms of ACE specific services similar findings to the Australian study were found with respect to satisfaction and usage of the service. The findings of this research would suggest that it is important for national programs dedicated to supporting elite athletes to establish longitudinal evaluation programs to identify whether or not the stated objectives are met. Often structures are put in place to support elite athletes but are solely evaluated in terms of medals and placings, rather than considering whether the structures in place are

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actually making a difference to athletes. It takes around 12 years to develop an elite athlete, but most systems are based on 4 year cycles, as is currently being evidenced in New Zealand where the system of delivering support services to 21 sports has just been reduced to 9 sports, based on the 2006 Commonwealth Games medal tally.

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