

The Prime Minister's Scholarship for Athletes

A report to the Prime Minister
And the
Minister for Recreation and Sport

By

Gary Moller

DipPhEd PGDipRehab PGDipSportMed (Otago) FCE Certified

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Contact details:

Web site www.healthandlifestyle.co.nz

Email: gary@healthandlifestyle.co.nz



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Introduction

The Prime Minister's Scholarship Scheme for athletes assists New Zealand Academy of Sport's Carded Athletes with undertaking study while training and competing.

The author of this report is a sports medicine, rehabilitation and sports science consultant with a special interest in the preparation of high performance athletes.

The Prime Minister's Scholarship for athletes may not be achieving its goal of producing educated high performance athletes. It is possible that athletes receiving scholarships under the present system achieve only mediocre athletic and academic results, for reasons associated with the organisation of the scholarship and may even be contributing to the loss of athletes overseas.

This report outlines the problems and offers a solution.

A cross section of high performance athletes, sports coaches, sports administrators, scientists, sports academics and tertiary education providers contributed to this report while it was in draft format. While it does not claim to represent anybody's views other than the author's, this report has taken careful account of each respondent's suggestions and guidance. The author is highly appreciative of their contributions.

The problem

Modern high-performance sports require 8-10 years of total dedication to training and competition by gifted young athletes in order to realise their potential. Distractions or interruptions – including injury, illness, a tiring social life, relationship problems, a busy study timetable, work demands, or financial stresses will lower the peak in career performance and/or delay its attainment.

It is interesting to examine the lives of Olympic or World champions. These extreme achievers dedicate at least eight years to training and competition – and little else. Their buildup consists of intense training with as many as three sessions a day with little or no let-up over the year. They travel frequently to training and competition venues at home and overseas. In the case of the Kiwi champion, this means several months or years far away from home in order to get the exposure to elite competition.

Few New Zealand Olympic or world champions have gained degree level qualifications during their build-up period – it is an interesting exercise to challenge sports buffs to name more than three. For many athletes it is impossible to study and pursue athletic goals at the same time, due to exhausting training demands and the need to travel and live in foreign lands. This generalisation applies more to some sports than it does to others.

A carded athlete who attempts to strike a balance between study and sports competition may risk removal from the New Zealand Academy of Sport. This is because the process of reviewing athlete-carding lists every six to 12 months favours the athletes who produce short-term competition results, rather than the steady improvers who are much more likely to achieve sporting greatness.

The end result

The athlete, who accepts the Prime Minister's Scholarship, takes on the three obligations to train, compete and study. This creates problems for the athlete:

- Training for elite sports competition requires total dedication and focus over several un-interrupted years. Anything less will give mediocre results in competition
- Enrolled educational/vocational courses require similar dedication and focus and the Prime Minister's Scholarship requires a reasonable and consistent academic record
- An athlete has limited physical and mental energy to spread around
 - An athlete trying to achieve elite level performances has little physical and emotional energy to spare for anything else, including study, assignments and exams. The focus has to be on rest and recovery when not training and competing
- Training and competition for most elite sports and the requirements of an educational scholarship are in timing conflict with each other. To gain exposure to elite competition a New Zealand athlete has to travel to the Northern Hemisphere at the times of the year when NZ educational programmes are in full swing
 - This means interrupted study, missed classes and failed exams and assignments and poor quality qualifications – and stress that an athlete would be better without
- The athlete may feel obliged to the New Zealand Academy of Sport and their governing sports association to compete more

frequently than they might otherwise to produce impressive but short-term results while neglecting laying the foundations for an impressive and lengthy career. This short-term approach may be out of fear (a very real one) of deletion from the New Zealand Academy of Sport and Scholarship programmes at end of current their carding period.

- This focus on producing impressive short-term results can cause excessive stress, over-reaching in training, career-shortening injuries, premature competitive burnout and losing sight of long-term athletic career goals
- Educational failure or mediocrity may cause feelings of self-doubt and loss of confidence with negative spill-over into their sports performances

What is most impressive about elite athletes is their strength of focus, their dedication and their killer self-confidence. They allow nothing to get in their way or distract them from making and surpassing their performance goals. When they are not training, they are resting, eating, sleeping or getting a massage. There are no late nights, imposing boyfriends/girlfriends are quickly shown the door and they apply strict restrictions on media and sponsor demands. There is usually no formal study.

If our young athletes are to knock these sports champions off their perches, they must show at least the same focus and self-discipline.

An athlete with this sharpness of focus and strength of self-discipline risks being a Prime Minister's Scholarship dropout. This athlete may end up overseas with a partial qualification and a student loan debt that blows out with accumulating interest.

A young athlete must have long-term career and educational plans in place before their retirement from sport. This is the reason for the Prime Minister's Scholarship for athletes. While it may not be

working as well as it should in its present format, there is a solution.

For the Prime Minister's Scholarship to work there needs to be sufficient flexibility so that an athlete can concentrate on achieving sporting excellence while not forgoing present or future educational and career opportunities. However, before we discuss solutions, there is another problem – the athlete talent drain.

The athlete talent drain

1. A downside of our outstanding population-disproportionate athletic prowess is the permanent loss of much of our best sporting talent overseas. These great athletes are also some of our best intellectual talent. It is a national tragedy that they remain overseas after retirement from competition. It is a further tragedy that many of those athletes who return home end up under-employed in relation to their experience and skills.
2. We lose these athletes for a variety of reasons. The ones focused on here are the hiatus of job and career opportunities in New Zealand upon retirement from sporting competition and the problems they have with student loan debt and redundant or incomplete qualifications.
3. A retiring athlete must find steady employment. After competing overseas for several years earning some prize money, doing promotional work for a sponsor, perhaps some study at a university and building a network of business contacts, the prospect of returning to New Zealand can be daunting to the point of being scary. Few athletes ever retire with money in the bank. It is like starting from scratch in a career and employment vacuum. It takes time to find and establish a rewarding career and this is difficult in a small marketplace like New Zealand. This move may require selling up and shifting a young family back to New Zealand.

- Few athletes, especially those with a family in tow, will risk the uncertainty of a year or two with little or no income.
4. There are many examples of outstanding athletes who have come back to New Zealand only to become locked into dissatisfying employment and career paths due to lack of useful qualifications, employment opportunities and insufficient personal funds. Retired athletes can have great difficulty settling in and may have to resort to using their name and reputation before it is forgotten to sell insurance or houses, or work as sales reps for beverage companies, sell advertising, or run a bar or nightclub. Others simply end up gardening for the local council.
 5. An athlete with a student loan who travels overseas to pursue their sport may decide not to return, due to the loan blowing out with interest payments. Many athletes have found themselves in this situation. While some have returned to work off their debts, others have decided not to, or are delaying the decision.
 6. Even when an athlete has gained a qualification, it may be unused or underutilised for several years and the athlete may need to invest in further training/education upon sporting retirement. Examples abound of athletes who have pursued other work upon retirement because they could not afford the time and the cost of retraining and updating their qualifications. The other consideration of sport/study followed by total commitment to sports achievement can after 5-10 years lead to a person who has "moved on" and the base qualification no longer being as valid to career opportunities and interests post competitive sport.
 7. It is easier for them to make their homes overseas in the country where they are already well known and their skills and knowledge may already be generating income.

8. We must explore ways that we can encourage and assist them with returning to New Zealand and settling in.

The Solution

The proposed solutions allow a carded athlete to concentrate entirely on training and competition knowing that their educational and vocational futures are secure.

Concisely, the solution proposed here sets out to reward performance, rather than get in its way. The Prime Minister's Scholarship is rescheduled. After all, in excellence, timing is everything!

Scholarship credits

A scheme of scholarship credits is proposed – a kind of educational “Fly Buys” scheme.

The carded athlete will receive a set number of scholarship credits that will enable the athlete to enroll in a course of study at an accredited New Zealand educational institution. The number of credits will reflect the amount of fulltime study that will be funded by the Prime Minister's Scholarship.

- The carded athlete is eligible for a set number of scholarship credits in accordance with their carding status
 - The credits accumulate for each year of carding
 - The higher the carding – the greater the number of credits per year
 - Bonus credits are awarded for representing New Zealand at international events and as a reward for success at these competitions

- Generous bonus credits are awarded for medal performances at Olympic, Commonwealth or World Championship events, or for setting World records
- The athlete may, at any time that suits them, draw down on their scholarship credits for educational and vocational training and associated expenses at a New Zealand educational institution
 - Many athletes will draw on their credits after their sporting career has peaked and in decline, or upon retirement from elite competition, so their dollar value would need to be inflation adjusted

Benefits

This solution has a number of significant benefits:

- Athletes can focus for several years on achieving peak athletic performance and staying on top without worrying about life after retirement, having a confusing study timetable and generally stressing out about failing at both sport and study
- The athletes are heavily incentivised to train, win and to keep focused, so as to maximise the accumulation of scholarship credits
- Upon retirement from elite sports competition, the now mature athletes can redirect their exceptional self-discipline and intense focus on study and career development
 - These mature and confident high-achievers will now produce exceptional performances in their academic study and new careers
 - Scholarship credits are restricted to enrollment in New Zealand institutions. This will reverse the athlete talent

drain by encouraging them to come home to New Zealand for several years of study.

- By the time their studies are completed, they will have settled down (Probably with partner, family and home) and be contributing again to NZ society, sport and commerce. They will not have to migrate overseas for career or financial reasons

NZ sport and society in general will be the great winners of this scheme.

Some Issues that may need to be addressed

This report draws on the observations, experiences and opinions of a wide range of people. It does not claim to objectively assess the effectiveness of the Prime Minister's Scholarship for athletes in its present form. It does appear that there may be some validity to the concerns raised in this report. For example, not a single athlete in an individual sport was found who has or is successfully completing the Prime Minister's Scholarship while competing internationally (It appears, for various reasons, that athletes in team sports may be having more success with wedding study and sports obligations).

1. It would be timely to conduct an independent review of its present performance and to investigate ways in which it may be tweaked, including considering the suggestions made in this report
2. For the scholarship credits to work, the Prime Minister's Scholarship will need to be more flexible:
 - a. More generous concerning age – would a late emerger like the great Jack Foster of running be eligible (He was well into his 30's when he first took up serious running and remained among the best in the World well into his 40's)?

- b. Over the 10-20 years of an athlete's career, there will be occasions of extended time out due to injury, illness, the need for a rest or due to any number of life demands. The scholarship should be able to be parked in neutral when, or if this happens
 - c. The Prime Minister's Scholarship should be available to athletes who are wealthy. We should still offer incentives for them to come home with their wealth and to use their talent and experience for the benefit of New Zealand. Whether they take it up or not, should be their choice.
 3. The Prime Minister's Scholarship will attract many enthusiastic athletes and will require a substantial increase in funding over present levels.
 - a. If funds are limited, it may be necessary to consider reducing the total number of carded athletes and reducing Academy overheads.
 - b. It will require guarantees that funds are available for athletes to draw on ten or more years down the track – even if the Scholarship is wound up in the interim
 4. Some athletes may build up substantial value in credits. Course fees, equipment, accommodation and living expenses should be included in the disbursement criteria. It would be rare in the case of mature students, but what happens to eligibility – and the funds - if a recipient fails to pass a course due to lack of ability or application?
 5. The Academy of Sport and its parent organisation, Sparc, need to explore with NZQA and develop rules and procedures for recognition of current competencies on retirement from competitive sport.
 - a. This would need to be on a case-by-case basis and specific to the qualifications aspired to. The life/sporting experience and transferable skills should be recognised in equivalence for undergraduate papers.

6. There is also a flexibility of delivery issue for tertiary trainers. There should be arrangements that facilitate athletes studying where they are and at times/seasons when they have gaps in training and competition. The pressure on the athlete is often more on fitting into inflexible delivery systems, time lines and locations than the total impracticality of fitting study into the year somewhere
 - a. There are many examples of athletes who were highly committed to study but who, despite all their planning and best intentions, found it impossible to complete their study, due to conflict with overriding sporting commitments, including the need to travel overseas
 - b. Private training institutions should be included in the Scholarship scheme because these institutions are quite often in the design/technology/travel sector. Their programmes are shorter more intense learning (not so many holidays) so it is a good use of time for the returning athlete wanting to get on with life.
7. The most significant cost component of study for adults is time out of paid employment and living costs, especially if the training institution is away from their normal place of residence (especially where other family members also need to be relocated). These issues are difficult to address by scholarship credits alone, unless they are flexible enough to include assistance with cost of living expenses while studying.
 - a. An accompanying solution for current and retiring athletes may be for each of the Universities to have a family home available as a scholarship for sports performers. Tertiary providers already have systems to sponsor writers and artists in residence and similar systems
8. A zero interest loan should be considered in addition to the Prime Minister's Scholarship for athletes who are carded but not funded.

Closing statements

The Prime Minister's Scholarship for athletes requires blocks of four to five years of commitment to carded athletes from the New Zealand Academy of Sport. The current practice of chopping and changing athletes after six months to one year of their being in the programme is counter-productive and shortsighted. Athletes who focus on long-term sporting and educational goals must be able to do so without pressure or penalty from the New Zealand Academy of Sport, or their sports association for doing so.

The proposed solutions outlined here would be an incentive for our promising young athletes to get out there, train and to take on the rest and the best of the World.

This proposal for introducing scholarship credits will encourage and reward performance.

Later, when retirement beckons, our country will not have forgotten or lost them. Instead, we will say,

“Thanks for representing us so wonderfully on the World’s stage and for bringing us so much joy and inspiration – now come on home and we’ll give you a World-class education”

Please visit the author's website which has other papers and articles and lots of other interesting stuff being added all the time about health, fitness, injury prevention, rehabilitation and high performance sports.

Contact details:

Web site www.freerangers.org

Email: gary@freerangers.org