



## Good Sport: Developing a Policy to Safeguard High-Performance Athletes from Psychosocial Workplace Hazards

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### Abstract

This paper explores the New Zealand (NZ) high-performance sport industry from the perspective of occupational health and safety (OHS). High-performance athletes face significant psychosocial stresses and hazards in the course of their work, which have not been sufficiently addressed through top-down leadership, or safe systems of work. This paper outlines best practice for managing psychosocial hazards in the NZ high-performance sport industry, culminating in a proposed safeguarding policy. The “Proposed HPSNZ Policy: Wellbeing and Mental Health Support for High-Performance Athletes” is grounded in international best practice incorporating literature from OHS, hauora Māori (Māori health), and sport psychology. If implemented by High Performance Sport NZ (HPSNZ), this policy could safeguard NZ high-performance athletes from psychosocial workplace hazards. Such a policy was recommended following the death of NZ Olympian Olivia Podmore, and this paper presents a viable option allowing HPSNZ to fulfil that recommendation.

### Key Words

High-performance athlete; HPSNZ; National Sporting Organisation; occupational health and safety; psychosocial hazards

### Introduction

High-performance athletes face significant stress and psychosocial hazards in the training and competitions they undertake. However, little research exists examining high-performance sport from the perspective of OHS. The current research endeavours to address this “white space” (Cherry, 2010) in the NZ context, with the ultimate aim of producing a policy that HPSNZ could use to safeguard NZ high-performance athletes. Such a policy was recommended by Heron et al. (2022) in their report following the tragic death of Olivia Podmore. In response to this recommendation, HPSNZ observed that: “nowhere else in the world has developed a centralised version of policies that are applicable in the safeguarding space” (Heron et al., 2022, p.22). There remains an urgent need for HPSNZ to create and implement an organisational athlete-safeguarding policy.

Olivia Podmore, a NZ high-performance cyclist who competed in the 2016 Olympic Games, died by suicide in 2021 (Bridgman & Walker, 2022). Heron et al. (2022) investigated the circumstances leading to Podmore’s death, including issues which affect high-performance athletes’ mental health and psychological safety. Systemic internal failings were found within Cycling NZ (CNZ), as well as with how CNZ interacted with their high-performance athletes.

This paper starts with a post-positivist structured literature review, from which evidence-based best practice was synthesised into a draft policy. This included evidence from OHS, sports psychology, and hauora Māori, as well as grey literature. The draft policy was evaluated by four stakeholders with diverse experience and knowledge of NZ high-performance sport and the psychosocial hazards therein. Summarised feedback was used to improve the draft policy and produce a final policy.

This multi-step pragmatic process ensures the research is robust and rigorous, and can bridge the gap between academia and OHS practice. The final policy represents a pragmatic and practicable alignment of international best-practice in OHS and high-performance sport.

It addresses known hazards within the NZ high-performance sport industry, and could ultimately improve the mental health and psychological safety of high-performance athletes.

## **Methodology**

### **Paradigm**

This research uses mixed methods, and each section of the study uses the methodology most applicable to it. Methods were chosen for their usefulness in achieving the best possible outcome. Therefore, the overarching paradigm is pragmatism.

In part one, post-positivism is preferred, in order to produce a coherent, simple document, using literature from a multitude of sources, in which common understandings and definitions are important (Denscombe, 2021, p.40).

Part two uses an interpretivist paradigm. Interviews were semi-structured, and the process of analysing interview data was inductive. Some interviewees spent considerable time discussing matters outside the questions asked (Appendix C), which extracted many useful and unexpected insights.

### **Epistemology**

This research primarily uses post-positivist epistemology (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Post-positivism expands upon the strict objectivity of positivism, introducing epistemological caveats such as context and complexity, which are crucial for effective OHS work. Post-positivist epistemology recognises that knowledge remains open to revision (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This is important because the policy produced herein will need to adapt to different contexts and evolve alongside the NZ high-performance sport industry.

### **Ontology**

This research uses realist ontology, which assumes an objective reality comprehensible through the synthesis of empirical studies. This research draws together and analyses published literature, using that foundation to produce a singularly applicable policy.

### **Methods**

A structured literature review was chosen as the best method to find and critically analyse relevant literature. The literature review findings were crystallised into a bespoke policy. A draft version of that policy was shared with knowledgeable stakeholders, who critiqued it prior to publication. Their feedback was recorded, considered, and incorporated into the final product, being the policy within the 'Findings' section.

Interview data was analysed using thematic analysis, broadly guided by Denscombe (2022, pp. 329-335):

### **Data Protection**

Audio components of online interviews were recorded and saved. This data will be held until November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2029, and destroyed in line with Victoria University's 'Data Governance Policy' (VUW, 2023).

### **Transcription**

Data (in .m4a audio files) was uploaded to 'WhisperTranscribe' (Whisper, 2024). Each transcript was verified line by line. Several minor alterations were made to each transcript.

### **Familiarisation**

The researcher listened to each interview, and re-read each transcript twice more.

### **Initial Coding**

Generative, deductive coding was used. Codes arose from the data, rather than data fitting into pre-defined codes. Background knowledge was added to better make sense of the data (Denscombe, 2022, p331). Initial codes were assigned to relevant chunks of text.

### **Developing Codes**

Codes were categorised into 'who', 'what', 'where', 'why', and 'how'. Code development was completed while regularly referring back to the original text, so the refined codes correlated with what interviewees said (Denscombe, 2022, p333).

### **Distillation**

A summary was produced from the codes and revised codes, stating the distilled ideas that might modify the draft policy.

### **Drawing Conclusions**

Distilled ideas were considered for inclusion into the final policy. Many outputs from the thematic analysis were woven into the draft policy, in order to produce the final policy.

### **Tiriti o Waitangi Considerations**

Consideration was given to te Tiriti o Waitangi, and to models of hauora Māori. Due to its popularity and resonance, Te Whare Tapa Whā was the model chosen over Te Wheke (Pere & Nicholson, 1997) and Ngaruroro (Johnson et al., 2024). The ultimate aim of the research was to enhance the wellbeing, and therefore the mana of high-performance NZ athletes.

Māoridom and Māori athletes are well represented in NZ Olympic Games teams (Shailer, 2019), and in NZ high-performance sport broadly. The proportion of people with Māori whakapapa is higher in the NZ Olympic team than in the overall NZ population (Stats NZ, 2017; Te Tohu Taakaro, 2024). If Māori athletes comprised their own nation, they would sit 37<sup>th</sup> in the all-time summer Olympic medal table, ahead of Ethiopia, Mexico, and Ireland (Wood, 2024). The strong representation of Māori athletes dictates that downstream benefits arising from this research will enhance kaitiaki (tangible benefits for Māori) (Hudson et al., 2023).

### **Te Whare Tapa Whā**

The most well-known model of hauora Māori is Te Whare Tapa Whā, whereby hauora is represented by four 'walls', namely taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing), taha hinengaro (emotional and mental wellbeing), taha tinana (physical health) and taha whānau (connections with family and friends) (Durie, 1998). Current HPSNZ wellbeing framework is based on Te Whare Tapa Whā (HPSNZ 2023a). Te Whare Tapa Whā was also used as a proxy definition for 'wellbeing' by Heron et al. (2022, p.5).

### **Contemporary Tikanga Māori**

Contemporary tikanga Māori provides useful insights that might help safeguard NZ high-performance athletes. For example, Glover et al. (2016) found that Māori 'Aunties' no less effective than doctors at improving smoking behaviours, despite the extent of Aunties' formal education being a Certificate in Hauora Māori (Glover et al. 2016, p.1112). Many high-performance athletes hold cynical views towards their National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) (Heron et al., 2022), hence the authors recommended HPSNZ use external providers, rather than clinicians associated with HPSNZ or NSOs (Heron et al., 2022, p.50). 'Aunties' could provide similar externality and might be an effective and non-threatening psychological support conduit for high-performance athletes.

## **Ethical Implications**

There are two strands of ethical implications within the current research. Firstly, it was critical to consider psychological safety when conducting interviews. Secondly, this research complied with Victoria University's Human Ethics Policy (VUW, 2021), under Human Ethics application number 31629.

Several allowances were made to accommodate ethical concerns, particularly around conducting interviews. Any athlete or coach involved in the 2024 Olympic or Paralympic Games was excluded from the pool of potential interviewees, in case involvement hampered their work during this life-changing period. Secondly, the draft policy avoided language that may have triggered unpleasant memories from working in the high-performance sport industry. Thirdly, interviews are presented in such a way to minimise identifying data. Interviewees' sexes and ethnicities were separated from their credentials; neither of which were linked to interview transcripts. The transcripts themselves were redacted to remove any personal or identifying information, hence specific comments were not attributable to specific people. This had the additional benefit of allowing interviewees to be as frank and honest as possible (Lancaster, 2017).

## **Rigour**

The current research drew together disparate areas of knowledge, from multiple perspectives, which ensured the process was thorough, and the final product robust. The literature review, policy production, iterative interview process, and subsequent thematic analysis were all systematic. Rigour was promoted through the application of sound reasoning and methods, rather than by rote application of established protocols (Harley & Cornelissen, 2022).

## **Findings**

This section details research outcomes, including the literature review and the final version of the proposed Wellbeing and Mental Health Support Policy for High-Performance Athletes. Brief descriptions of each interviewee's role(s), experience, and demographic data are provided in separate tables.

## **Literature Review**

A structured literature review was undertaken between July 2023 and September 2024. Several online databases were searched, including CINAHL, MEDLINE (Ovid), SAGE, ScienceDirect, and SPORTDiscus. Individual words and combinations of terms relevant to the research were searched, namely:

- I. OHS / WHS / "occupational health" / "workplace health";
- II. "elite athlete" / "high-performance athlete" / "high performance athlete";
- III. "mental health" / "mental illness" / "mental wellbeing";
- IV. "psychological safety";
- V. "psychological hazard" / "psychosocial hazard"; and
- VI. NZ / "New Zealand".

Several pieces of 'grey literature' (Adams et al., 2017) were also included, mostly from WorkSafe NZ and HPSNZ. Finally, relevant legal cases were also analysed. The final literature review is presented in six sections.

## **Health Provision in High-Performance Sport**

Sport-related illness and injury tend to be assessed, treated, and classified under the umbrella of sports medicine. Sports medicine usually does not consider concepts such as

'safe systems of work' (Braun et al., 2021) into injury and illness. Such considerations might be better approached from the perspective of OHS.

Within sports medicine, sport psychology is the area of expertise that covers athletes' mental health (Abrams, 2021), but this is a relatively new field. Only six years ago did The International Society of Sport Psychology publish its first 'position stand' on "athletes' mental health, performance, and development" (Schinke et al., 2018). Despite the paucity of academic research into high-performance athletes' mental health, there is already convincing evidence around this population's exposure to psychosocial hazards, and high levels of mental illness (Beable et al., 2017; Gulliver et al., 2015; Reardon et al., 2019).

### **Occupational Health and Safety**

OHS is well established in industries such as construction, transport, and manufacturing. These industries all have high rates of workplace injuries (WorkSafe, 2020). High-performance sport also has high rates of injury, with high ACC worker levies for all its subsets (ACC, 2022, p.6). However, the high-performance sport industry does not appear to be captured by WorkSafe data.

Irrespective of the current debate about being 'employees' or 'contractors' (TAC vs. HPSNZ [2024]), high-performance athletes are undisputedly 'workers' (Heron et al., 2022). Therefore, NSOs have an obligation to provide high-performance athletes with safe systems of work (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2021). In the absence of safe systems of work, it is unreasonable and unsafe to place a significant OHS burden on individual workers (Matthews et al., 2019). Section 36 of HSWA (2015) states that employers "must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of workers". The 'workplace' includes any environment in which high-performance athletes train, compete, travel, and perform other necessary aspects of their work.

### **Psychosocial Hazards in the Workplace**

Psychosocial hazards are one of the five types of hazard (Robson et al., 2012) and include: "aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organisational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm" (Weissbrodt & Giauque, 2017, p.110). AS/NZS ISO 45003:2021 (SNZ, 2021) is the international standard for psychological health and safety at work, and provides "guidelines for managing psychosocial risks" (SNZ, 2021, p.1). Any policy to safeguard high-performance athletes from psychosocial workplace hazards must align with ISO 45003.

There is significant overlap in examples of psychosocial workplace hazards (Lovelock, 2019, p.16), and actual working conditions for NZ high-performance athletes (Heron et al., 2022). In high-performance sport, hazards include pressure to succeed; threat of injury; public scrutiny; and uncertainty about post-sport career prospects (Heron et al., 2022, pp. 91-92). The social benefits from sport are counterbalanced, and often exceeded, by psychosocial stressors. Those most likely to describe psychological stress arising from their work are generally athletes who have shifted away from home to join a centralised program; athletes under 25 years old or contemplating retirement; and athletes competing in an individual sport (Beable et al., 2017, p.1047).

### **Mental Health Through OHS in High-Performance Sport**

Only one known article (Schinke et al., 2022) discusses the mental health of high-performance athletes from the perspective of OHS. They introduce aspects of OHS (e.g., occupational risk assessments), which may be novel concepts to many high-performance sport stakeholders. Commonalities with Cottrell (2018) and Heron et al. (2022) include examples of high-performance sport environments prioritising results at the expense of athletes' mental and physical health. The importance of organisational culture is also a strong theme, including a top-down responsibility to ensure athletes can work safely, and report misconduct freely.

Section 36 of HSWA (2015) also promotes positive organisation culture, emphasising the responsibility of senior leaders in maintaining psychologically safe workplaces. It also aligns with ISO 45003 section 5 (Leadership and worker participation) (SNZ, 2021). This outlines senior leaders' legal, moral, and practical responsibility for the culture and practices within organisations. Cottrell (2018, p.5) agreed that NSOs bear "moral and ethical duties to take all reasonably practical measures to reduce the risk of injury for participants (including Elite Athletes)".

Senior leadership is especially important for NSOs who must allocate scarce resources to sporting success as well as athlete wellbeing. However, Cottrell (2018, p.6) warned that "Many NSOs do not have the level of resource, training or expertise they need to meet their responsibilities in terms of the rights and welfare needs of their Elite Athletes". However, 'performance vs. wellbeing' cannot be an 'either / or' decision, and athlete welfare must be considered and facilitated by the NSO (SNZ, 2021).

Finally, Schinke et al. (2022) offers a discussion of how national sporting culture might affect OHS. An individualistic country like NZ (Shulruf et al., 2011) is more likely to blame individuals for work-related injury or illness. Such attitudes reduce pressure on NSOs and HPSNZ to provide safe environments for athletes. Schinke et al. (2022, p.1723) also builds on Douglas & Carless (2015) noting problematic comparisons between the parlances of sport and war (e.g., "going in for the kill"; "take no prisoners"). Without a psychologically safe workplace, such phrases may subconsciously dissuade high-performances athletes from seeking mental health support when it is needed.

Cottrell (2018, Heron (2018), and Schinke et al. (2022) lament the insufficiency and inconsistency of psychological safety standards and practices in high-performance sport. Schinke et al. (2022) observe that "the lack of sustainable, and physically and psychologically safe sport environments is surprising given similarities between athletes and employees" (p.1712).

### **Psychological Safety**

Psychological safety in sport is "the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm (including fear, threat, and insecurity) in sport" (Vella et al., 2024, p.28). Within youth sport, increased psychological safety is correlated with motivation to succeed, and self-assertion (Blynova et al., 2020). Examining high-performance sport from the perspective of OHS, Chen et al. (2019) concluded that building a positive safety culture improves injury rates as well as performance. The growing body of literature, along with expert opinion (e.g., Walton et al., 2024), suggests that increasing an athlete's psychological safety will generally improve their performance in sport.

### **HPSNZ**

HPSNZ plays a central role in allocating funding to NSOs, and attaching conditions to such funding. HPSNZ is increasingly concerned with wellbeing, however this remains insufficient to address the psychosocial hazards faced by high-performance athletes. The funds and expertise required to deliver on athlete wellbeing are also often lacking.

HPSNZ are introducing a multi-phase initiative to measure wellbeing in a valid and consistent way (HPSNZ, 2023a). Recent publications include internal guidance on testing athlete wellbeing (HPSNZ, 2023b); and a resource to gauge perceptions of NSOs (HPSNZ, 2024c). These sit within a broader wellbeing framework (HPSNZ, 2023a) based around Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998). HPSNZ's 2032 high performance system strategy document (HPSNZ, 2020) is aspirational but vague, and has not been updated since 2020.

These publications are promising but insufficient to address psychosocial harm. HPSNZ 2023a, 2023b, and 2024c inherently focus on individuals' feelings, without examining the role or actions of NSOs, or HPSNZ. Purcell et al. (2019) notes that it is pointless and unsafe to improve awareness and help-seeking behaviour if there is no system to adequately

respond to athletes' needs. HPSNZ has started considering athlete wellbeing (and other factors) in allocating funding to NSOs (Adrian Blincoe, personal communication, January 31, 2024). However, overall funding remains almost entirely dependent on the prospect of winning Olympic medals. There has also been no increase in HPSNZ funding to back wellbeing initiatives.

Economic concerns are important to individual high-performance athletes, NSOs and HPSNZ, who are all reliant on limited government funding. Funding and income are cited as concerns amongst high-performance athletes almost universally (Cottrell, 2018; Heron et al., 2022). This is due to the low pay rates for sport itself, as well as the limited opportunities for additional employment, due to the time and effort consumed by high-performance sport.

Most high-performance athletes are effectively paid below the minimum wage (HPSNZ, 2024b). In 2025, the base training grant increased for athletes likely to win a medal in the current Olympic cycle, but effectively reduced for all other athletes. Most high-performance athletes earn no more than NZ\$25,000 per year (HPSNZ 2024b). Furthermore, high-performance athletes are 'dependent contractors' and cannot work for any employer other than their NSO, limiting their ability to bargain.

## Legal

The most important law in NZ OHS is HSWA (2015), which outlines the roles and responsibilities of workers and organisations in ensuring health and safety. However, the most relevant legal cases focus on other legislation, including the employment status of athletes. Other legal cases are relevant in terms of the psychosocial hazards reported by workers.

A relevant case (TAC vs. HPSNZ [2024]; HPSNZ vs. TAC [2024]) is currently before the NZ judiciary. The issue is whether high-performance athletes are entitled to the right of collective bargaining with HPSNZ. Irrespective of being 'employees' or 'contractors', high-performance athletes are undisputedly recognised as 'workers' (Heron et al., 2022; TAC vs. HPSNZ [2024]). This contrasts with the British case of former high-performance cyclist Jess Varnish, who was adjudged to be neither an employee nor a worker (Gilroy, 2020). However, British law has recognised athletes as workers since at least 1909 (Walker vs. CPFC Ltd. [1910]). In their summary of that case, judges Cozens-Hardy, Moulton, and Farwell wrote "It may be sport to the amateur, but to a man who is paid for it and makes his living thereby it is his work" (Walker vs. CPFC Ltd. [1910], p.93). This was echoed in Buckley vs. Tutty [1970] (p.372), regarding a high-performance rugby league player: "...the fact that football is a sport does not mean that a man paid to play football is not engaged in employment".

Last year the NZ Sports Tribunal (NZST) overturned CNZ's non-nomination of Sammie Maxwell for the 2024 Olympic Games (Maxwell vs. CNZ [2024]). CNZ's failure to nominate Maxwell was largely driven by disinformation from CNZ's high-performance director (HPD) to CNZ's Olympic Nomination Panel. The HPD also failed to send a copy of this report to Maxwell for the opportunity to respond, a decision described as "...a serious breach of natural justice" (Maxwell vs. CNZ [2024], p.11).

The rebuke of CNZ by NZST would be embarrassing for any organisation, but carries extra significance given the wellbeing spotlight on CNZ in recent years. Heron (2018 and Heron et al. (2022) outlined serious issues with culture at CNZ, and the insidious, deadly consequences for athletes. CNZ's "Transformation Plan 2024" was meant to acknowledge past mistakes and start afresh, with new personnel, policies, and culture (Toogood & Smith, 2024). However, since then, Maxwell vs. CNZ [2024] shows the importance of external accountability of NSOs, even when they claim to have robust internal safeguarding mechanisms.

In K&R Cronin-Lampe vs. Melville High School [2023], two former school councillors were awarded NZ\$1.8m for their school's failure to protect their psychological wellbeing. They were found to have received inadequate support despite raising issues internally and

complaining of ‘burnout’. The employer-worker relationship between the Cronin-Lampes and Melville High School could plausibly be replicated in high-performance sport. Heron et al. (2022) alleged several examples of CNZ failing to properly respond to athletes reporting psychosocial stress relating to their work. It is conceivable that an Employment Court might have found CNZ legally culpable in the death of Olivia Podmore, if a case was brought to them.

### Interviewees

Four experienced, knowledgeable, and passionate stakeholders consented to reading a draft version of the policy, being interviewed about their thoughts on it, and having their advice feed into the final policy. Demographic data was collected and reported in order to demonstrate diversity in the stakeholders interviewed. Summarised descriptions of interviewees, and their demographics, are shown in tables 1 and 2 respectively.

**Table 1: Description of interviewees’ relevant history and expertise within the NZ high-performance sport industry.**

1	Olympian; Executive-level athlete representative
2	Former HPD of NSOs in both NZ and another country.
3	Sports lawyer; author of previous wellbeing report on NZ high-performance sport; former professional sportsperson.
4	Olympian; member of the Athletes’ Commission of a NZ NSO.

**Table 2: Demographic data of interviewees.**

Demographic Category	Description	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of Interviewees
Gender	Female	2	50%
	Male	2	50%
Ethnicity	Australian	1	25%
	NZ European	2	50%
	Pasifika	1	25%

### 9.3 Feedback from Interviewees

Full interview transcripts and notes on thematic analyses thereof can be found in Appendices F – M. Key points from interviews were extracted to modify the draft policy into the final policy, namely:

#### Define ‘Psychosocial Hazard’

‘A definition of ‘psychosocial hazard’ was included in the final policy, i.e., “Psychosocial hazards are aspects of work (and its contexts) with the potential for causing psychological or physical harm” (adapted from Weissbrodt & Giauque, 2017, p.110).

#### Define ‘High-Performance Athlete’.

A “high-performance athlete” is explicitly defined as an athlete receiving funding and / or other assistance from HPSNZ; and / or who is selected to compete in a current or upcoming Olympic or Commonwealth Games.



## **Include Religious Considerations**

Religious and spiritual considerations were added to a clause and a sub-clause requiring that NSOs ensure “support services are accessible and responsive to athletes’ diverse cultural and religious backgrounds”. These considerations fit within ‘taha wairua’ of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998).

## **Define Contacts Within NSOs.**

There should be multiple NSO employees available to athletes for raising issues pertaining to psychological safety and psychosocial hazards (especially the HPD, and Wellbeing or Safeguarding Officers). These could also include ‘Aunties’ (formalised into the term ‘external provider’).

## **Include Recently Retired Athletes**

Recently retired athletes have a high risk of depressive symptoms (Beable et al., 2017, p.1047), therefore it is reasonable that they should also be covered by this policy.

## **Clarify the Roles of HPSNZ and NSOs**

Explicitly clarifying the roles of HPSNZ and NSOs helps align the policy with funding structures, whereby NSOs are largely reliant on HPSNZ for funding. HPSNZ attaches conditions to the funding it provides NSOs, and is ultimately responsible for providing high-performance athletes with safe working environments.

## **Promote Banter and Prevent Bullying**

Banter is a crucial part of positive, healthy, and psychologically safe high-performance sport environments (Newman et al., 2023). Conversely, workplace bullying is a psychosocial hazard and is unequivocally negative (Weissbrodt & Giauque, 2017). There is no defined line separating banter and bullying, hence this topic was avoided in the draft policy. However, this paradox is confronted in the final policy for clarity. The onus for ‘calling out’ bullying is on the individual, even though this stance is potentially problematic.

## **Proposed HPSNZ Policy: Wellbeing and Mental Health Support for High-Performance Athletes**

**(NB: this document is a proposed policy that has developed as a result of my research. It is not an official publication, and hasn’t been adopted or endorsed by HPSNZ or any other party.)**

### **Purpose**

High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ) is committed to ensuring the health and wellbeing of high-performance athletes within National Sports Organisations (NSOs). This policy aligns with 'Te Whare Tapa Whā' (a Māori model of health) and incorporates evidence-based practices to manage psychosocial hazards, support mental health, and foster a safe environment for high-performance athletes. By optimising wellbeing and mental health, this policy also aims to improve athletes’ performance.

### **Scope**

This policy applies to:

- all NSOs under the guidance of HPSNZ, and
- all athletes who:
  - receive TAPS or other HPSNZ support, or
  - are selected to compete in a current or upcoming Olympic or Commonwealth Games.

- met the above criteria and have retired in the last 12 months.

All stakeholders within an NSO should understand and follow this policy, including athletes, coaches, support staff, and leaders. It outlines the principles, responsibilities, and procedures required to promote and protect the mental health of athletes in high-performance sport environments.

## **Guiding Principles**

### ***Hauora***

HPSNZ recognises the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and mental health. Te Whare Tapa Whā emphasises four dimensions represented by walls of a house. HPSNZ sees NSOs as the poupou that strengthen each wall.

The four dimensions are:

1. Taha Tinana (Physical Wellbeing): Physical health and fitness are foundational to performance and wellbeing.
2. Taha Wairua (Spiritual Wellbeing): A sense of identity, purpose, and belonging is crucial for performance and wellbeing.
3. Taha Hinengaro (Mental and Emotional Wellbeing): Mental and emotional health must be actively supported to ensure resilience and optimal performance.
4. Taha Whānau (Family and Social Wellbeing): Social support and strong relationships are essential for performance and wellbeing.

### ***Evidence-Based Practice***

This policy is informed by the best available research and international consensus, including guidelines from the International Olympic Committee, the International Society of Sport Psychology, and WorkSafe NZ. These sources provide a foundation for managing psychosocial hazards, supporting hauora, and optimising occupational health and safety in high-performance sport.

### ***Cultural Competence***

HPSNZ is committed to cultural sensitivity and inclusion, recognising the importance of cultural identity and practices in promoting health and wellbeing. Beyond Te Whare Tapa Whā, NSOs must ensure that their support services are culturally responsive and inclusive of athletes' diverse backgrounds.

## **Policy Statements**

### **Psychosocial Hazard Management**

Psychosocial hazards are aspects of work (and its contexts) with the potential for causing psychological or physical harm. NSOs are responsible for identifying, assessing, and managing psychosocial hazards within their environments. This includes:

- Conducting regular risk assessments to identify potential stressors and hazards, especially when athletes are exposed to new training or competition environments, or new personnel.
- Providing training and resources to help athletes, coaches, and staff recognise and minimise psychosocial risks, including managing workload, preventing burnout, and promoting recovery.
- Establishing and maintaining clear communication channels to report psychosocial hazards promptly. This can be via a High-Performance Director, a Wellbeing Officer embedded within the NSO, or an external provider.

- Reporting back to stakeholders who previously raised concern(s) with subsequent investigations or actions arising from their concern(s).

### **Mental Health Support**

NSOs must prioritise mental health as a critical component of overall wellbeing and performance. This includes:

- Ensuring all current and recently retired high-performance athletes have access to qualified mental health professionals, including counsellors and sport psychologists.
- Providing early intervention and support for individuals experiencing mental health challenges.
- Offering mental health education and training for athletes, coaches, and support staff to increase awareness and reduce stigma.
- Facilitating regular check-ins and monitoring to identify and address mental health concerns proactively.

### **Occupational Health and Safety**

NSOs are required to maintain a safe and healthy work environment for all individuals involved in high-performance sport. This includes:

- Adhering to occupational health and safety best practices as outlined by WorkSafe NZ.
- Following legal requirements, including from the Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) (e.g., taking all reasonably practicable steps to ensure the health and safety of high-performance athletes while they train and compete).
- Implementing measures to minimise workplace hazards, including psychosocial hazards.
- Conducting regular audits of training and competition environments to ensure compliance with health and safety standards.
- Promoting a culture of safety, where individuals feel empowered to report concerns without fear of retribution.

### **Athlete Hauora**

NSOs must support athlete health and wellbeing, considering their physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, religious, and social needs. This includes:

- Incorporating Te Whare Tapa Whā into athlete development programs, ensuring a sustainable approach to training and competition.
- Encouraging strong social connections and support networks, both within and outside sport environments.
- Supporting athletes in their life beyond sport, including career planning, education, and personal development.
- Ensuring that support services are accessible and responsive to athletes' diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.
- Promoting an inclusive environment where all individuals feel valued and respected, regardless of their cultural identity.

#### **9.4.4.5 Monitoring and Evaluation**

NSOs are responsible for regularly monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of their wellbeing and mental health initiatives. This includes:

- Establishing key performance indicators to measure the impact of psychosocial hazard management and mental health support efforts.
- Seeking feedback from athletes, coaches, and staff to identify areas for improvement and to ensure that support services meet their needs. In particular, monitoring periods of high psychological stress within each Olympic cycle, and ensuring athlete support is maximised during such periods.
- Reporting outcomes and progress to HPSNZ to ensure alignment with national standards and objectives.

#### **Roles and Responsibilities**

##### ***HPSNZ:***

HPSNZ is ultimately accountable for providing athletes safe work environments. HPSNZ will provide guidance, resources, and funding to help ensure that NSOs implement this policy effectively. HPSNZ will also facilitate training, share best practices, and monitor compliance across NSOs. This will be funded independently of performance-related funding received by the NSO.

##### ***NSOs:***

NSOs are responsible for overseeing athletes' work, and implementing this policy within their organisations, including developing specific procedures, conducting risk assessments, and providing mental health support. NSOs must also ensure that their practices align with Te Whare Tapa Whā, and are culturally competent.

##### ***Athletes, Coaches, and Support Staff:***

Individuals will take responsibility for their own health and safety, and actively participate in creating safe and supportive environments. This includes adhering to policies, engaging in training, voicing concerns, and seeking support when needed. Informalities within training groups help form social ties, and should not be discouraged. Individuals should raise concerns if they believe such informalities have crossed the line into bullying, and are affecting their mental health.

#### **Conclusion**

HPSNZ is dedicated to fostering environments that prioritise the hauora of high-performance athletes. By aligning with Te Whare Tapa Whā and integrating evidence-based practice, this policy aims to promote a culture of health, safety, and wellbeing within NSOs. The successful implementation of this policy will contribute to sustainable excellence in the performance and overall development of high-performance athletes.

#### **Discussion**

In this paper, a policy has been produced that aligns international best-practice and, if implemented by HPSNZ, could safeguard NZ high-performance athletes from psychosocial workplace hazards. This was achieved by thorough methods involving multiple drafts and refinements to every aspect of the research. The final outcome could have significant implications for the health and safety of high-performance athletes, especially in NZ.

Part one of the research sought to align international best practice regarding psychosocial workplace hazards in high-performance sport. Given the scarcity of sport-specific OHS literature, 'aligning international best practice' was not literally possible, however there were other angles from which to achieve this outcome. This research leaned heavily on OHS literature. Grey literature included legislation, HPSNZ publications, WorkSafe guidelines, and international standards. Finally, extensive investigations in hauora Māori revealed considerations that are important in the NZ context.

Part two sought to apply research in a practical and functional way, to effectively safeguard high-performance athletes from psychosocial hazards. Aside from the rigour of the literature, implementing it in a practical way required pragmatism and real-world experience. The policy had to be concise, practical, and easily understood by diverse stakeholders. Testing the draft policy with knowledgeable interviewees was also crucial for this step, in order to correct any perceived errors and omissions. Efforts were made to write the policy in plain English, and to keep it to under four pages (Smith, 2016).

The diverse elements of the policy complemented each other well, and the final policy emerged as a coherent document. There is significant crossover between OHS, psychological safety, and models of hauora Māori including Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998). Overlap also exists between concepts of reducing psychosocial workplace hazards, duties of care under HSWA (2015), and corporate structures of NSOs and HPSNZ. In all these examples, a 'top down' approach is necessary, whereby ultimate responsibility rests with the senior leaders, especially within HPSNZ.

## **Conclusions**

NZ high-performance athletes face significant psychosocial stress during their work. Applying an OHS lens helps clarify NZ high-performance athletes as 'workers', who should expect the same duty of care from their NSOs as employees expect from their employers. For their part, NSOs face significant pressure from HPSNZ, therefore it is incumbent on HPSNZ to fund, train, and empower NSOs to enable NSOs to fulfil these important safeguarding duties. This represents a 'top-down' approach to legal and moral duties, funding, and creation of psychologically safe workplaces for high-performance athletes. This approach aligns with international standards (SNZ, 2021), and NZ workplace legislation (HSWA, 2015), and is fortified by case studies of toxic workplace cultures (Heron, 2018; Heron et al., 2022).

This paper has produced a policy, which, if implemented by HPSNZ, could safeguard NZ high-performance athletes from psychosocial workplace hazards. The policy incorporates diverse literature, OHS legislation, best practice guidelines, and hauora Māori. A thorough and robust structured literature review strongly informed a draft policy. Feedback from invested, knowledgeable, and diverse interviewees informed revisions to the draft policy, hence a final policy was produced, as per the third recommendation of Heron et al. (2022, p.22).

The policy has the potential to materially improve the health, safety, and achievements of NZ high-performance athletes. The most feasible mechanism for this to occur is for HPSNZ to adopt this policy, or to agree to further refine it. The existence of this policy now renders obsolete HPSNZ's assertion that: "nowhere else in the world has developed a centralised version of policies that are applicable in the safeguarding space" (Heron et al., 2022, p.22).. Furthermore, this policy is adapted to the NZ context, through cultural competency, adoption of Te Whare Tapa Whā, and incorporating hauora Māori. It is incumbent on HPSNZ to adopt a safeguarding and wellbeing policy, and the current research represents a feasible mechanism to do so.

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## Conflicts of Interest

Nil.

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HPSNZ has not sanctioned or otherwise approved any of the content of this paper, nor has any other party.

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