

What Makes New Zealand So Good at Producing Highly Skilled Sportsmen and Women?

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June 13, 2025

New Zealand, a nation with just over 5 million people that has produced elite athletes across all sports. From rugby to sailing and from netball to cricket. The country consistently performs well at an international level, but what factors contribute to New Zealand's success in producing such skilled sportsmen and women?



New Zealand All black's after winning the 2011 rugby world cup

Cultural Emphasis on sport

Sport is deeply ingrained in New Zealand's culture. Here, as soon as you can run you are encouraged to play sports. Our country shows a clear love for sport and physical activity so there are strong foundations for future athletic success. Local clubs and schools play a massive role in promoting sport and instilling a sense of national pride to help athletes succeed in sports and motivate them to do well. Mr Tony O'Connor -Former world rowing champion and current rowing coach for Christ's College, knows sports culture better than anyone else. And that is because he has been all around the world competing at international level for multiple years. This is what he had to say about New Zealand's cultural emphasis on sport..

"New Zealand's sports culture is actually quite a unique one. I've been around the world and seen a lot of different things, you know, what countries do. The sport in New Zealand is mainly based in the schools, right from primary school, from year zero, year one." However, this isn't true for all countries as places like Germany and France don't do that, They do sports clubs.

"I think the main one actually is the fact that we have winter and summer sports and that a huge number of kids do both so they learn skills for one sport and then they go into another sport and get better at that and then they can transfer them back to their original sport and they keep swapping back and forth for years and years and that just builds better athletes, but it also allows kids to get burnt out."

His main point is that if the kids are only doing a sport for six months a year they won't get sick of it. This is an amazing thing we do here and that is because, if the kids of New Zealand were expected to stick to one sport for an entire year that leads to parents around the country essentially wasting money on new and expensive sports equipment that goes to waste when their child comes home saying they've lost interest in their sport. It is an interesting concept that he actually didn't understand when he first arrived here in Nz but he asked the question of "how can you run a program in six months?" And he found that "You can, really successfully. And I advocate that, never mind this pre-season training stuff, do your sport properly and then do your other sport properly and it benefits both sports. So yeah, it's a cultural thing which is really cool here."

Access to facilities and coaching

New Zealand has a huge variety of sports facilities and programs to help athletes get to that next level and that makes developing young athletes into highly skilled sportspeople very easy and almost autonomous. Many of the coaches here in New Zealand are former pro athletes themselves so they can provide valuable insights and advice. The high amount of different specialized training programs available for young athletes really helps them develop their skills and physical condition. When Mr O'Connor was asked - How does the



Tony O'Connor coaching young New Zealand rowers

New Zealand education system integrate sports training and physical education? He responded with

"Really well. Yeah, really well, I see it in this school (Christ's College) and of course that curriculum has changed a lot. PE used to just be here's a ball and go kick it around, which was kind of fun. Now, right down to year nine, PE is a little bit more educational. This is why we do it and this is what happens and these are the physical, physiological, cultural, social reasons and outcomes of doing sport. So I think that can't help but make better sports people and people who appreciate it even more."

There is a sense of trust that you can have in what Tony has to say as he has won 5 medals at the World Rowing Championships in the Men's Lightweight Pair: Gold in 2001; Silvers in 1996 and 1997; Bronzes in 1994 and 1999. Tony and partner Neville Maxwell held the World Best Time for Men's Lightweight Pair, 6:26.61 set at Paris in 1994. Mr O'Connor knows exactly what it takes to develop successful sportsmen and he is familiar with what kind of education they need, which is where New Zealand is so advanced. Nz gives their young and upcoming athletes wide access to high performance facilities and coaching.

By integrating a more advanced physical education system into the schools curriculum, New Zealand has seen a noticeable difference in the amount of keen sports people who actually appreciate their sport and how their body works while doing them.

"I think they're doing a very, very good job with that. So you're not just getting people who like sports, you're people who actually appreciate it as well and understand it and can pass it on and be good teachers and be good coaches. I think that's a huge part of it."

With the rising number of well educated kiwi kids coming through, New Zealand can and will have an almost unlimited supply of coaches which benefits our future generations and also benefits this generation by supplying them with more job opportunities. "A lot of you guys here potentially or theoretically could be really really good coaches because you're educated. You don't pick it up from people who've done it before like I used to do it. I used to just do it because everyone else did it, but you actually understand it. So I think the future is kind of a Good question."

Strong support systems

Athletes in New Zealand get the benefit of having advanced sports science, nutrition and mental health programs. This makes it so each athlete can perform at their best without any distractions. These programs help athletes focus solely on mental health so that they can maintain peak performance. "You actually have to take the time to get to know the individuals. But there also has to be compromise with individuals. If you're on your own, doing your own thing, you get the very best out of yourself. But sometimes if you're in a team sport, you may have to play out of position or you may have to adjust your technique to roll with other people. So in terms of yourself, you're maybe not at 100 % but you're getting 100 % out of the team."

New trends you see in New Zealand sports that might influence athletes development in the future

As the years pass I'm sure you can notice that sports are taking a route of pleasing the big number of "short attention span" people of this generation. "So globally things change and I see a lot of sports going down what I call the Instagram route or the TikTok route. So reducing the length of time sports takes. So cricket went from five days to three days to 20 overs to six balls or something. This happens in so many sports now, we even went from five aside basketball to three aside basketball in the Olympics. So you ask the people why? And it's all to keep it exciting and I don't think sports should be exciting. I think that's a byproduct, should be enthralling, should be something that you just look at amazed, rather than something that can take place in two minutes." Although this is true, It's important to think about the mindfulness of the athletes and their physical fitness. If we were to continue to have long games, our athletes would get burnt out and potentially lead to us seeing more frequent injuries. But there is an aspect of sports that you are expected to maintain, and that is toughness. You could go as far as saying athletes need to be physically and mentally tough so it shouldn't matter how long the game is and that they should be fine. But Tony has a very valid point in why we shouldn't change the length of sports but you have to look at both sides of the argument and value the health of our athletes.

"We're changing sports to cater for people who can't concentrate very well. You're a sky viewer on the couch with the remote control and the six pack in one hand who just wants to be entertained. I don't think we should go down that road but it seems to be happening." How do we make sport more exciting? Well don't. Make it more tough and enthralling. You should be looking up to these people. Rugby games used to be a game of rugby and now you've got to have the fireworks at the start and music pumping out and you have people riding around in horses and Crusader outfits just to keep the masses happy and entertained. I think that's bollocks. But that's just me."

How is technology being integrated into training and performance analysis for athletes here in New Zealand?

Athletes are increasingly using wearable technology to track their performance, monitor health and analyze biomechanics. This data can help develop personalized training programs. There is also another use for technology in sport and this is where you see sports like cycling for example; using power meters to maintain a certain speed or power output to be able to get their time they are wanting.

“You can see that the rugby players are walking around with their straps on, you know their GPS units. You see the rowers with their force gates on to tell you exactly what sort of wattage and when you pull them and how long it is every stroke. I think we could be hitting peak technology pretty soon because I find now that it's starting to distract from the actual art of sport rather than it turning into a huge science which loses the talent and the feel and the instinctiveness if you're always just playing to a plan or a number. You rarely see cyclists just lash up the mountain or turn off all the power meters and just go for it. They're always constantly trying to pump out 310 watts because they know that that equates to a lactic level in their bloodstream that they can't keep going for six and a half minutes or whatever. So it's very scientific. I'd love to see a cycling race, for example, with no technology, just like kids cycling, and just let them go and see who the true athletes are.”



The Gps tracking device for analysis found on athletes

Sports organizations are trying out sustainable practices, such as using renewable resources and reducing waste which can influence the overall culture of sports. The use of stronger materials like carbon fiber also makes it so we don't have to produce more parts or equipment for sports.

“I guess it depends on the sports and something like say the America's Cup which is not accessible to the vast majority of people, but we're world leaders on that and have been for a long time and the use of you know carbon fiber composites and even the fact that now everybody does. It's the cyclists who pump the hydraulic system rather than the grinders who use their hands and that was the New Zealand innovation. So in some sports we're way ahead, other sports we play catch up and we look at what other people do. But again it's hard to differentiate New Zealand from the rest of the world because there are no secrets anymore but definitely the use of technology and analysis is huge.”

New Zealand's success in producing highly skilled sportsmen and women shows the nation's commitment to sport. The combination of quality coaching and good support systems creates an environment where athletes can thrive. Every year New Zealand continues to excel on the world stage and Nz is known as a role model for other nations who are looking to enhance their own sporting achievements.