

Star power in boardroom

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Bringing a high-performance career in sport to governance has its benefits, but it can be sink or swim.

Famous sports stars bring instant name recognition – and credibility in some cases – to a boardroom, but it is diversity in thought and experiences that set people apart, says Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa chair Bill Moran MInstD.

A number of sports stars were appointed to the High Performance Sport NZ (HPSNZ) board in September, including two-time Olympic shot put gold medallist Dame Valerie Adams, Silver Ferns coach Dame Noeline Taurua, and four-time swimming Paralympic gold medallist Duane Kale CMIInstD. Former New Zealand national softball team player and coach Don Tricker (now health and performance coach at MLB's San Diego Padres) was also appointed.

All Blacks great Richie McCaw also made the leap into governance this year, being appointed as a director of New Zealand Rugby Commercial, formed in New Zealand Rugby's deal with US private equity firm Silver Lake.

While some sports need a name to be able to connect their board to the people, umbrella body Sport NZ is blessed with superstar athletes. The nine directors include Kale, former world champion discus thrower and four-time Olympian Beatrice Faumuina MInstD, former Black Ferns captain Farah Palmer MInstD, and former double international sportswoman Karen Vercoe (rugby and touch).

“New Zealand has punched above its weight in terms of medals since the

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2012 London Olympics,” says Moran, who is also chair of HPSNZ. “But high performance sport is about more than medals. It is about heroes and those people who make us proud because of the challenges they have had to overcome to achieve fame and success.

“Athlete and coach health, and wellbeing, is the foundation of high performance. Appointing Dame Valerie, Dame Noeline, Don Tricker and Duane Kale brings lived, and living, athlete and coach experience to the board table, connecting strategy and priority to the things that really matter to athletes and coaches.”

But they are not there just because of their performances in the sports arenas.

“It is critical for the directors on the Sport NZ board to bring diversity in thought and experiences, to ensure good board culture and performance, and to ensure boards and their organisations are able to face new challenges in an ever-changing and evolving world,” says Moran.

“It is important that boards have people who hold different views and that they are able to bring those views to the table. Strength lies in the differences of directors and boards, thinking independently together.”

In June 2021, the government appointed five new directors to the Sport NZ board, all bringing varying degrees of governance experience. The current board comprises five women and four men, and provides culturally diverse voices, including Māori, Asian and Pasifika.

“The priority was to broaden the diversity of thought by appointing directors who could bring vastly different life experiences, communities of interest, and professional skills, as well as bringing a demonstrated history of working well with others in diverse teams,” says Moran, who has been chair since 2018.

Chairs need to have the skills to create an open and inclusive culture where



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all voices are heard at the table and collective accountability for decisions is taken by all directors, once those voices have been heard, he says. “Bringing a board together is just the beginning of a process, keeping it together is progress, and enabling it to work together is success.”

But it is important for Sport NZ to have directors who have experience in, and understanding of, the play, active recreation, and sporting landscape in Aotearoa, says Moran.

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In the 16 months since the board was formed, Moran says it has had an active focus on its culture and performance. It has done this through a self-review at the end of each meeting, regular self-reviews of individual director performance, and an annual review of board performance, the first of which has just been completed by BoardWorks.

Sport NZ chief executive Raelene Castle is also regularly asked for feedback on the value of each board meeting, and on the board’s overall performance, including as part of the 12-month board review process.

Despite the new board being formed as Covid-19 swept the world, Moran says they came together quickly. Sessions were run allowing board members to get to know each other, their personal histories and aspirations, and to develop a common set of values to govern their conduct and the conduct of board meetings. This meant each director was accountable for ensuring the collective success of the board.

And in making strategic decisions for sport in New Zealand they are facing some big challenges – one of the biggest is understanding the rapidly changing demographic profile.

“We need to target investment in the sport and recreation system to improve the life outcomes of tamariki and rangatahi with the lowest rates of physical activity, including Māori, Pasifika, Asian, girls and young women, and those with disabilities. A board that has directors with specific understanding of these populations and their particular needs is critical to good investment decisions,” says Moran.

SLAM DUNK FOR BASKETBALL

Former Basketball New Zealand chair Brian Yee MInstD says they made a smart move when asking superstar Megan Compain to join their board – “it gave us a lot more credibility”.

It also gave them the important role model they needed as part of their strategic priority to develop and support women’s and girls’ basketball – and help achieve equity and inclusion.

“One of our biggest criticisms was the board was not connected to basketball, they were not sports people, they did not know the sport,” Yee says. “Having high-profile sportspeople gives the board a lot more credibility.”

But not all sports stars can trade off their famous names in a boardroom and they have to be quick learners to survive. Yee says it is natural for people to like having a high-profile or well-known person on a board, but he cautioned they won’t bring a lot of value to the governance table straight away if they don’t have prior experience.

“They need to adapt and learn how they can contribute around the board table, as opposed to on the field or on the court. It is totally different,” says Yee, who stepped down as chair this year but is still heavily involved in the game.

Compain, the highly decorated double Olympian and WNBA trailblazer, has made that transition to governance, bringing 15 years of commercial experience in the sports industry. She is also involved in operational aspects



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of basketball, as well as being a TV commentator/analyst.

“She has been able to make the leap in terms of contribution to governance but also be an important role model as part of our strategic priority around women’s and girls’ basketball,” Yee says.

“We needed someone who was high-profile and been a role model for the entire sport, leading from the top right down to the grassroots. She is pivotal in that role.”

One of the game’s biggest challenges is to stop player attrition when they leave school, despite it being the fastest growing secondary-school sport in New Zealand.

Compain has helped revamp the WNBL in the past two years, making it semi-professional, attracting sponsors and introducing pay equity. “From the board perspective, it is really important to have someone to be the face of basketball,” Yee says.

And he says they found a way to keep her on the board when the former Tall Fern wanted to be involved as a part-owner of one of WNBL teams – the Tokomanawa Queens.

Finding people of Compain’s calibre, with the right skill sets and attributes around the board table as well as contributing passionately at grassroots, is hard to find, says Yee.

A highly successful high-school coach who has helped many girls gain scholarships in the US, Yee answered a call when “basketball was technically insolvent” and the board was restructuring.

Sport New Zealand demanded a proper governance structure and a proper mix of people on the eight-strong board – 50% appointed and 50% elected.

Yee was an obvious choice with his passion and involvement in grassroots basketball and his background in strategic and business consulting. He

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was appointed in 2014 and became chair in 2019.

Directors can only be appointed for eight years (two terms), which is viewed as too short by some, but the only option is to change the constitution.

“I would have loved being able to continue giving back to the game I love, but rotation enables fresh blood and new ideas to be brought to the board table so I was happy to finally call it time,” he says.

It did help having Tall Blacks great Glen Denham replace Yee on the board, as well as another highly acclaimed player, Dillon Boucher, taking over as CEO in 2021.

“Having superstars in the governance of sport is invaluable,” says Lee. “They are heroes and are well respected and connected within the basketball community.”

Yee says another issue is they are voluntary positions and a modern board cannot really operate and make significant changes or restructuring if they are “only getting together six-to-eight times a year”.

He says the board is trying to implement some of the recommendations that came out of a NZ Sport-funded restructuring of the basketball system.

The board has also been able to negotiate a commercial deal with Sky TV with women’s basketball now a big part of its programme. “We entered into a five-year deal allowing us to introduce equal pay for women, and televise all basketball.”

NETBALL IN GOOD HANDS

Former Silver Fern Bernice Mene MInstD has also been able to bring a high-performance career to the boardroom, but she was already armed with at least 15 years’ experience around the board table.

“I had been on numerous boards when I joined Netball New Zealand in 2018,” Mene says. “Joining boards has always



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been driven by my experience and my values – and whether you can make a difference.” That difference comes in her passion for youth development, community engagement and education.

Having worked with Paralympics NZ, Sport Auckland and on a number of government projects, Mene brings a wealth of experience and understanding across the sports multiverse. She played for New Zealand for 10 years (1992-2002) – three of them as captain – but also had a background and love for languages, with a linguistics degree in German.

Her first encounter with governance came at the Graeme Dingle Foundation after working in a voluntary capacity on its Project K programme for Year 10 students. “I have learned a lot on the boards I have been on. They have been quite different in composition and make-up.

“It wasn’t until I did my IoD directors’ course this year that everything crystalised and it all clicked into place,” said Mene, who was been re-elected for another four-year term.

The key to all boards, she says, is having a strong chair who is clear on your role and how the group interacts and operates. A lot of the culture is created by the chair. “Diversity around the board table is also really important,” she adds.

One of the most important developments she sees in netball is the move to integrate the youth voice. She remembers she was the youngest member when she joined Netball New Zealand – “and I’m not that young to be honest,” says the 47-year-old.

Having Mene on the board brought the missing connection with the grassroots.

“When I went to my first AGM or council meetings as a board member a lot of representatives from netball centres were very receptive,” she says, citing the reaction of the “ladies at the Manurewa netball centre who were heartened and that gave them higher trust around the decision-making”.

Netball is such a multifaceted sport with zones and centres that all have ownership and voting rights so getting everyone on board and backing your vision was a challenge, says Mene, who is also chair of the Olympic Education Commission and a trustee of leading contemporary dance company Black Grace.

Mene is also the national programme manager for Hyundai NZ's Pinnacle Programme, a TV presenter/commentator, an MC and a speaker.

She advises anyone looking at governance – and not necessarily in sport – to look first at voluntary roles in not-for-profits or school boards.

“And you have to be sure you have the time, the commitment and the bandwidth to be able to give and to be effective,” says Mene, who was made a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2012 for her services to netball.

EXPERIENCE RUNS DEEP IN ATHLETICS

Athletics New Zealand chair Cameron Taylor MInstD says finding the right skill set and depth of experience around the board table is key for any organisation.

A quarter-finalist in the 200 metres at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and a lawyer by profession, Taylor has “a real passion for athletics and providing an environment where young people have an opportunity to participate and succeed in the sport”.

Professional and family commitments meant he wasn't able to be involved in the sport as a coach, but he is participating in the boardroom instead.

He joined the Athletics New Zealand board in 2012 and was re-elected as chair in 2021. It was his first board role but he had extensive experience working with boards and senior management teams when advising on strategic transactions internationally.

The Athletics New Zealand board line-up includes Genevieve Macky, a silver



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Cameron Taylor

medallist at the 2016 Rio Olympics in rowing, and Courtney Ireland, a 1994 Commonwealth Games silver medallist in shot put. Taylor says they, along with other board members, bring a range of commercial, financial and other valuable skills and experiences to the board table.

He says a high-profile former Olympic or Commonwealth-level athlete is certainly very helpful, but that in itself doesn't give a board credibility.

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The board is comprised of four women and four men and has a strong focus on being a governance board, not an operational board. That focus has been important because the organisation has faced a large number of challenges and has changed over the past 10-15 years.

The challenges keep coming and vary from year to year, Taylor says.

“Like all sports, one of the key challenges is resources. Funding is always a challenge. Covid-19 has added to that challenge with lockdowns around all or parts of the country that severely restricted our ability to run events and engage with our members.

“We are very lucky to have some amazing people in our management team and fantastic officials, volunteers and athletes all around the country who are the lifeblood of our sport.

“We are also in the very fortunate position to have some incredible athletes that are great role models,” he says, referring to recent Olympic medallists Dame Valerie Adams, Tom Walsh and Eliza McCartney in particular. **BQ**