

Riders Meeting with Rob Waddell

When Rob Waddell took the stage at the Hawkes Bay Rider's Meeting, the room became silent. Older riders through to children were in awe of this hugely respected sportsman, towering over them at his 2.01m in height. He introduced himself and humbly rattled off a few of his achievements including three Olympic Games and three Americas Cups. It was pretty obvious that this was a true blue Kiwi legend, while still only 43 years old.

He recalled his gold medal success in the single sculls rowing at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. He was anxious and nervous but what helped him was knowing that the race was won or lost before he even walked into the Olympic Village. He didn't walk in hoping to do well, he knew he was prepared and would do his best. The second thing that helped him on the day was isolating the challenge down to the simplest thing; making the boat go fast. It is easy to get distracted by the noise on the side-lines. One of the biggest challenges is to work on focusing on the process and making sure you do as well as you can. The outcome is then predetermined. This key advice could be applied to any sport; focus on the process!

Rob paused to reflect on all of the recognition he received after winning an Olympic gold medal. He received a lot of faxes from young children and appreciated every one of them.

After Sydney, Rob looked for a new challenge and he joined Team NZ for the Americas Cup campaign. The team had been building up a new team and Rob knew very little about sailing but took up the role as a grinder. But they were looking for someone with good physiology and good positive energy. This was in 2003 when the Team NZ sail broke, which was one of the most sobering experiences of Rob's career.

He participated again in the 2007 America's Cup regatta, where the boats changed to a sport with more risk, no limits, and a lot of attention to detail. Then in 2013, Waddell was a key grinder and member of the team that won the Louis Vuitton Americas Cup.

Rob was questioned about dealing with unpredictability. He believed athletes/riders need to be mentally strong, minimize distractions, and prepare for any possible scenario. Quality becomes a habit and becomes who you are! Repetition in your mind grows belief you can achieve. Attitude can be defining and make the difference to personal and team performance.

Being the current Chef de Mission for our Commonwealth Games (2014 and 2018) and Olympic Games (2016 and 2010) teams, it is fair to say that he knows a thing or two about managing top sports men and women. He simplified his role into five categories;

planning, culture, media, selection, and operations. The countries that perform the best are the sports that have the planning and preparations done well. Detail is imperative.

The aim is to build a good performance culture; Pride, Respect, Integrity, Leadership, Excellence – these are our core team values.

Pride – top athletes are proud to be on the team and proud to represent their country and families.

Respect – athletes have high standards and are immaculate.

Integrity – this is very important and New Zealand has one of the best names in the world for this. We are right at the top!

Leadership – people need to have initiative and should care for other people in the team and in the sport. Stop to think; how my efforts might help or hinder my team mates, remember to show respect to others.

Excellence – keep your standards high and your surroundings immaculate.

Rob reveals there is culture in leading New Zealand sportspeople, they ask “what can I do to help this fellow competitor and what can I do to help my sport”.

But Rob’s number one passion is his family – with three kids. Rob and wife, Sonia, do not push their kids too hard in their sport. They are massive believers that young people should get to a certain age (teenage years) and have had fun and positive experiences in sport. Children need to learn resilience, passion, good sportsmanship, and perseverance. It is great to learn a wide range of sporting skills, but not specialise early. Too many talented young sports people burn out at a young age, because the sport hasn’t been fun. He added, in many sports there is little or no correlation between age records and long term high performance.

Rob said it is important how you talk to kids. He does not ask his children if they won, rather he enquires about what went well. Parents need to message the right things; it is not all about winning, to achieve in sport, you have to enjoy what you do. Rob recommends getting good people around your kids. Sport is who we are as people, what we give back to others and our own community. At the highest level you see the top athletes focusing, being proud of who they are as people and enjoying it versus focussing specifically on results. A good tight team has good relationships through the whole journey.

Young athletes need to take a risk and learn from the mistakes. You miss 100% of the shots you never take. Try things out because while some people might be good at something, they may discover they are brilliant at something else. Most top sports people have had experience in many disciplines.

Nowadays, Rob's focus is with Waddell and Associates, a business that manages sponsorship and funding for 12 national sports. He was questioned about what sponsors look for in an athlete and the common theme was that sponsors like to feel appreciated. Sponsors are not always attracted to the elite athletes, there is often a need to reach the community and support the grass roots.

When Rob was competing at the top level, he wondered how his sporting achievements were going to cross over into real life.

Wealth can be looked at as financial success but also there is a wealth of relationships in life, health and wellbeing, and the realisation of how much you enjoy what you do.

- 1) **Work ethic** – this is the back bone of what you do. You need to have focus and commitment.
- 2) **Excellence** – we are what we do repeatedly, so make every process as good as what it can be. Make excellence a habit.
- 3) **Attitude** – train the mind as hard as the body, we are what we do repeatedly.
- 4) **Leadership** – take initiative, following means coming second.
- 5) **Team work** – be a good team player. By sharing information collectively, we all could do so much better individually
- 6) **Happiness** – ask yourself- are you happy with what you are doing, are you passionate?

To achieve his goals, he would ask himself; have I done everything I can to make the boat go faster. So his advice to the aspiring riders in the room was “every night ask yourself the question- have I done everything I can?”

We were so lucky to have heard Rob Waddell's inspiring advice. Whether you are a top-level rider or young hopeful beginner, a parent or coach, his pearls of wisdom can be applied to each and every one of us. But the main realisation for me was to meet such a down-to-earth guy, so famous and acclaimed, yet so willing to share his knowledge with us all. To have achieved so much, while remaining so sincere, is the greatest attribute of them all.

Claire Wilson