

Understanding the Athlete

Resource: Athlete Characteristics and Needs

The attached tables list the general characteristics of the athletes and the related athlete needs for the various coaching communities defined in the New Zealand Coaching Strategy.

Athlete characteristics have not been included in the adult communities because the majority of athletes have passed the stage of significant development changes that impact on their ability to perform and be involved in sport. However this still means that coaches of adults should recognise individual characteristics of the athletes they coach when they are considering both individual and group needs of their athletes.

Community	Athlete Characteristics	Athlete Needs
<i>Early Childhood community</i>	<p>Information and programmes for this community relate directly to SPARC's Active Movement initiative.</p> <p>Active Movement recognises the concept of parents as first coaches.</p> <p>Further development in this area will be coordinated through the SPARC Active Movement team.</p>	

Community	Athlete Characteristics	Athlete Needs
<p><i>Middle Childhood community</i></p>	<p>Physical</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are developing and mastering fundamental gross motor skills. 2. Are beginning to develop motor coordination. 3. Have slow, steady musculoskeletal growth. 4. Mainly use large muscles – have better control of large than small muscles. 5. Have high energy levels but tire easily and recover quickly. 6. Girls and boys have similar abilities. 7. Learn best if physically active. 8. Have low anaerobic and aerobic capacity. <p>Social</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are dependent on adults, especially parents for support. 2. Self and family orientated but begin to experience empathy for others and start to become independent. 3. Are learning how to be friends and may have several 'best friends' at a time. 4. Opinions of peers are becoming more important. Often care more about being successful in front of peers than parents. 5. Boys and girls enjoy playing together. 6. Diversity is embraced, with positive acceptance of others. 7. Cooperation is being learned. 8. Motives to participate are to be with friends and have fun. <p>Emotional</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. See fairness as 'the golden rule'. 2. Need and seek parental or coach approval. 3. Like external rewards and positive reinforcement – success is important. 4. Are sensitive to criticism and become frustrated quickly. 5. Like to play games with simple rules. 6. Need adult help in learning to cope with failures and problems. 7. Are easily distracted. <p>Cognitive (thought processes)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have increased understanding of words, but learn best by doing/exploring. 2. Are more interested in the process than the outcome. Will continue working on a project rather than completing it. 3. Concept of competition is difficult to understand. 4. Have a limited and inconsistent attention span – interests are short and changing. 5. Start to take into account ideas and emotions of others. 6. Are easily motivated – like trying something new. 7. Are naturally curious and imaginative. Ask lots of 'why' questions. 8. Handle well only one mental operation at a time. 9. Start to distinguish between reality and fantasy. 10. Respond to external feedback or praise. 11. Lack spatial awareness and understanding of time. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opportunity to experience a variety of sporting situations and a wide variety of activities within a session. 2. Rotation of roles – no specialisation in positions. 3. Frequent rest periods. 4. Skill learning immersed in play. 5. Activities designed for both boys and girls to play together. 6. Modification of rules, field sizes and equipment. 7. A safe environment. 8. 'On task' involvement of everyone. 9. No fitness testing. 10. Activities that are progressive in intensity without the necessity of a warm-up. 11. Emphasis on success and cooperative games where everyone can win. 12. A coach who understands the athletes' characteristics and the relevance and implications of what that means to individual needs. 13. Focus on general skills (and fitness) development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agility, balance, coordination, speed • running, jumping and throwing • kinaesthetics, gliding, buoyancy, striking • catching, kicking, striking. 14. Positive support, a caring coaching approach, praise, affection and attention, to build confidence. 15. Activities that are demonstrated with simple, limited verbal instructions. 16. Reinforcement of values through 'coachable moments'. 17. Exploration of winning/losing concepts. 18. An environment where everyone can experience success. 19. Parents who reinforce the coach. 20. Opportunity to explore, question and foster natural curiosity and imagination. 21. The opportunity for play, fun, participation and interaction with others.

Community	Athlete Characteristics	Athlete Needs
<p><i>Late Childhood community</i></p>	<p>Physical</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Growth is slow until puberty. 2. Many females and some males reach puberty and experience growth spurts. 3. In puberty, skeletal system grows faster than muscular system, thus increasing injury risk. 4. Lack coordination whilst going through puberty. 5. Have steady increases in motor skills, strength, balance & coordination – fine motor skills developing 6. Hand-eye coordination is relatively mature. 7. Are maturing at differing rates (individual, gender and ethnicity). <p>Social</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are becoming more independent. 2. Begin to identify with peers, although still need and want guidance/support from parents/coaches. 3. Like an environment with consistent standards and fair consequences. 4. Enjoy organised group activities. 5. Like sense of belonging to group, team and club and enjoy working in cooperative activities. 6. Begin to sense differences. 7. Start to identify/prefer being with same-sex groups. 8. Enjoy taking responsibility and assuming simple leadership roles. 9. Girls are more socially mature than boys. <p>Emotional</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accept parent/family beliefs but are beginning to question parental authority. 2. Admire and imitate older people (role models) – look for the similarities between self and friends. 3. Success should be emphasised and failures minimised. 4. Like challenge, but dislike public failure. 5. Find comparisons with the success of others difficult and this erodes self- confidence. 6. Need to feel accepted and worthwhile (self-worth). 7. Are easily motivated to be involved and prepared to take risks. 8. With puberty, changes in hormones and thinking patterns contribute to mood swings. 9. Early maturing can be stressful – rapid physical change can be embarrassing. <p>Cognitive (thought processes)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are capable of developing leadership skills. 2. Vary greatly in academic abilities, interests and reasoning skills. 3. Begin to think logically and symbolically; new ideas are best understood when related to previous experiences. 4. Have increased attention span, but have many interests which change rapidly. 5. Are learning to absorb new ideas, but tend to judge in terms of right/wrong or black/white. 6. Often reject solutions offered by adults in favour of finding their own solutions. 7. Like to share thoughts and reactions. 8. Are developing individual identity – intrinsic motivation is important (doing it for yourself). 9. Understand multiple levels of meaning and have a rapidly increasing vocabulary. 10. Use reasoning skills to solve problems, negotiate and compromise with peers. 11. Can differentiate between ability and effort (If I work hard, I will improve). 12. Have clearer understanding of the concept of competition (social comparison). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Variety of sports, events and positions. 2. Skill development that becomes more sport-specific. 3. A continued degree of modified sports, but gradual introduction of adult structured games/events. 4. A high level of activity (lots of time on task) with rotations of roles and equal involvement. 5. Consistent, organised sessions – transition from deliberate play to increasingly deliberate practice. 6. Decision making. 7. Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). 8. Introduction to the notion of competition, with emphasis on improvement to win. 9. Provision of a safe emotional, physical, cultural and social environment. 10. Proactive promotion of fair play and moral decision making. 11. Use of role models as a teaching tool. 12. Lots of positive reinforcement, variety, enjoyment. 13. Learning through mistakes and creation of challenges. 14. Encouragement to take risks in games. 15. Positive input from parents. 16. Cooperative activities that reinforce the enjoyment of playing with friends. 17. An empathetic environment (understand and listen to individual athletes' needs). 18. Leadership and responsibility opportunities (independence). 19. Identification with current childhood trends. 20. Understanding of hormonal mood swings (e.g. do not embarrass).

Community	Athlete Characteristics	Athlete Needs
<p><i>Early Teenage community</i></p>	<p>Physical</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Growth spurts occur and are likely to cause clumsiness. 2. Complex motor skills become more refined. 3. Hormones affect body composition. 4. Are capable of handling appropriate physical training/workload (otherwise susceptible to injury risk). 5. Are capable of developing energy systems (e.g. anaerobic, aerobic). 6. Have maturity differences within and between genders. <p>Social</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are searching for personal (including athlete) identity – acceptance vs. isolation. 2. Friendships (both same and opposite gender) formed are often sincere and long-lasting. 3. Peer groups are very important. 4. Move away from family reliance. 5. May begin sexual relationships. 6. Increased costs, wider range of opportunities and time constraints can be barriers to sporting involvement. 7. Emphasis is on balancing career goals and roles in life – are starting to forward plan. 8. Role models are influential. 9. Are learning to cooperate with each other. 10. Have increasing awareness, and possible use, of alcohol and drugs. <p>Emotional</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have increased awareness of body image (notice differences) – e.g. disability, weight changes. 2. Are seeking to understand and accept sexuality. 3. Seek emotional autonomy from parents. 4. Hormones cause mood swings. 5. Want responsibility and to be treated as an adult. 6. Internally desire success, but are influenced by external pressures to conform (cool to be average). 7. Are vulnerable to negative criticism, but respond to constructive feedback. 8. Teens who develop differently physically from their peers may become uneasy about physical changes. <p>Cognitive (thought processes)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Like to find their own solutions. Value presenting their own ideas. 2. Have longer concentration span – are ready for more in-depth learning. 3. Are capable of complex problem solving. 4. Develop their own language. Use teen slang. 5. Have sense of invincibility. 6. Begin to value setting goals based on feelings of personal needs and priorities. 7. Tend to be self-focused. 8. May lack understanding of their abilities and talents. 9. Begin to demonstrate moral thinking and appreciate values. 10. Are capable of informed decision making and appreciate leadership roles. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Opportunity for sport-specific skill development. 2. Training programmes that recognise their physiological stage of development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical fitness/strength • skill development • injury prevention/ burnout. 3. Coaches who plan, with goal setting based on needs. 4. Simple tactics. 5. Mental and physical challenges. 6. Structure and firm but fair discipline. 7. Empathy – understanding the player as a person as well as an athlete. 8. Setting of realistic expectations of success. 9. Learning to make decisions and learning from mistakes. 10. Inclusion in decision making. 11. Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). 12. Two-way interactions/effective communications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coach/athlete • coach/family. 13. Encouragement. 14. Ownership and responsibility, but consequences if they are irresponsible. 15. Understanding of why they are doing things. 16. A safe, secure, non-threatening environment. 17. Support for continued participation (costs, travel). 18. Coaching that recognises their lifestyle. 19. Being taught to be self-reflective and to self-analyse. 20. Experiences within a variety of different sport-specific situations.

Community	Athlete Characteristics	Athlete Needs
<p><i>Late Teenage community</i></p>	<p>Physical</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most reach skeletal physical maturity. 2. Males continue to gain muscle strength and mass. Both sexes continue to develop bone mass. 3. Have better posture and coordination. 4. Can achieve advanced levels in complex skill and movements. 5. Are reaching physiological maturity. <p>Social</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have strong, independent social needs and desires. 2. Status in peer group is important. 3. Want to belong to groups, but be recognised as individuals within the team/groups. 4. Are likely to be sexually active. 5. Are in transition stage – change in home, locations, sport involvement. 6. Can assume major responsibilities and leadership roles. 7. Are engaged in making lifestyle and career decisions. 8. Are socially aware of their own and others' needs. 9. Likely to be involved in alcohol use and risk taking adventures. <p>Emotional</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-identify becomes more stable. 2. Feel they have reached the stage of full maturity and expect to be treated as adults. 3. Have more stable emotional responses but feelings of inferiority and inadequacy are not uncommon. 4. Tend to assume more responsibilities, with the associated stress. 5. Feel the pressure of other priorities, e.g. work, study, church, flats. 6. Are less preoccupied with body changes and body image (still an issue though). <p>Cognitive (thought processes)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are able to learn new skills/concepts, and can relate to past experience. 2. Have higher level of abstract thinking. 3. Personal philosophy begins to emerge. 4. Make choices/solve problems/accept responsibility. 5. Self-evaluation, self-correction and motivation become strong tools. 6. Can determine their own plans, schedules and goals. 7. Are capable of complex analysis and associated decision making. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sport/event/position-specific training. 2. Specific strength training as appropriate. 3. Increased precision in prescription of programmes and performance assessment. 4. Practising strategic approaches within their sport: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • taking ownership and responsibility • decision making • Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). 5. Opportunities for individual challenge and to be intuitive in their approach. 6. Being understood: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lifestyle situation • school/university/work/employment/unemployment • family. 7. Having clear expectations. 8. Being stimulated, challenged and excited. 9. Positive role models. 10. Leadership and the opportunity to be a leader. 11. Encouragement and support to remain involved (especially if there is a shift in location). 12. Consideration of both long and short-term development.

Community	Athlete Needs
<i>Social Adult community</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lots of activity. 2. Opportunity to compete (games or events). 3. Safe physical and personal environment. 4. Understanding of other priorities (work, education, family). 5. Opportunity for social contact. 6. Maintenance of general fitness and health.
<i>Competitive Adult community</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hugely varied and wide ranging, depending on the sport, the nature of the group and the geographical location. 2. Recognition of maturity level of adults. 3. Flexible approach – considering outside influences and time constraints (e.g. marriage, education, careers – balance). 4. Structured and focused sessions. 5. Coaches who can refine technical and tactical aspects of the sport and extend mentally. 7. Leadership opportunities (lots of self-responsibility and ownership). 6. Opportunity to create and develop team culture. 8. Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). 9. Quality-led practice and competition environments. 10. Specialisation of sports/events/positions/roles. 11. Individual planning. 12. Feedback based on analysis. 13. Fitness/lifestyle/nutrition/injury prevention/mental skills information (performance enhancement knowledge). 14. Funding/costs/travel considerations. 15. Suitable equipment and facilities. 16. Appropriate competition at the appropriate level. 17. Retirement planning/extension of career.
<i>High Performance community</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A culture of excellence. 2. Input into vision, goals and planning. 3. Expert technical and tactical coaching – group and individual. 4. Exposure to cutting-edge, innovative coaching that acknowledges research and overseas best practice. 5. Performance based, individualised, specialist support services. 6. Specific, individualised, periodised training programmes. 7. To be challenged and work to the limit. 8. A focused, high quality training environment. 9. Training opportunities that prepare them for a changing environment and performing under pressure. 10. Opportunity to make decisions, innovate and try new ideas. 11. Regular access to high quality technology, equipment and facilities. 12. Timely and clear technical and performance feedback based on expert analysis – individual and/or group. 13. Clear understanding of 'where they are at' and areas for improvement. 14. A coach who creates a positive environment, provides leadership, and role models expected behaviours and ethics. 15. Recognition of efforts and performance. 16. Having views and opinions valued and respected. 17. Lifestyle and longer-term planning support.