

# Understanding the Athlete

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## Resource: General Information

### Background

SPARC's Coach Development Framework is athlete-centred and embedded in coaching practice. The learning opportunities provided for coaches should match this philosophy. For this module, there is an emphasis on helping coaches understand who they are coaching and providing ideas on how to meet the needs of their athletes.

### Overview

To become a world-class coach for a particular coaching community, coaches need to understand their athletes. Thus this module focuses on enabling coaches to understand athletes' physical, emotional, social and cognitive characteristics and their related holistic needs. (See the Athlete Characteristics and Needs resource). An understanding of their own athletes' individual characteristics, will then lead coaches to better understand how to cater for collective group needs and individual considerations when designing and implementing activities, games and sessions for their athletes.

According to SPARC's Talent Development Framework, which underpins New Zealand coach development, the following values should be considered in any delivery programme or learning activities for developing coaches or athletes:

Programmes and activities should be:

**Athlete focused:** Talent belongs to an individual, not an organisation, parents, coach or any other interested party. Athletes' welfare is paramount and must take precedence over the self-interest of other persons or organisations.

**Holistic:** Responsive to the holistic development and performance needs of athletes and the support of coaches, parents, teachers and organisations influencing those athletes.

**Excellence oriented:** Aim to create and reward a culture of excellence with the ultimate aim of producing winners.

**Long-term:** Support a culture of continuous improvement and foster ongoing development and identification across the athlete's career.

**Sport specific:** Support sport and discipline-specific identification and development methods overlaid across the talent development pathway.

**Collaborative:** Involve close partnerships between key stakeholders.

### Domains of Human Development

The following is a brief definition of the four domains that reflect holistic human development:

**Physical characteristics:** These refer to the growth and changes that occur in a person's body (including genetic, nutritional, and health factors that affect those developments) and motor skills.

**Emotional characteristics:** These refer to mood and sensitivities of athletes. Two dimensions are pleasure/displeasure (characteristics) and activation (the response to the emotion), e.g. embarrassment, anxiety, self-worth.

**Social characteristics:** The social influences that guide athletes e.g. interactions with others in the group, cultural factors, family influences community and attitudes.

**Cognitive characteristics:** How athletes think, decide and learn. These characteristics include perception, imagination, judgement, memory and language.

**Important Note:** All individuals are different and respond in totally different ways to different situations at different times. Successful coaches tend to be those who read the signals (empathy) and adapt their approach to best meet both the collective and individual needs of the athletes they coach.