

RESOURCE DOCUMENT

High performance female rugby players

This document is intended to provide support and guidance for personnel working within the high-performance rugby environments. While some of the information below may be considered as stating the obvious, the intention is to provoke thought and initiate constructive conversations.

Physical Environment

It is essential that our environments encourage our female players to feel safe and appropriately catered for. Facilities play an important part in this. Ensure that your facility has:

- Enough separate female toilets and showers (or private access to male facilities – with clear signage)
- Sanitary bins in bathrooms
- Private spaces for testing etc
- Family spaces (more info below)

Physiology

It is expected that anyone working with high performance female athletes will seek advice from experienced medical professionals about best practice around physiology. Below are some starting points:

Menstrual cycle – understanding the menstrual cycle and its effects is essential for performance and wellbeing. Some points to consider include:

- Having your period is an ergogenic (performance enhancing) aid;
- Being aware of how players feel across the cycle will enable them to train wisely, and on flat days, specific nutrition interventions can be used to negate this flatness;
- The regularity of a female's menstrual cycle is an indicator of health, therefore an irregular cycle can be an indicator of an imbalance. Some females enjoy not having a period and so may not recognise this as a problem;
- Some athletes use the Oral Contraceptive Pill (OCP) to alter their cycle, and therefore may not be aware whether their cycle is normal;
- Encourage players to keep a diary or use an app to assist them with their knowledge of how their cycle is impacting them as an individual which can then be factored into training programmes;
- Every female's period affects them differently, but some common physiological impacts include headaches, fatigue, fluid retention/weight gain, breast tenderness, abdominal pain and mood changes.

Injuries – females tend to have a wider pelvis which means more pressure is put on the knees. This can mean that female players are more prone to knee and lower leg injuries. Considering this, strength and conditioning programmes should incorporate the mechanics of jump/land in programming.

RED-S (Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport) – although not limited to females, the underlying problem of RED-S is an inadequacy of energy to support the range of body functions involved in optimal health and performance.

- RED-S can have severe, long term implications such as impaired fertility, low bone density or osteoporosis.
- Some athletes are susceptible to under fuelling their bodies especially females. This can be due to pressure to lose weight, body dysmorphia, lack of nutritional education and many other reasons
- The following can be indications of RED-S:
 - Insufficient energy to train and perform physically
 - Poor recovery, reduced ability to perform in the future
 - Slowed metabolism, reduced ability to process body fat
 - Reduced concentration and motivation, increased irritability
 - Irregular or absent menstrual cycles – see menstrual cycle above
 - Reduced immunity/increased sickness
 - Disordered eating (see more info below)
- If a player needs to change their body composition for performance, drastic or heavily restrictive diets should be avoided. A long-term plan with a focus on performance rather than a number on the scales can reduce the risk of RED-S.

Medical Staff – there may be topics that female players do not feel comfortable discussing with males. For this reason, it is best practice to have at least one female medical staff member accessible within the high-performance environment.

General Practitioner – players should be encouraged to have their own personal GP, outside of the HP doctor. The GP should be responsible for all care except for rugby specific matters. This is especially important if/when players are considering starting a family and continuing care post rugby.

Family Planning & Pregnancy – planning a family doesn't have to be reserved only for retirement. If or when a player decides they would like to have a family, open communication and planning will assist with this decision. All those working within our environments should be familiar with the NZR Pregnancy Policy (once made official by NZR Board early 2020) to understand the obligations and process around pregnancy and return to play following birth.

Body composition – having conversations around weight with female athletes needs to be carefully considered. Focus on health, strength and conditioning, and a positive body image.

- Nutritionists should be consulted and made available to athletes to provide advice and assistance when body composition changes need to be made.
- Be sensitive with the language you use – focus on high performance and health, rather than fat/weight loss. De-emphasize the importance of weight.
- Don't assume that reducing body fat or weight will enhance performance.
- Conversations should be held in private, with a support person offered and present if appropriate.

Disordered eating – female players are a group particularly at risk for developing eating disorders or engaging in unhealthy eating behaviours.

- Recognize signs and symptoms of eating disorders, (weight loss, fatigue, over-training, refusal to eat with the team, frequent injuries, etc.) Eating-disordered individuals often hide their symptoms out of shame and embarrassment.
- If a player is chronically dieting or showing the above signs and symptoms, she should be referred to a health professional with eating disorder expertise. Early detection increases the likelihood of successful treatment; left untreated the problem may progress to an eating disorder.
- Listen to the language players use when discussing their bodies (e.g. weight loss, gain, appearance) and their relationship with food - this may indicate unhealthy or distorted body image issues
- If there is concern about an athlete's relationship with food, the athlete should be referred to a professional skilled in diagnosing and treating eating disorders.

Culture, Communication and Team Environment

The following points are encouraged in all areas of high-performance sport, regardless of sex, but can be particularly important within our female environments.

Having a supportive, safe culture and team environment that is appealing to the players, and built on strong relationships, empathy and connections is important for performance – at an individual player and team level.

- **Connections** – get to know your players as people first. Who are they away from the rugby field? By showing that you care about players as people, you can start to build trust and connection within the high-performance environment.

- **Empower** – involve players in decision making. This creates ownership of the outcome, but also gives greater understanding to the ‘why are we doing this?’ question.
- **Confidence** – be aware of comments and actions that may undermine a player’s confidence and self-esteem. Building confidence produces high performing players.
- **Motivation** – environments that are led by motivation and inspiration work best, compared to environments with fear and punishment as drivers.
- **Physical contact** – always ask a player first before using physical contact to demonstrate anything with them.
- **Personnel** – consider the gender ratio represented across all levels of personnel within the environment. If a female team, aim for a high percentage of females in order to encourage players to feel safe and included.
- **Guide them but let them guide you too** – ask for feedback on how you interact with players on important issues, and on how things are dealt with in the environment.
- **Inclusivity** – it is important to create a safe environment for all players, creating visibility and respectful discussion around diversity. Open conversations about diverse cultures, sexuality and faith can help achieve this. Relationships within the team are common and management knowing how to set up an inclusive environment, deal with any homophobia, sexual harassment or relationship breakdowns as well as just how you support a couple within a team environment can require additional thought. NZR can support education on these areas.
- **Listen** – create an environment where players feel comfortable to voice an opinion. When asking for feedback, make sure you are ready to listen. Players want to feel that their voice is heard, and they also need to feel that they are safe to give honest feedback without repercussions.
- **Language** – use positive language that is encouraging, empowering and empathetic. Aim for honest feedback to be delivered in a constructive way.
- **Children and Families** – children will often need to attend training or games. It is important to keep children safe and included. Leaving children in the car or hotel rooms alone is not best practice. Communicate with your players to ensure their children are catered for, including potentially identifying or setting up a space for families to use.

- **Meeting spaces** – always use appropriate spaces to have individual meetings with players and make players aware that they can bring a support person with them. This is for protection of both the player and staff.
- **Child protection** – all coaches and staff working with young people should be familiar with the NZR Child or Young Person Protection Guidelines (included in references). This is for protection of both the player and staff.
- **Planning** – open communication around planning creates a better work environment and contributes to health and wellbeing. In the current semi-professional environment, the responsibilities many female players have in relation to work, family, extended family etc, mean it is crucial to be as organised as possible. Therefore, last minute or poorly communicated changes can cause great stress for players. Things to consider are:
 - **Annual plans** – aim to deliver annual plans and any changes/updates early, and with as much advance notice as possible
 - **Change** – changes will occur, so aim to communicate these as soon as possible, even as a ‘heads up’ that changes or more information is still to come
 - **Manage external pressures** – work with players to help them manage external pressures – knowledge of what their life involves away from rugby will help you do this
 - **Reduces stress** – work, family, relationships and financial stability are all topics that can create huge stress for players. Early and clear communication of planning helps players reduce stress and anxiety
 - **Training diaries** – encourage players to use a structured format such as a training diary for planning, scheduling, wellbeing and reporting
 - **Family Planning & Pregnancy** – create a safe and confidential environment to ensure open discussions can take place around family planning, pregnancy and return to play following birth. Players should be made aware that they always have the option of seeking independent advice.
- **Selection** – selection of a team can have a big impact on the emotional wellbeing of individual players, the connections within a team and the entire team culture. Things to consider are:
 - Unsuccessful players should be communicated with before the announcement of a team – in a private and where possible, in person.
 - Contacting unsuccessful players a few days after the announcement is an opportunity to provide feedback when emotion has decreased, and to check in on the player and their wellbeing.
 - Selection is a stressful time. This should be acknowledged and dealt with empathetically.

- Establishing and communicating a clear plan around selection with players regarding how selection and the communication of that selection will take place will help alleviate some of the stress.
- The better you know the players the more you can personalise how the communication of selection and other difficult conversations can take place.

Further Resources

The following resources were used in developing this guideline. We encourage all those working within the high-performance rugby environment to continue to up skill and learn.

- ❖ Female Athlete Health: Interactive Learning www.olympicresources.com/
- ❖ Coaching Female High Performance Athletes <https://www.womeninsport.org/research-and-advice/our-publications/research-and-insight/coaching-female-high-performance-athletes/>
- ❖ The IOC consensus statement: beyond the Female Athlete Triad—Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) <https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/48/7/491>
- ❖ Differences between men's and women's football <https://www.fifa.com/womensworldcup/news/differences-between-men-and-women-football-1458638>
- ❖ Brain Differences Between Genders. Do you ever wonder why men and women think so differently? <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-relationships/201402/brain-differences-between-genders>
- ❖ Empowering Athletic Girls and Women through Education <https://fuelaotearoa.co.nz/>
- ❖ Overuse Injuries in Female Athletes <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2213798/>
- ❖ NZR Child Protection Implementation Guidelines document <http://www.communityrugby.co.nz/safe-play/child-protection>
- ❖ Sports Coach UK and the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF) have produced a series of factsheets aimed at coaches who coach women or who are interested in coaching them in the future <https://www.womeninsport.org/research-and-advice/our-publications/research-and-insight/coaching-female-high-performance-athletes/>
- ❖ *ROAR: How to Match Your Food and Fitness to Your Unique Female Physiology for Optimum Performance, Great Health, and a Strong, Lean Body for Life*, Dr Stacy Simms, 2016
- ❖ NZ Rugby Pregnancy Policy – link to finalised document to be inserted once ratified by NZR board.