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Keeping our Olympians cool, calm and bug-free

Theme:
Leadership

 Keeping our Olympians cool, calm and bug-free

Co-authored by Suzanne McFadden, LockerRoom

Around 5.30 each morning in the Olympic village in Paris, the New Zealand health team will head out for a run or go to the gym, warming up for their own fierce competition – the daily sports quiz.

It’s a serious event, says Dr Sarah Beable, who won gold in the Kiwi quiz contest at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

“It’s very competitive,” says Beable, the deputy health lead in the New Zealand performance support team in Paris. “It’s my favourite part of the morning, and I think the culture we create in the health team feeds into other spaces as well.”

This is just the start of long days for the New Zealand performance support team, who will often work into the early hours of the morning to help athletes be at their best for Olympic competition.

In Paris, the Kiwi athletes will face wily opponents in respiratory illnesses, gastro bugs, bedbugs and heat waves. But the health team around them are more than prepared for every scenario.

In a Covid-afflicted Olympics three years ago, the Kiwi team made themselves a reputation as one of the healthiest in Tokyo; prevention, they say, gave them a competitive edge.

In line with Paris being the first gender-equal Olympic Games, the 20 health professionals in the New Zealand performance support team going to Paris includes 12 women. Six are High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ) staff, seconded to the NZ Olympic Team to look after the athletes.

LockerRoom spoke to three of the women bound for Paris.

Dr Sarah Beable – Deputy health lead

We’re all itching to know – will our Olympians have unwelcome bedmates in Paris?

Beable laughs: “The public is quite obsessed with bedbugs, and yes we’ve written a protocol for the athletes about them.”

But what concerns her more is keeping our athletes healthy leading up to and through the Olympic competition – especially when Kiwis travel further than most of their rivals just to get to Paris.

“The more time zones you travel through, the more chance of illness – we’ll have five times the risk of respiratory illness. It’s not just Covid to be wary of, there’s influenza and gastro bugs too.

“An injury can rule out an athlete, but an illness can take out half a team. Our team manaaki [support] is that it’s about the greater team.”

Athletes will be given masks, hand sanitiser and travel supplements, and the health team will clean all the surfaces in the New Zealand rooms before the athletes arrive.

“It can be triggering going back to being really careful with distancing, having outside meetings and wearing masks, but it’s our health and performance advantage and we had such reduced rates of illness in Tokyo and at the Birmingham Commonwealth Games,” Beable says.

Gastro bugs are the second most infective illnesses in a Games village, after respiratory lurgies and before skin complaints. “The worst situations are when people don’t tell anyone they’re sick and then the whole team come down gastro, which is devastating performance-wise,” Beable says.

And there’s also a major emphasis now on supporting the athletes’ mental health. “It’s something we’ve gone on the front foot with – checking in regularly with the athletes,” says Beable. “It’s so hard to win Olympic gold and it can be a really tough experience for them if they don’t perform to their expectations. So we’ve put a lot of work into helping with their mental wellbeing.”

The core health team will set up their own clinic within the village for the Kiwi athletes (although larger sports like rowing, cycling, sailing and sevens have their own medics with them).

“We have a reception, and a nurse, and we’re basically self-sufficient, bringing in all our equipment and medication – that left New Zealand shores in a container four months ago. If there’s an urgent situation, the village has a medical clinic with MRIs and x-rays,” Beable says.

Another challenge will be geographical. Around half the New Zealand team will be competing at satellite venues.

“That means the health delivery is spread out too,” Beable says. “Fortunately everyone has become used to telehealth now, but it’s been challenging working out how we can give the best physio and massage support when it’s not an easy city to zip across.”

This will be the second Olympics for Beable, who’s the medical director for Snowsports NZ in Queenstown. Her first Olympics was Rio 2016 and she’s worked at three Commonwealth Games (her mum, Barbara Poulsen, was a New Zealand field athlete at three Commonwealth Games).

“I go into it with excitement but apprehension,” says Beable, who loves practising medicine in the New Zealand tracksuit and jandals rather than a white coat.

But it’s often the team’s support staff who get sick at the Games, she says, working overtime to care for the athletes: “We talk to them about banking as much sleep as they can, because it’s a superpower of the immune system.”

Three TV screens in the clinic will be tuned into Kiwis in competition. “We try really hard not to get too caught up in the performances, but you know them all so it’s quite hard not to get emotional for them,” Beable says.

Christel Dunshea-Mooij – Performance nutritionist

A highlight of every Olympian’s experience is to eat with thousands of other athletes in the village dining hall (an old, 200m-long electrical power plant where 45,000 meals will be served each day).

But Christel Dunshea-Mooij, the performance nutritionist with the New Zealand team, won’t be encouraging Kiwi athletes to eat every meal there.

“The food hall is exciting. It’s catering for 15,000 people, it’s all hustle and bustle, and there are five different themes of food. But it comes with risks,” she says.

“It’s decision-making time, which requires skill when you’re a high-performance athlete. And there will be airborne diseases around as well.”

So Dunshea-Mooij has shipped off a wide array of food, blenders, mixers and slushie machines to set up a Kiwi kitchen in the New Zealand team HQ. “We want to keep things simple for the athletes, so having snacks and easy familiar food options saves a long walk to the dining hall,” she says.

“In Rio, the rowing team powered through the Pic’s peanut butter and Weetbix when they arrived from training in Europe.”

Dunshea-Mooij, part of the preparation and recovery team in Paris, also prepared 1500 snack bags athletes can dip into for their recovery. They were part of the two containers filled with food and gym equipment, ice baths and pools for the physiology area that left here last month.

“We try to create an environment that makes the athletes feel at home, because we know that’s beneficial for performance and recovery,” says Dunshea-Mooij, who’s head of performance nutrition at HPSNZ.

“We know it could be very hot in Paris, so we have the slushies there for pre-cooling. [There’s a strong likelihood of a heatwave hitting the city in July and August, and the athletes village has been built without air conditioning.]

“We’re providing services any of our athletes can use as part of their normal recovery. But it’s very important people don’t change what they’ve been doing before their pinnacle event – if someone has never used an ice bath, this is not the time to start.”

Paris will be Dunshea-Mooij’s fourth Olympic Games, part of the team since she worked with rowing at the 2012 London Games.

“It’s a privilege to work in such a unique environment,” she says. “I really like assisting athletes – that’s what drives me. It’s hard work – you’re head down, bum up the whole time. But it’s that unseen work that helps our athletes, and I absolutely love it.”

Dr Helen Fulcher – Doctor

One of five doctors in the NZ performance support team, Dr Helen Fulcher sees her role as being part of the Kiwi Olympians’ “foundation”.

“We need to be nurturing and supporting to help the person to flourish. We’re not the shiny stuff – that’s the athletes. Our space is in the background. If we’re not needed, that’s brilliant,” she says.

Fulcher believes the Māori wellbeing model of Te Whare Tapa Whā (the meeting house with four walls) can be applied when an athlete is suddenly struck down in Paris.

“We can’t guarantee they won’t get injured or sick the night before their competition. But what we do is be the foundation, and help bolster those other walls to hold up a listing wall for long enough to get through their race for gold,” she says.

A mum of three sons, Fulcher’s other job is the specialist female health doctor at HPSNZ. And she expects that aside from the musculoskeletal injuries and traditional respiratory and gastro infections you see at Games, she will see health issues affecting women.

“Inevitably, we will see heavy periods or impacted tampons; stuff that’s slightly unpredictable but can be pretty devastating for someone,” Fulcher says.

“But in the last couple of years, we’ve shifted into prevention and health promotion, certainly in women’s health, by managing those kinds of things a lot sooner. Hopefully we’ve come some way with that.

“I’ll be working across all sports and all athletes; anyone who needs me, I’m here for them. But sometimes it’s nice to have a female GP, who’s possibly had children or understands where they’re coming from, who they can talk to about things that are really personal and vulnerable.”

And Fulcher is prepared to be available at any time, day or night.


“We can have dinner at midnight if we have to because we’re not the ones getting up and performing on the world stage the next day,” she says. “We know how hard the athletes have worked to get here and what they’ve sacrificed – we want to help them hold that joy and feel incredible.”


This is Fulcher’s first Olympics, though she was a doctor to the New Zealand team at the 2009 Australian Youth Olympics in Sydney. They had a bedbug issue there, too.


“Bedbugs have been around forever. Some people can get allergic reactions and skin infections from their bites, and psychologically it can be brutal,” she says. “But they’re not dangerous and they don’t pass on blood-borne infections.

“We’ll tell the athletes what to look for before they settle in for the night. And tell them ‘don’t let these bugs take away from this amazing experience you’re about to have’.”

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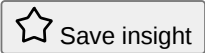
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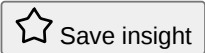
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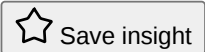
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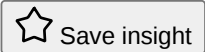
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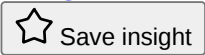
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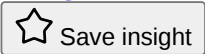
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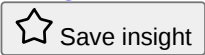
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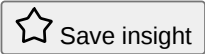
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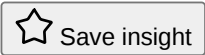
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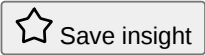
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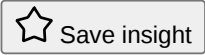
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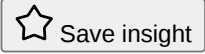
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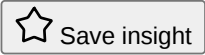
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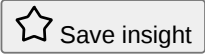
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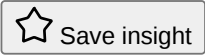
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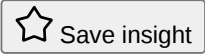
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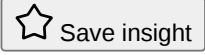


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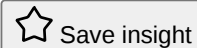
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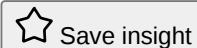


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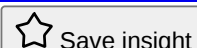


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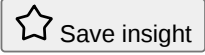
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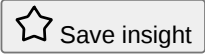
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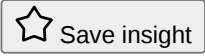
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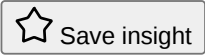
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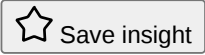
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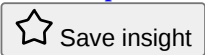
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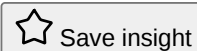
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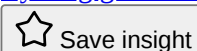
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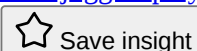
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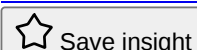
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