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# Te Hāpaitanga: Women breaking boundaries and reshaping sports leadership in New Zealand

Theme:  
Leadership

 Te Hāpaitanga: Women breaking boundaries and reshaping sports leadership in New Zealand

Co-authored by Luke Kirkness, NZ Herald

**The pursuit of excellence knows no gender in professional sport yet [female coaches](#) have long faced an uphill battle towards recognition and success. But a groundbreaking initiative, Te Hāpaitanga, is rewriting the playbook, one that embraces the richness of [New Zealand's cultural tapestry](#) and recognises that [diversity](#) isn't just a buzzword – it's the key to unlocking untapped potential in the coaching realm.**

Te Hāpaitanga – the act of elevating, lifting and empowering – emerges as a beacon of change in the professional coaching landscape, [challenging traditional norms](#) and fostering diversity.

At its core, Te Hāpaitanga isn't just about training coaches or [growing the talent pool](#) of female coaches; it's about cultivating a community of resilient, empowered women ready to tackle head-on the challenges of high-performance sport. Its objectives are as ambitious as they are noble, seeking to [dismantle the barriers](#) that have long hindered female coaches from reaching their full potential.

It's urgently needed in a landscape where high-profile coaching roles remain overwhelmingly dominated by men. The glaring absence of women in top coaching positions, exemplified by the fact that all 16 nominees for the [Halberg Coach of the Year](#) were male, underscores the systemic barriers and biases that persist within the industry. Despite the undeniable talent and expertise that women bring to the table, their representation in coaching roles continues to lag behind. Te Hāpaitanga addresses this disparity head-on by providing women with the necessary support, resources, and opportunities to excel in high-performance coaching, thereby challenging the status quo and paving the way for a more inclusive and diverse coaching community.

From one-on-one mentorship with seasoned high-performance coaches to immersive residential workshops, the 18-month holistic approach is designed to foster growth, accelerate development, and forge lasting connections within a community of like-minded coaches. Importantly, Te Hāpaitanga is inclusive, welcoming women from diverse backgrounds, including former athletes, mothers, and all ethnicities to apply.

Born out of the Women in High Performance Sport (WHPS) pilot project, Te Hāpaitanga is not only [reshaping the future of coaching](#) in New Zealand but paving the way for [greater success on the international stage](#), according to High Performance Sport New Zealand's (HPSNZ) head of high-performance coaching Daryl Gibson, himself a former [All Black](#).

"Often the barrier the women are facing to move forward [as coaches or managers] and contest positions at the highest level is experience. I think for our aspiring women coaches, in rugby in particular, it's going to take time to develop that experience and contest taking those positions. If I looked back at Super Rugby and the coaches when it went professional in 1996 compared to now and how coaching has evolved, it takes a lot of time. That's the challenge.

"One of our goals is to increase the diversity of our coaching workforce. Not only through gender and ethnicity, but the sheer volume of candidates and depth we have for different positions. We're a small country, we don't have a huge number of coaches and sports, so increasing the capability of our workforce and diversity of that is incredibly important. The competitive advantage of having people from different genders and ethnicities is the unique insights they provide. Diversity of thought across the coaching team and programme and making sure there's a pathway for those people is important."

Te Hāpaitanga emerges from a landscape where women's voices and leadership in high-performance sports [were underrepresented](#). In October 2018, then minister for sport and recreation, Grant Robertson, announced \$2.7 million to fund the WHPS pilot to help resolve the significant underrepresentation of females in sports leadership and coaching roles and the first Te Hāpaitanga cohort started in September 2020.

"Female athletes make a massive contribution to New Zealand's success on the international sporting stage, yet women remain significantly underrepresented in high-performance leadership and coaching roles," Robertson said in a statement at the time.

"The \$2.7m being invested through HPSNZ seeks to change this by creating the right environment and opportunities for far greater representation of women in high-performance leadership and coaching positions.

"As a sector, and as a Government, we need to keep leading [positive conversations around gender equity in sport](#), while also continuing to challenge poor behaviours and attitudes."

The initial pilot was deemed a success with 11 of 14 women participating either changing their roles or taking on more responsibility in their sport since the beginning of Te Hāpaitanga.

At the time, only four women were in high-performance director roles across 28 different national sporting organisations (NSOs). That number has increased to 12 across 48 NSOs, increasing from 14 per cent to 27 per cent.

HPSNZ director of high-performance Steve Tew says the rewards will be properly reaped further down the line by the NSOs.

“We can provide the technical stuff that a programme can deliver – education, confidence, testing, challenges, but we need the environment for people to go back into and evolve.

“My personal belief is that coaching has been a very competitive advantage for New Zealand for a long time. For some reason, we produce high-performance coaches across a range of sports that is disproportionate to our population, you only need to look at the influence of New Zealanders around the world.

“This is one of the things I’ve been asked to explain around the world: How does New Zealand perform so well for its size? It’s a great environment, we’ve got a unique ethnic and cultural mix, but ultimately coaching is a critical component of any success story. If we get the coaching right, we give the athletes the chance to be the best we can be.”

Tew, a former New Zealand Rugby Union chief executive, acknowledges the programme’s role as a catalyst for change.

“Sport, I don’t think anyone pretends this hasn’t been the case, is largely the domain of men but we’re changing that and have seen a lot of progress in the last 10 to five years but there’s still work to be done.

“Sport mirrors the rest of society. I think, a lot of people are very progressive and thinking ahead and knowing that diversity, be that around board tables and coaching tables, are a strength but there are others who are slower to come to that. If that’s happening in a broader society context then it will happen in sport as well.

“Some of the [old-fashioned views](#) of the world still exist but we’re breaking down those barriers and the best way we can do that is to give women the opportunity for them to be successful.”

As the programme prepares to welcome its fourth cohort, the stories of its alumni serve as testaments to its impact. Through resilience, empowerment, and a commitment to diversity, Te Hāpaitanga is rewriting the playbook and paving the way for a future where women coaches thrive in high-performance sports.

*In the next instalment of our series tomorrow, we find out how Te Hāpaitanga empowers and transforms its participants.*

**[Luke Kirkness is an Online Sports Editor](#) for the NZ Herald. He previously covered consumer affairs for the Herald and was an assistant news director in the Bay of Plenty. He won Student Journalist of the Year in 2019.**

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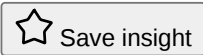
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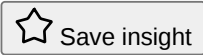
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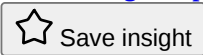
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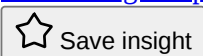
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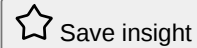
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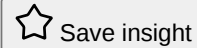


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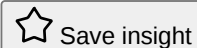


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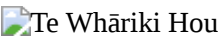
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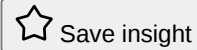
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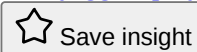
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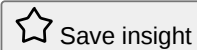
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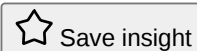
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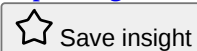


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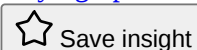
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