

Running Good Trials and Selections



BALANCE IS BETTER
THE HOME OF YOUTH SPORT IN NEW ZEALAND

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We know that trials and selection processes in youth sport can be a hot topic for many sports administrators, coaches, parents and athletes.

And despite trials and selection processes being a significant part of the youth sport landscape, a quick search of the internet uncovers very little useful information about what ‘good’ might look like.

In this guide, we unpack some of the key considerations for running successful trials and selection processes in youth sport, including:

1.

The pitfalls of trials and selection processes in youth sport

2.

Being clear on why you are using a selection process and what you are selecting for

3.

The key elements of effective trial and selection processes

4.

What taking a participant-centred approach means in the context of trials and selection processes

N.B. This guide shouldn't be used to inform guidance on selection processes in high-performance sport contexts, where there are [other available resources to support that](#).

1.

The pitfalls of trials and selection processes in youth sport

Before exploring best practices for running trials and selection processes, it's important that those who lead them are aware of (and contend with) some of the negative consequences, particularly for athletes.

Good processes can mitigate some of these consequences, but still, as leaders (and coaches) in sport, we need to reconcile the fact that trials and selections are a type of structure to help adults make decisions about inclusion and exclusion, for example:

- Who does and does not get to play?
- Who does and does not get access to better coaching?
- Who does and does not get to go on a trip?

That's not to say we shouldn't have trials or selection processes. There are good reasons for trials and selections, which include:

- Sport is inherently about competition, and at some point within sporting pathways, it's important to ensure there are frameworks, structures and processes in place to identify, support and celebrate our best athletes.
- Within youth sport, stratification by skill level has its merits because it supports like-skill level to compete with like-skill level. And as per the tenets of [Self Determination Theory](#), an environment that is underpinned by 'even competition' is conducive to creating an intrinsically motivating sports experience for athletes.



But, as stated earlier, we need to be mindful that there are a number of negative consequences, particularly for athletes and participants, associated with trials and selection processes.

The flaws of early talent identification

Research points towards there being little evidence to suggest that child success in sport is indicative of adult success. Consequently, a fixation on trying to identify talent too early comes at the detriment of excluding potential talent later on.

The impact of non-selection

One of the primary negative consequences associated with trials and selection processes is the impact of non-selection. Non-selection can have a number of impacts on athletes, which include:

- Athletes who are not selected can feel like they have failed, or that they are not good enough to be part of the team/group. This feeling of failure or not being good enough can lead to a loss of confidence and a decrease in self-esteem. In some cases, athletes may even give up on a sport altogether.
- Athletes who are not selected can feel isolated from their peers, particularly if they have been training and competing with them for an extended period of time prior. This isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness and social anxiety. It might also lead to dropping out if they feel they are no longer able to connect with their peers through sport.
- Athletes who are not selected can feel ostracised by the coach, which can lead to a loss of motivation and enjoyment.



Cognitive biases of selectors

An important factor to consider when running trials and selection processes are the **cognitive biases** that selectors and coaches might bring to the process.

Some cognitive biases that are heightened during trials and selection processes include:

Relative age effect

The tendency for athletes born in the early months of the eligibility cut-off to be overrepresented at age-group level competitions. This is because they are, on average, larger and more physically mature than their peers. This can mean they are more 'effective' in the game at that moment in time. As such coaches/selectors who confer current physical fitness/ability with future potential (or outcomes) are more likely to favour these athletes.

Similarity bias

The tendency to favour athletes whom we are more familiar with, that we have worked with previously, etc.

Confirmation bias

The tendency to look for information that reinforces our beliefs about something/someone (yet ignore or not value information that might challenge that belief)

Roster management bias

The tendency to select athletes based on their ability to fill a specific role on the team, rather than their overall ability as an athlete.



Incomplete picture

Another important factor to consider is that trials and selection processes can only provide a snapshot of an athlete's ability at a specific point in time. And that snapshot is very likely an imperfect picture given the time and resource constraints that are likely impacting youth sports coaches and selectors.

Furthermore, it's important to remember that athletes (and people in general) are constantly evolving and developing, which means that the picture we get from trials and selections will never be the complete picture.

Putting out fires and dealing with the fallout

It's also important to remember that trials and selection processes can often be a breeding ground for drama, conflict and problems. This is particularly the case when there are large numbers of athletes vying for a limited number of positions. We find that poor communication is often the biggest reason underpinning conflict and drama arising out of trials and selections (more on this below).

Are trials and selection processes even appropriate?

For the list of reasons outlined above (and others) it's critical that sport leaders and administrators critically reflect on when and where they use trials and selection processes and ask themselves, are they appropriate or effective for the wider outcomes that I'm trying to achieve? In effect, this is about getting clear on your purpose for using trials and selection processes (and not falling back on 'doing what we've always done').



2.

Being clear on why you are using a selection process and what you are selecting for

Being clear on the purpose of trials and selection processes is important, as this will help to ensure that everyone involved (from athletes to coaches to parents to administrators) is aware of what the process is trying to achieve.

- Are you using a trial process to select a team for an upcoming tournament?
- Or are you using it as part of a larger talent identification and development process?
- Are you looking to identify athletes for a specific position or role on the team?

It's also important to be clear on what you are selecting for.

- Are you looking for athletes with raw athleticism?
- Or athletes who have the potential to develop into something more?
- Are you looking for athletes who will fit into a specific system or style of play?



In considering the purpose of youth sports trials and selection, it's worth pausing to reflect on a more fundamental question – what constitutes success in youth sport?

- Is it about short-term winning?
- Developing athletes for a programme?
- Is it about providing positive and constructive athlete development experiences for young people?
- Keeping as many people in sport as possible?

These are all somewhat different versions of success, and depending on how you think about them (even subconsciously), your choices around trials and selections (and what they appear like, and the impact it has on those involved) might vary.

For more information on what success can mean in youth sport, [click here to explore the Balance is Better Principles](#).

Balance is Better Principles

1.

Safe, fair and inclusive

All New Zealanders have the right to participate in sport in a safe, fair and inclusive environment.

2.

Quality experiences, regardless of ability or motivations

All young people should receive a quality sport experience, irrespective of the level at which they are involved.

3.

Bold and courageous leadership

Bold and courageous leadership at national, regional and local levels is required to design and deliver quality youth sport participation and development opportunities.

4.

Working together

Aotearoa's sport sector must work collaboratively to encourage the widest possible change for the wellbeing and sport participation of young New Zealanders.

5.

Collective attitudinal change

Sport leaders, coaches, administrators, parents, and caregivers involved in youth sport must collectively lead attitudinal change.

6.

Skill development for all

All young people should be offered participation and skill development opportunities.

7.

Encourage variety

All young people should be supported to participate in a range of activities and play multiple sports.

8.

Balance getting better with doing too much

Adults need to proactively monitor and manage the workload (intensity and volume) of motivated young people to mitigate the risks of overtraining and overloading.

9.

Talent ID occurs later

Talent Identification should occur later in young people's development; reviewing the role and nature of national and regional representative selections and tournaments is an important step in ensuring elite sport attitudes and practices are introduced at developmentally appropriate times.

3.

Key elements of effective trial and selection processes

So assuming you have a clear on the purpose of your trials and selections, how do you ensure that the process itself runs as well as it possibly can?



Below we offer some considerations for people in charge of leading trials and selection processes, including how to mitigate some of the pitfalls and challenges we mentioned earlier.

Establishing clear objectives, assessment criteria and process

Clear criteria for making selection decisions about athletes that are linked to thinking about purpose (as outlined in the previous section) are important. This might include thinking about what athletes need to demonstrate during trials, and how that relates to the team or programme philosophy.

Coaches and selections should meet before trials to discuss this, and confirm:

- What are the objectives of the trials?
- What specific criteria will be used to assess and select athletes (and are these criteria age and stage appropriate)?
- Considerations to minimise some of the inherent flaws that trials and selection processes have? Examples might include, gathering information on athletes from other coaches; running assessments over a longer time period to 'widen the snapshot'.
- Who will be responsible for making decisions about which athletes are selected (and how will disagreements between selectors be handled)?
- What kind of feedback will be given to athletes during and after trials?
- How will decisions be communicated to athletes and parents?
- Any other considerations and contexts that are important to surface, for example, coaches' availability, upcoming challenges to the season, etc.

Pre-trial meetings are also a good opportunity to surface some of the cognitive biases that are common in selectors and coaches and to discuss ways in which these biases might be mitigated.

Running a fair, objective and organised process

There are a number of different ways to create a fair and objective trials and selection process, but some key things to consider include:

- Reiterating selection criteria in a clear and concise manner to athletes and parents (handouts are a good way to support this)
- Using multiple independent observers/assessors to help minimise biases
- Allowing athletes to trial/be assessed in multiple ways (e.g. through physical testing, skill-based drills, game-based scenarios, etc.)

With regards to organisation, consider:

- Having a clear and concise plan documented and shared with everyone involved in running the trials
- Make sure all the necessary resources are in place
- Having a contingency plan for things that might go wrong (weather, facility availability)
- Assigning clear roles and responsibilities to everyone involved

Communicating effectively with everyone involved

As we mentioned earlier, communication is key when it comes to managing trials and selection processes. This includes communicating before and during:

- The purpose of the trials and selection process
- The criteria that will be used to make decisions
- How will the athletes be assessed?
- When and where trials will take place?
- Who will be involved in making decisions?

It's also important to communicate decisions effectively, and this means being clear about the rationale behind the decisions. This can often be the hardest part of the process, as it's not always possible to please everyone.

However, being open and honest about the reasons for decisions (even if they are unpopular) is crucial for maintaining trust and credibility. We've found that organisations that provide lots of communication to athletes and parents ahead of trials (e.g. in the forms of emails and workshops), benefit from the transparency and have fewer challenges and appeals upon the completion of trials.



Following up after the process has finished

The trials and selection process doesn't end when the last athlete has been assessed. It's important to follow up with everyone involved, whether they were successful or not.

This includes:

- Thanking everyone who took part
- Providing feedback to athletes on their performance
- Analysing the process to see if there are any areas that could be improved

Deselection

Special consideration should be given to the process and manner you will handle deselection.

Key questions to consider include:

- How and who will communicate with those that are deselected?
- Will there be additional opportunities provided for them to continue to play, and/or receive skill development support?
- Are there opportunities for re-entry into the programme/team?



4.

What taking a participant-centred approach means in the context of trials and selection processes

Participant – or athlete-centred thinking should underpin both the rationale for and the design of trials and selection processes.

Consider some of the following questions:

- How will these processes aid the long-term development of the athlete?
- How will these processes aid the likely retention of the athlete in the sport?

Ideally, trials and selection processes are part of a wider sport programme that is designed in a manner that reflects the [Balance is Better principles](#).

Some of the key focus areas relevant here include:

- How do you ensure all young people are offered skill development opportunities?
- When is the right time and age to bring in talent identification (and therefore different types of trial and selection structures)?



When it comes to trials and selection processes, some key ways you can take a participant-centred approach include:

Balance short-term and long-term outcomes

Short-term outcomes like winning a youth sporting tournament shouldn't be the priority. There is no doubt that winning a tournament, or learning through competition will be of benefit to those involved. Whether it's winning or failing, these results can help with critical life lessons beyond sport.

However, in a youth sport context, coaches and system leaders should look at the bigger picture.

- Are participants returning every season?
- Are participants getting an appropriate level of challenge in the environment?
- Regardless of level, is the environment fun?
- Is the participant experience encouraging engagement in sport for life?

Ensure there are skill development opportunities for everyone

One typical consequence of trials and selection processes is that 'selected athletes' then benefit from access to better and/or more coaching support. Subsequently, we often see a self-perpetuating effect in youth sport, where these athletes' skills develop quicker than their non-selected peers, and as such, they become more likely to get selected at the next trial or selection.

Coaches and sport leaders and administrators should consider how they can continue to keep the 'net cast wide' and provide all aspirational athletes with quality skill development opportunities.



Consider opportunities for reentry

If an athlete is de-selected, sports should have a clear process around the criteria for re-entry. Ensuring athletes have an exit plan and some key objectives to focus on in order to return to the next trial in a better position is good practice. It's often the case that when an athlete exits a program they may not have access to the same quality of coaching or support that their peers who remain in the environment do.

In order to ensure that selection remains fluid and accessible, those who are deselected should clearly understand why they weren't selected at this moment in time, what areas they need to work on, what support they can access and what strengths they have that they could continue to develop.

Account for late maturers

It's important to remember that young people grow and mature at different rates. And while young people who are more physically advanced than their peers often enjoy more success, this is not necessarily an indicator of long-term success – particularly given that their peers will eventually catch up and they'll likely lose those physical advantages.

Consequently, selectors must strive not to disregard late maturers, and coaches must help young athletes to develop technical skills and not become reliant on their physical attributes.

Don't give up on troublemakers too soon

It's important to understand the socio-cultural context that surrounds every individual participant. Often, it's easy to look at the technically gifted athlete who needs support in their physical development or the strong and fast athlete who needs to improve tactically.

However, when it comes to disruptive behaviour, or athletes deemed to be challenging characters, coaches or selectors can often be put off. This challenge needs to be seen like any other in coaching.

- First of all, why is the athlete behaving this way?
- What is their home life or school environment?
- Do they have some challenges away from the sporting environment?

Understanding the reasons for poor behaviour or difficult characters will enable sports coaches and the programs they operate within to support athletes to overcome these challenges. After all, we should be utilising sport as a vehicle to develop good people as well as good athletes.



Ensure there are sport opportunities for everyone

As discussed earlier in this guide, trials and selection processes act as a structure to work out what participants are included and what participants are excluded. At a system level, when we think about the cumulative effect of trials and selections, the analogy of a funnel is apt to illustrate how a proportion of participants are promoted and continue to be included in the system at each stage (i.e. each subsequent trial or selection). But there is a flip-side here too. Where some participants are promoted / continue to be included, others are not.

While trials and selection processes might be good structures for finding the best talent (in order to support outcomes based on winning) they arguably aren't a great structure for incentivising retention of participants in a system, i.e. *"keeping them in the game"*. For most sports participants, elite-level competition will not be the reality. As such, designing systems that account for the 1% and exclude the 99% are flawed.

With this in mind, two important considerations for sport leaders and administrators are:

- When trials and selection process are implemented, ensure that they are appropriate for the type of sport opportunity.
- Take a wide look across your sports programme, and consider if you provide enough (and the right type of) opportunities to meet the various needs and abilities of the participants in your community.

Ultimately, when it comes to trials and selection processes, we have a responsibility to be clear in what we are aiming to achieve (for the participants), why we are conducting trials, what the entry (or re-entry) criteria are and how we are going to adequately support those who are not selected or are deselected.

By ensuring an environment focused on fun, appropriate challenge and the right level of stretch and support for the ability of those involved, we can provide a fantastic sporting experience for all involved.



In Summary

- Without clear messaging, trials can be frustrating for parents and demotivating for kids. It's essential that coaches and selectors provide adequate communication.
- We should try not to introduce competitive selection processes too early. The correct time will vary from one sport to another.
- A growing number of organisations are prioritising character strengths over physical and technical attributes.
- It's important that selectors understand what they're looking for, and how they measure it, in order to provide consistent, fair, and effective assessments.
- Athlete registration is a key part of preparing for a trial process and getting to know the participants.
- Organisers should strive to create welcoming and supportive trial environments.
- Traditional, one-off trial events may not be the best approach for some sports, organisations, or groups of athletes; sometimes an ongoing process of coaching and observation will be more suitable.
- The priorities are participation and development: coaches must strike a balance between competitive team selections and providing adequate opportunities for all young athletes.
- We must strive to keep sport accessible. This means maintaining engagement for as long as possible, creating multiple entry and exit points after trials begin, and providing participatory opportunities for all individuals who want them.





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