



Water Polo

AUSTRALIA

National Performance Framework

2021 – 2032

Revised Version

For Players, Coaches, Parents & Guardians, Referees,
Officials, Administrators and Staff around Australia

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the National Performance Framework (NPF) is to provide players, coaches, parents, referees and administrators at all levels of Water Polo with an understanding of the overall framework around their journey as an aspiring player, coach or referee within Water Polo in Australia. Success in sport, is rarely if ever linear. The path is undulating and full of challenges and opportunities. The NPF attempts to provide a framework within which members of the water polo community can reach their potential, based on their ability, attitude, characteristics and performances. This journey will vary for every individual, and the framework is designed to cater for that, with the ultimate goal of producing consistently successful Sharks and Stingers teams.

Australian teams compete in the top tier of international competition and have demonstrated historically that we can be highly competitive in both men's and women's competition. Australia is currently the only nation in the top 10 which does not have a professional domestic league, has a relatively small player base and limited funding and funding opportunities. While none of these factors alone prevent a country being competitive on the global stage, when combined they create a significant challenge. The National Performance Framework seeks to optimise the identification, development and retention of talent, enhance the quality of the training and competition environment within Australia and to harness and optimise the human and financial resources available to water polo in Australia.

The National Performance Framework (NPF) seeks to integrate the key components to ensure that collectively the system produces exceptional outcomes and maximises the limited resources available. Those key components are:

1. The National Institute Network (NIN)
2. Water Polo Australia's National Programs including the National Age Group Program (NAGP)
3. AWL Teams
4. Clubs
5. State Association Development Programs (where applicable) and State Teams.
6. WPA Alumni and Community

The National Performance Framework (NPF) plays a key role in the delivery of the National Strategic Framework (NSF) and is linked via the mission to *“create success today, to inspire tomorrow, and be a team for life”*, and through Strategic Element 4: Perform which states the ambition to *“Provide an aligned performance framework to create sustainable success”*.



The National Performance Framework (NPF) is aligned with the NSF through its purpose and objectives described below:

Purpose	To identify, develop and optimise Australia's best talent to excel on the international stage, in a manner that optimises the involvement of key stakeholders and inspires future generations.
Objective 1	To develop and communicate through all National programs the standards , culture and characteristics of Australian teams to provide clarity and consistency for all existing and emerging national team players.
Objective 2	To develop and continually refine the understanding of the characteristics of successful performers and utilise this information to inform the talent identification and development processes for players, coaches and referees at all levels.
Objective 3	To implement a thorough, affordable, collaborative National Age Group Program to facilitate the development of identified players, coaches and referees with the attributes to produce sustainable and successful international performances.
Objective 4	To effectively integrate all elements of the Performance system that contribute to the development of successful Olympic teams.

Definitions

Australian Water Polo League (AWL). The competition known as the Australian Water Polo League (AWL) is referred to through this document as the **“AWL”**. Entities participating in the AWL are referred to as **“AWL Teams”**, to differentiate from all Clubs across Australia.

Clubs refers to the term “Clubs” is used more broadly, in relation to all Water Polo Clubs around Australia, including Clubs who participate in the AWL.

Confirmation Process refers to a process identified talent will go through as part of the National Age Group Program. This will include a range of aspects including quantitative testing, observation of players in training and competition opportunities with their peers and in coaches developing a greater understanding of the person behind the player and the characteristics they possess. This is not a perfect science and is multi-factorial and includes a degree of subjectivity.

Framework. The use of the term **“Framework”** as opposed to **“Pathway”**, is a significant shift in philosophy and has been done consciously to remove the notion that a **“Pathway”** is something you need to “get on” as early as possible or else you will miss out. The **“Framework”** refers to the essential supporting structures placed around the Talent and includes WPA, State and Club programs, competitions and the various process and systems that underpin these critical elements.

Additionally, the framework also supports multiple entry and exit points to capture Talent at various points to ensure that late developers or late starters are not overlooked, or one missed opportunity through injury, exams, life or work, is not the end of their water polo journey.

Olympic Success – refers to the visible and measurable outcome of the NPF, however it is understood that only a small number of players, coaches and referees will reach this level. Be that as it may, many of the characteristics identified as increasing the likelihood of success at this level are closely aligned with those that contribute to the retention of people in water polo more broadly, these being: resilience, perseverance, competitiveness and the desire to be part of a team.

There will be a concerted effort to retain Talent within the sport regardless of the level they ultimately reach and equally to minimise the number players, coaches and referees who leave the sport prematurely. The WPA Performance Unit adhere to the rule of three principle. WPA ultimately would like to have three (3) genuine candidates for every spot on a national team, every coaching role called for and each refereeing opportunity that comes up at National or International level. Three people vying for each position will drive the performance culture, the training and preparation standard and give the selection or appointment panels choice.

Talent. The term **“Talent”** is used broadly and refers to PLAYERS, COACHES and REFEREES (in most contexts, as there are some elements specifically related to players only).

Competing Demands

In any complex system, there are several polarities or tensions that need to be managed. Polarities refer to their being multiple solutions or options that could be justifiably implemented; however, they are interdependent, meaning choosing one path, creates an opportunity cost or has a combination of positive and negative impacts on the system. Polarities exist on a continuous infinity loop and WPA must manage the tension between those polarities, their respective positives and negatives, and ensure that all parties are aware of the implications for movement around this loop. Rarely is there a right or wrong answer but there are consequences for the decisions made and action taken. The following is a non- exhaustive list of polarities to be managed in relation to the National Performance Framework.

Option A		Option B
Centralised programs	and	Decentralised programs
Underage National team success	and	Olympic success
Competition for the best young talent	and	Delaying selection and investment in talent
Anecdotal experience	and	Evidence based approach
History	and	Future
Program scope, competition opportunities	and	Financial sustainability and capacity
Uniform approach	and	Innovation and competitive advantage
System cohesion and efficiencies	and	Restrictions, rules and standards
External focus (FINA, IOC, FINA etc)	and	Internal Focus (WPA Members)
Club focussed programs		State focussed programs

Competitions

National Competition Framework

WPA conduct a number of different competitions, with a desire to ensure all national competitions serve a specific and purpose that is integrated into the broader Talent Development Framework. The National Competition Framework can be found [here](#) and described the purpose and key elements of each competition, those being:

1. The Australian Water Polo League (AWL)
2. National State Championships (NSC)
3. Australian 18&U Water Polo Championships (AYC)
4. Country Championships
5. Masters Championships

The aim is to ensure that the community has affordable, access to the appropriate level of competition, and that these competition formats support the retention and development of players, coaches and officials.

The reference to the “appropriate” level of competition, refers the standard that a player, coach or official’s ability and attributes allow them to perform at. It is recommended for development that talent is exposed to three levels of competition during a season. Those being:

1. A level where they find it difficult to keep up and are really challenged. This may inspire them to train better to improve or they may decide they are comfortable one level below, or
2. A level, usually with their peer group, where they are can experience wins and losses equally. Where there is a balance of stronger and weaker performers, and
3. A level where they can dominate and are expected to lead or be one of the stronger performers. They may have a role here in assisting to develop and guide others.

Exclusively operating in any one of these environments will impact on their ability to develop and progress further. It is recommended to spend the majority of time on level 2 which is ideally local, with minimal travel and cost associated with accessing it. Opportunities to step up to level 3 will usually be found through representative tournaments at State or National level, however these will generally be associated with additional travel related costs. Finding an appropriate balance of exposure to these different levels is a personal choice. The three levels will be different between individuals as well, hence no specific competitions are listed alongside each.

At every level, competitions are fundamental to the health of the sport. From local club or school competitions through the World Aquatics World Championships, each has a specific role to play. Improving the quality of our local competitions, enhances the affordability of the sport for all, reducing the need to travel long distances to play competitive games.

Circular Calendar Model

The Circular Calendar Model (CCM) is designed to illustrate the relationship between Intrastate, National and International competitions, as well as the continuous cyclical nature of the competition framework and player movement through the framework over multiple years. The multi-year approach is also reflected in the National Performance Framework which will be finalised in the coming months. The first stages of this are reflected in the recently released National Age Group Program information.

Members will be aware of numerous other competitions that are conducted, however only competitions managed by the Water Polo Australia (WPA) and/or those that are part of the Performance Pathway have been included in the National Competitions Calendar. The National Competition Framework does also include a small number of other events that are not managed directly by WPA, to ensure parents and participants understand how those competitions fit into the broader framework. It is anticipated that this enables parents and players to make informed decisions about which events they attend, to assist with affordability

National Programs

Aussie Stingers and Aussie Sharks

The Aussie Stingers and Aussie Sharks programs are managed by the National Performance Unit (NPU), led by the General Manager - Performance (GMP) and National Head Coaches/Coaching Directors. The purpose of these programs is to ensure our national teams are well prepared to compete at benchmark events globally. Historic and future projected performances at benchmark events, largely determines funding from the AIS and support from the SIS/SAS network and therefore this plays a key role in the ongoing sustainability of the High Performance programs. The GMP will work with the National Coaches and WPA Management to determine the most appropriate program structure based on the funding available to both programs

National Age Group Programs

WPA have established an integrated National Age Group Program (NAGP) that complements the [National Competitions Calendar](#) and [Framework](#) and is a fundamental part of the NPF. The age groups within the NAGP are 20&U, 18&U and 16&U. The [National Competitions Calendar](#) and the NAGP allow stakeholders of Water Polo in Australia to know what events are held when and to plan accordingly.

The purpose of the NAGP is to identify, support and develop athletes in preparation for the relevant international age group events but also to best prepare them to compete for selection in future National senior teams. To support this purpose WPA have reposition the NAGP under the guidance of the National Performance Unit (NPU) effectively aligning the NAP program to the senior National team programs. This allows for direct coaching input and program design by the National head Coaches/Coaching Directors.

Guiding Principles

- Performance and Potential: Identify and select athletes, coaches and officials through the lenses of current performance and likelihood of future success.
- Challenge and Support: Structure and deliver programs that reflect the commitment required for success, with the appropriate level and types of support to ensure athletes, coaches and officials do not burn out.
- Holistic Development: Structure programs to support the development of athletes, coaches and officials as a person, player and performer, in that order.
- Reflect and Respect: Prepare and deliver carefully considered 2 year programs that reflect and respect the role and time spent in National, State and Club programs, as well as the sequential nature of the respective NAGP programs (16&U → 18&U → 20&U).
- Communication: Ensure communication channels clearly reflect and value the contribution of all stakeholders.

Within the NAGP the objectives of each program are as outlined below and will be guided by the National Performance Unit (NPU)

16&U NAGP

- Athlete Education and Induction: Ensure that the athletes are inducted into the NAGP and understand what it takes to be an elite athlete.

- Fundamentals: Work on building excellent fundamentals (technical and tactical) that align with the Australian style of play
- Preparation: Prepare the athletes for their first international exposure and what is required to perform at this level

18&U NAGP

- Athlete Education and Induction: Further the education process in all aspects of the athletes' life particular school/sport balance.
- Build: Build on the fundamentals, further develop the technical and tactical skills, building on 16&U experience and feedback from National, State and Club coaches.
- Balance and Transition: Support to maximise retention of athletes through this transition phase out of school.

20&U NAGP

- Individualised Support: Build on previous experience and specialise the learning for each athlete relevant to their stage in life (school, uni, work, etc)
- Transition: Develop the tactical skills required to support the athletes' transition into Senior water polo
- Perform: Increased performance focus on the 20&U team for FINA events and looking to begin to compete for senior squad selection

The performance and effectiveness of the NAGP will be evaluated through the following metrics:

Performance

- Assess performances against expectation and plans at international events for the 18&U and 20&U teams
- Number of players within the NAGP cohort who are at or above the minimum standards required on agreed metrics.
- Potential to use squad averages on certain metrics to create team buy in toward common goal when training in DTE's. Set squad targets for each cohort to create some rivalry between programs.

Progression

- Increasing the number of players who progress to play 100 AWL Games and/or remain in the sport as referees, coaches (long term study)
- Dept of talent for selection with a goal to have three (n3) players per position that selection panel feel would be capable of performing at the next level in each National 20&U and Senior teams.

Retention

- Reducing the number of athletes who drop out/burn out of Water Polo from NAGP cohort.
- Participant feedback through surveys

Interest

- The number of applications for coaching and selector roles with NAGP's
- The number of appointed coaches and selectors who reapply for the following term
- Gender balance of applications for NAGP roles.

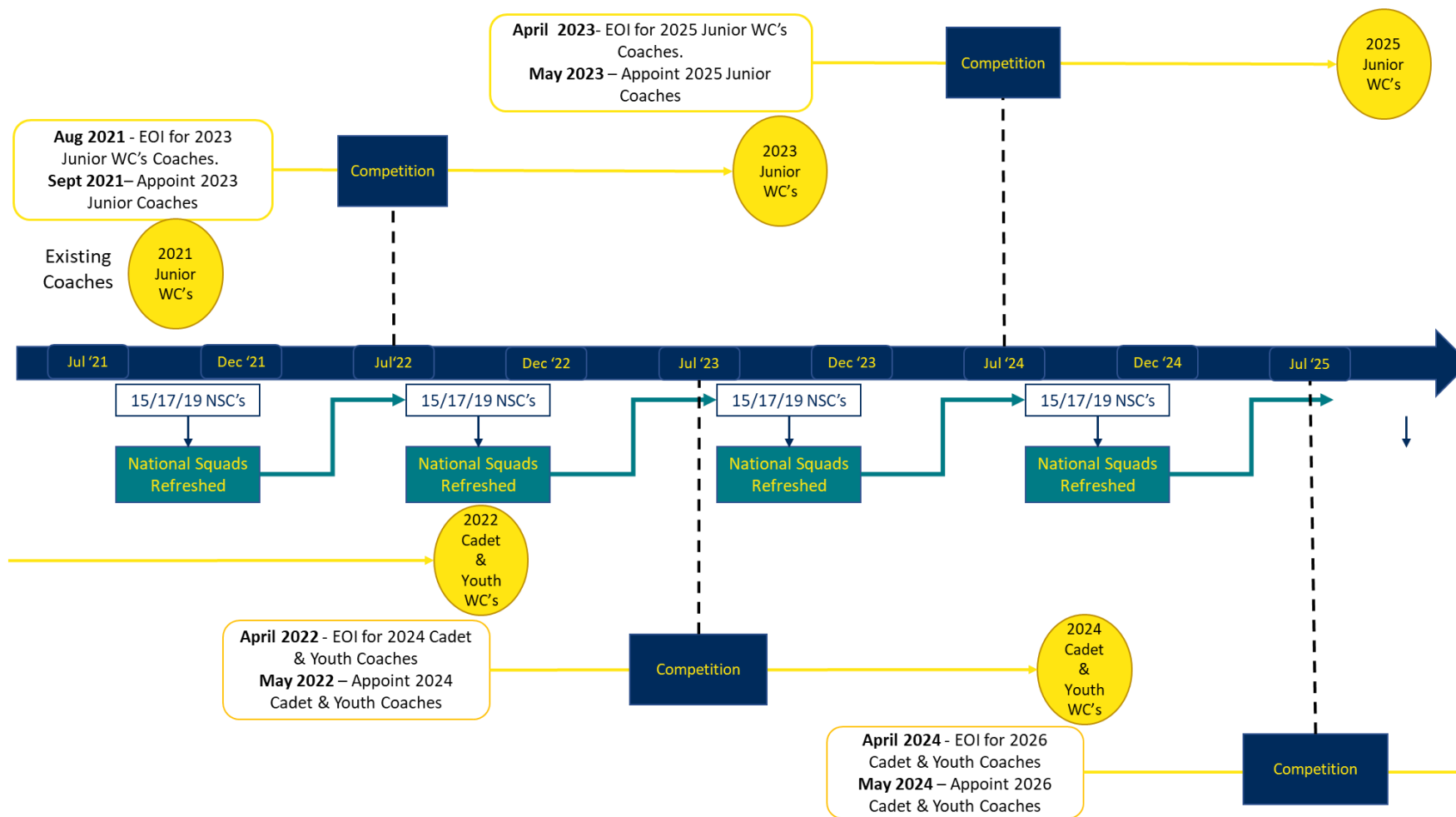
National Age Group Coaches

Coaches are initially appointed to an NAGP program following an application and interview process. Incumbent coach's performances are evaluated against a range of criteria outlined in the position description. Appointments are made for a 2 year cycle. Their key responsibilities include:

- Plan and run a national age group program over a 2-year period including leading squad/team selection and player feedback/assessment with guidance provided by the National Head Coach
- Co-ordinate training camps/tours and liaise with all squad members to inform them of the plan with assistance from the General Manager - Pathways and the National Head Coach
- Lead and coach the squad/team at the respective 20&U or 18&U World Championships and preceding years tours/camps in either Australia, NZ, USA or Europe
- As a Head Coach, work with the Assistant Coach(es) in conjunction with the National Head Coach, delegating clear responsibilities for the Assistant Coach(es) to assist the Head Coach at squad camps and competitions
- Communicate and collaborate with all other SIS/SAS, State and Club coaches around the country to help prepare the players for targeted squad camps and competitions
- Implement a very strong understanding of the basic skills and movements that are needed to become a world class senior player
- Implementation of the senior national team programs, adapted to their age

Once the Head Coaches are appointed WPA will work with the Head Coach to assemble a complimentary team of coaches around the Head Coach, considering the range of skills and attributes to ensure the best program and support is provided to the squad and team. All NAGP coaching roles are currently voluntary.

The 2022 to 2025 timeline for appointment and selections for the NAGP Program is outlined on the following page.



For more information on the National Age Group Program please click [here](#)

Daily Training Environment Recommendations

It is widely acknowledged that the Daily Training Environment is critical to the development of successful players and is established and managed by coaches.

The following principles are designed to apply to environments in which Categorised Players are training on a regular basis and will include:

- National Team Camps (Age Group and Senior)
- SIS/SAS (NIN) training environments
- AWL Team training environments.

Daily Training Environment (DTE) Guiding Principles

- Athlete-centered approach with integrated inter-disciplinary support technically and tactically led by the Head Coach
- Training program/s based on the individual needs of players and the respective teams, reflective of what it takes to win and current world trends
- Development of appropriate training specificity and quality with the right balance of challenge and support.
- The following is a guide to training expectations for each of the different levels of categorisation.
 - Podium Potential, Podium Ready and Podium Players: up to 22 hours total of training per week
 - Developing and Emerging Players: up to 16-18 hours of total training per week – (majority likely to be in senior school, University or commencing work)
 - Aspiring players who wish to progress: up to 10-12 hours of total training per week. These players are not yet categorised nationally and may still be playing other sports, as well as going to school.
- Induction and education programs to ensure the holistic development of players
- Compliant with all relevant [Codes and Policies](#)

Selection Processes

Overview

WPA has developed an identification and selection process to identify and select players for further opportunities and development. All processes and selections will be reviewed annually to ensure there are multiple entry and exit points, ensuring late developing players are captured and early maturing players are moved out if they stop progressing.

The respective National Selection Policy and National Age Group Selection Policy can be found [here](#). These contain all the details that players, parents and coaches should be aware of in relation to selection of squads or teams. Conflicts of interest are often raised in niche sports and both selection policies speak specifically to how these are managed by WPA.

To maximise the depth of talent available for Olympic selection, it is critical to keep as many players, with the desired characteristics involved in the system for as long as possible. This must be balanced over time with the capacity to provide selected athletes with the appropriate levels of support to those most likely to progress at the right time. There are multiple stages in the overall identification and selection process and there is a continuum from inclusivity (PONI list) to exclusivity at the final stages (Olympic Team selection).

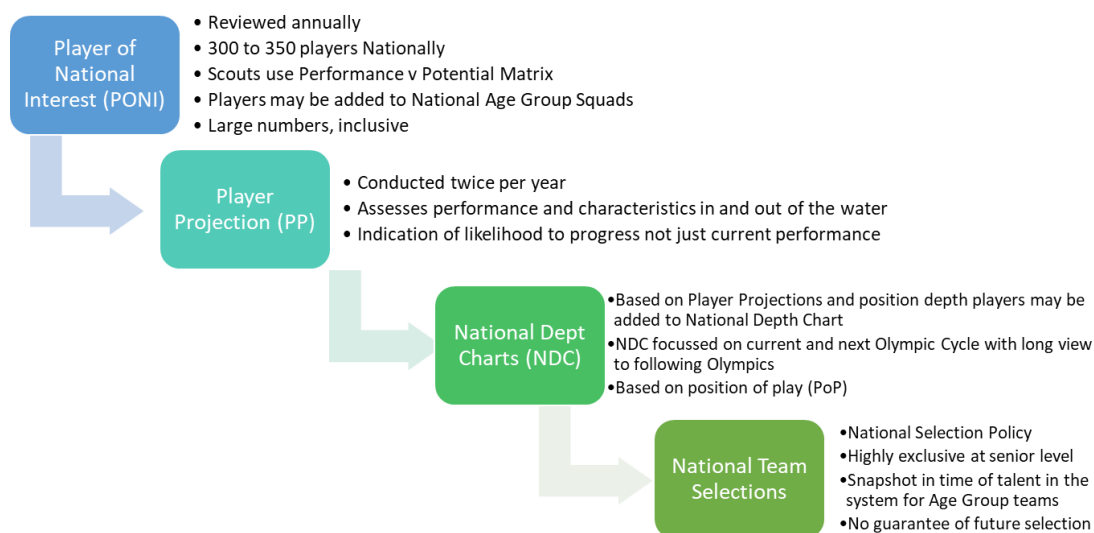
The respective Selection Panels will use various tools which sit along this continuum, including:

- Performance v Potential Matrix ([Appendix 1](#))
- Desired Athlete Characteristics ([Appendix 2](#))
- Player Projection System ([Appendix 3](#))
- Athlete Assessment Matrix ([Appendix 4](#))

The nature of team sports, means there is rarely a clear, right or wrong answer when it comes to selection of teams. The multitude of factors that contribute to team success are complex and nuanced, and the combination of players is more important than any one individual performance.

National Age Group Program (NAGP) Coaches and selectors will oversee an informal Confirmation Process with the players selected into their relatively large national training squads. This period of time will provide the coaches with a high-level insight into the “person” behind the player. The confirmation process is designed to allow the coaches and selectors to confirm if the observed performances or potential, is still relevant when put into a training environment with players of similar or better standard, and does the player show signs of the behavioural characteristics to continue to improve. WPA will work with NAGP Coaches to develop the implementation of this confirmation process before providing their Player Projection Ratings.

The underpinning structure for the identification and development of talent, is described below. The various selection panels and coaches play a role across these elements.



Athlete Categorisation

- The purpose of the AIS Categorisation is to provide direction to the NIN network in relation to the allocation of funding to programs and players (scholarships). It should be noted that the awarding of scholarships is the decision of the respective NIN partner and while WPA make recommendations, WPA does not make the final decision.
- The National Depth Charts will support the National Athlete Categorisation system in that it looks specifically at positional depth and likely requirements for the current and next Olympic cycle.
- Approximately 20 Players per gender, per program (Senior, 20U, 18U) can be categorised. WPA are unlikely to categorise players in the 16U squad and may not categorise the full 20 players allowed in each the 20U and 18U programs.
- In simple terms the National Categorisation Model, will be used by WPA in the following way:
 - Podium:** Multiple Olympians with demonstrated success at the elite level. Athlete is part of the current Olympic Cycle (Paris)
 - Podium Ready:** Has likely been to an Olympics already or is a highly established core member of the current National Team. Athlete is part of the current Olympic Cycle (Paris)
 - Podium Potential:** Has not been to an Olympics, but is part of the current Australian squad and will likely be part of current Olympic campaign (Paris)
 - Developing:** Highly likely to be part of next Olympic Cycle (Los Angeles), therefore considered likely to move to Podium Potential after the current Olympics, based on National Depth Charts
 - Emerging:** Chance of being part of next Olympic Cycle, but highly likely to be part of the following Olympic cycle, so would move into Developing after current Olympics.

National Age Group Selection

The NAGP Selection Panels are present at the National State Championships and seek to identify players to include in the annual National Age Group Squads. There are a number of people involved in the process as there are many players to view and coaches to speak to. The process is managed by a convenor, which will either be the GM – Performance, GM – Pathways or one of the National Head Coaches. Their role is to ensure the processes are followed when selecting the squads, rather than be a selector themselves. The National Age Group Squad and Team Selection policy can be found [here](#).

National Squad and Team Selection

- The [National Selection Policy](#) will support the squad and team selection processes for all National senior teams.
- The Olympic Team Selection Nomination Policy compliments the National Selection Policy and is used for the final selection of the Olympic Teams.

Coaching and Officiating

Performance Coach Program (PCP)

A National Strategic Framework contains a Strategic Priority around enhancing coach development for targeted coaches and providing additional support in developing our future National teams' coaches, both for NAGP and Senior Teams. To achieve this, WPA have developed a Performance Coach Program (PCP) which will deliver on the following objectives:

- Identify a cohort of up to 30, aspiring national program coaches who wish to holistically develop their coaching skills
- Provide individualised development programs for these coaches based on their own aspirations and analysis.
- Provide access for these coaches to development programs both within and outside water polo.
- Create a culture of sharing, collaboration and continual learning amongst coaches at all levels.

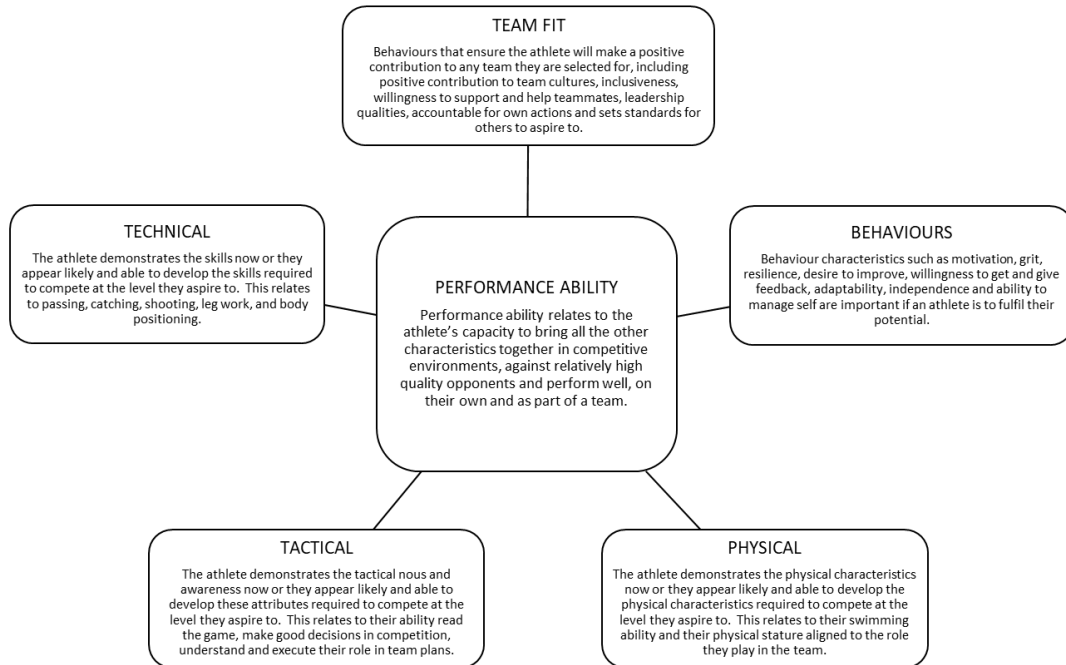
Referees

WPA nominate referees to the World Aquatics Panel each year who may then be invited to officiate at international competitions. Australian referees are assessed through their performance in domestic competitions, particularly the AWL.

The [National Talent Framework](#) describes the range of competitions that coaches and officials can progress through if they aspire to operate at the elite level. Naturally the majority of coaches and officials, do not aspire to these roles but play an equally critical role in ensuring water polo is delivered across Australia.

WPA provides complimentary access to the WPA Learning and Development opportunities for all platinum and gold members, to support the creation of a culture of continuous learning. Members can access this through the Member Pool [link](#) on the WPA webpage.

Appendix 2: NAGP Athlete Characteristics Summary



Appendix 3: Player Projection Model

The Player Projection Rating Scale that National Squad coaches will complete after a 12-month cycle with players in the respective National Squads. This will require the coaching staff to make a holistic evaluation of the athlete and project the level they believe the player can reach within the next three Olympic Cycles. The coaches are to use their knowledge of elite players, of the requirements of elite international competition and all of their other coaching experience and knowledge to make a subjective prediction on each athlete in their program. This is a very challenging activity and is not to be underestimated.

Player Projection	Description
10	
9	Projected to be the world's greatest player in their position, multiple Olympian.
8	Projected to be a high-level National team member, multiple Olympian, but may not be best in world.
7	
6	Projected to be a National team member at a World Championships or an Olympian.
5	
4	Projected to be a National team squad member who does not dominate as a National team member but may compete at World League or World Cup.
3	
2	Projected to be a strong National League or equivalent standard player, but unlikely to be a National Squad member.
1	
0	Unlikely to play National League as a Senior.



Water Polo Australia is committed to providing a safe and welcoming environment for all people to participate, including those with diverse sexualities and genders. To strengthen this commitment, we are a part of Australia's Pride in Sport program.



Water Polo Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises the ongoing connection to lands, waters, and communities. We pay our respects to the continuation of cultural, spiritual, and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to Elders past, present, and emerging.

Appendix 5: Links and Reference Articles

WPA Website Links:

1. [National Strategic Framework and Operation Plan](#)
2. [National Performance Framework](#)
3. [National Competition Framework and Circular Calendar](#)
4. [National Age Group Program](#)
5. [National Talent Framework](#)
6. [Water Polo Calendar](#)
7. [History](#)
8. [Hall of Fame](#)
9. [Policies and Procedures](#)
10. [Integrity](#)
11. [Think.Act.Play Guidelines](#)

Articles / Links

[Clearinghouse for Sport](#) – Information on a wide range of topics relating to sport.

[Balance is Better](#) – Home of 18&U Sport in NZ

[Advice for Sporting Parents](#) – Office Sport - NSW

[Preventing and overcoming athlete burn out](#) - Office Sport - NSW

[Professor Joe Baker on Talent Identification](#)

[Efficacy of Talent Identification Programs – Dr Arne Gullich](#)

[Dr Ross Tucker – Talent Identification and Development Part 1, Part 2, Part 3.](#)