



WATER POLO AUSTRALIA'S ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

WORLD-CLASS FACTORS AND ATTRIBUTES SHAPING
ATHLETE SUCCESS IN AND OUT OF THE POOL



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the WPA Athlete Development Framework, a structured guide that outlines the required factors and attributes for how athletes are supported to reach their full potential, in water polo and life.

- **VISION:** To develop world-class water polo players and teams with a pathway that inspires and nurtures talent to excel on the world stage and that fosters a lifelong passion for the sport.
- **PURPOSE:** to empower water polo athletes to grow and thrive through every stage of their development, from emerging talent through to World Class.

A UNITED APPROACH:

This framework is enabled by:

- WPA WITW
- WPA HP 2032+ Strategy
- Stakeholder engagement (WPA coaches, athletes', staff, pathway partners, AIS athlete pathway development program)
- Digital systems which transform how we connect, track data and operate.
- Athletes who inspire – winning well on the world stage when it matters most.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES



HOLISTIC ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

Supporting athlete growth through evidence-based coaching, sport science, and wellbeing.



ALIGNED NATIONAL PATHWAY

Establish a clear and consistent national framework that connects club, school, state, and national programs, enabling seamless transitions and continuous athlete development.



ELITE PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE

Cultivate a culture of high performance by prioritising building belonging, trust, safety, and growth, that is transferred to WPA world-class coaching, competition and resources.



LIFELONG ENGAGEMENT IN WATER POLO

Promote a love for the game that encourages lifelong participation – whether as a player, coach, referee, or supporter – building a strong and resilient water polo community.

WPA ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

THE COMPLETE PLAYER

We use the term "The Complete Player." A complete player is one who excels not only in the physical, technical, and tactical demands of the game, but also shows mental resilience, emotional maturity, leadership, and self-awareness. They are adaptable, committed to continuous improvement, and understand their role within both the team and the wider context of the sport.

It is significant to note that no single athlete is expected to demonstrate all attributes across all areas. These guidelines are designed to reflect the collective needs of all playing positions.



ATHLETE WELLBEING

WPA recognises wellbeing as the foundation of our sustainable success and underpins every part of the complete player.

A complete player balances the demands of high performance with resilience, perspective, and enjoyment, enabling both immediate achievement and long-term fulfilment.

The WPA Athlete Learning and Development Framework empowers athletes with the knowledge and skills to thrive—during their sporting careers and long after.



TECHNICAL (HIGHLY SKILLED)

- Shooting accuracy
- Ball handling under maximum pressure
- Passing execution
- Receiving and maintaining possession under defensive pressure
- Technical mastery of all saves and distribution (GK)
- Blocking and steal execution with timing and technique



TACTICAL (HIGH WP IQ)

- Adaptive to game contexts, competitive environments, and coaching
- Complete understanding of offensive and defensive patterns and structures, and able to execute at a world class level
- Mastery of decision-making in all transitional phases under maximal pressure
- Advanced ability to cope with setbacks and maintain tactical discipline



PHYSICAL (HIGHLY ATHLETIC)

- Maintaining elite physical fitness through
- Swimming speed meeting WITTW benchmarks by position
- Strength, power and endurance performance meeting WITTW benchmarks
- Elite approach to recovery, injury prevention, and rehabilitation
- Fuelling for success by implementing nutrition theory around training and games



MENTAL SKILLS (MENTALLY PREPARED & SKILLED)

- Adaptability: thriving in dynamic, complex and high stakes situations
- Bravery: taking critical risks in games when outcomes are uncertain
- Composure: Self-regulation skills supporting consistent performances under pressure
- Decision-making: mental frameworks that support decisions that are quick, effective and proactive under pressure



TEAM PLAYER

- Leadership (of self and team)
- Commitment to team
- Positive influence on team culture and standards
- Mentoring and development support
- Professional communication and engagement

WPA ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

PHASES OF ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

PHASE	BIG PICTURE	*AGE PROFILE		CATEGORISATION
		FEMALE	MALE	
WORLD CLASS	Driving world-class performance by equipping senior athletes with the skills, support, leadership, and wellbeing needed to excel on the world stage when it matters most.	OPEN	OPEN	Podium
HIGH PERFORMING	Building internationally ready Stingers and Sharks who demonstrate world-class standards, positional mastery, leadership, and wellbeing in pursuit of national team success.	21-34	21-35	Podium Potential/ Podium Ready
EVOLVE	Preparing nationally elite athletes for the demands of international competition through complete player development, tailored performance plans, and strong wellbeing foundations.	18-23	19-24	Developing
ELEVATE	Advancing technical, tactical, and physical capabilities while fostering positional specialisation, competitive experience, and wellbeing for high-performance progression.	16-20	17 -21	Emerging
ASPIRE	Building foundational water polo skills and game understanding in a fun, supportive environment that fosters confidence, teamwork, and a love for the sport.	<17	<17	Pre-categorisation

*Please note, the age profile is a general guide and athletes may fall into different categories at different ages

WPA ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT MATRIX

PHASE	GOAL	ATHLETE EXPERIENCE	KEY DEVELOPMENT FOCUS AREAS
WORLD CLASS	To support our best senior athletes to excel internationally and deliver on the world stage when it matters most.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated coaching with a focus on high-level skill refinement, game strategy, and performance International exposure and tournament participation to develop adaptability to global competition Ongoing mental performance coaching to support resilience and consistency at the highest level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World-Class Skills: Mastery of technical and tactical elements of water polo Elite Performance: Tailored training schedules competition at international tournaments (World Aquatics events, World Cup, Olympics) Professional Development: Engagement with sport psychologists, nutritionists, and S&C specialists as an integrated support team Leadership execution: Drives a professional, accountable, challenging but trusting and support team culture Wellbeing: Focus on personal wellbeing, emotional resilience mastery, leadership, maintaining career longevity, and long-term economic stability.
HIGH PERFORMING	To develop Sharks and Stingers athletes' capable of competing at senior international level and contributing to national team success. Establish consistent performance standards approaching world-class benchmarks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systematic progression towards WITTW physical and technical benchmarks Regular international competition exposure and training camps Integration into senior national team environment and training systems Performance analysis and data driven development programs Multi-disciplinary support team engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International Competition Readiness: Developing skills and fitness approaching WITTW benchmarks Advanced Mental Skills: Composure, adaptability, and decision-making under international pressure Position Mastery: Specialised technical and tactical excellence in primary position Professional Training Environment: full-time or intensive training programs with expert coaching support Leadership Development: Contributing to team culture and mentoring developing athletes' where collective wellbeing and psychological safety is emphasised Wellbeing: Consistent application of effective personal habits that underpin high performance.
EVOLVE	To prepare for international competition and provide a foundation of high-performance training. By this stage, athletes should be excelling nationally and start to develop towards international performances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular exposure to elite-level competition and national camps Development of specific technical skills (e.g. shot accuracy and speed, counter-attacking, defensive tactics, efficiency of blocking and movement through the water) Regular feedback and performance coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete Player Development: Balance of physical, technical, tactical, and mental skills Elite Competition Preparation: Participation in National Championships and Leagues with managed exposure to international competition environments Mental Skills: Building resilience, focus, and confidence under pressure Individualised Development Plans: Personal plan guiding athlete growth and performance Wellbeing: Working with Wellbeing manager to refine healthy habits in and out of the pool.
ELEVATE	To refine fundamental skills for high-performance and expand form within skill set. Educate through tactical understanding and begin specialisation in targeted positions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More structured and deliberate training sessions focusing on technical and tactical skills Regular match play in a variety of competitive formats, emphasising learning under pressure Cross-training activities to support general athleticism (e.g. swimming, dryland fitness) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advanced Water Polo Skills: Precision passing, shooting techniques, ball handling under pressure and blocking Tactical Understanding: Defensive strategies, offensive set plays, and position play Athletic Development: Focus on strength, conditioning, and endurance for Water Polo Increase in Competitive Play: Regular participation in state and national-level competitions Wellbeing: Navigating team dynamics and developing communication skills alongside healthy proactive and reactive measures to manage stress and pressure.
ASPIRE	Teach and develop water polo skills and overall game understanding to foster a love for water polo and water polo confidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small-sided games and modified formats to encourage participation and learning Introduction to basic tactics, focusing on positioning, defence, and attack Exposure to team-based play and healthy competition through regional and state tournaments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emerging Water Polo Skills: Ball handling, swimming, passing, shooting and blocking Physical Literacy: Coordination, agility, and strength development Sport Enjoyment: Promoting fun, team spirit, and learning through play Fundamental Movement Patterns: Building fundamental swimming skills (e.g. Treading water, reverse guard) Wellbeing: Basic awareness of emotions and coping strategies, as well as the importance of social supports inside and outside of sport.