

Sports Awards

Thank you for asking me to come and speak tonight it is a privilege to be asked back to speak at the sports awards because when I was a student here I remember sitting up near the back eagerly awaiting my sports blues badge and thinking I wonder if I'll ever be good enough at sports to be asked back to give a speech. So this evening I get to fulfil that dream and for that I thank you.

My journey to representing New Zealand in sports has not been straight forward. It's been full of anxiety, self doubt and disappointments but I have learned that these things don't have to hold me back I can still succeed in my sport and I hope that in sharing my story I can encourage you to chase your goals.

Year 9 me had always wanted to play for New Zealand but I'd never have guessed taking up curling in year 10 would be the sport that would take me there. I've had the privilege of representing New Zealand in Finland, Scotland and Sweden so far and if it wasn't COVID I'd might have added Japan to that list. I spent 6months living in Stockholm and training with the worlds best curlers living and breathing the sport until COVID brought me back.

I am now the New Zealand U21 selector and development officer for Dunedin. I am currently just 14 games away from the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. I could honestly talk for hours about my international experience but I want to focus on what it took to be selected for New Zealand because I think anyone here that is willing to apply themselves to their sport has the potential to get selected to represented NZ in the next few years.

I was recently at a job interview and they asked me what I sports I played in high school and I quickly listed them all and then they asked me what subjects did you study in year 13 and to my embarrassment I couldn't recall all of them. But I think that really shows what my passion was at school.

The year was 2011 and I was ready to try yet another sport after being told by my squash coach he thought I would be better suited to tennis ... I gave up on ball sports and started looking for a new challenge.

Curling caught me completely by surprise. A simple message in the school notices asking for students to express their interest in forming a team. I figured I had nothing to lose and if anything I ought to be half decent at it, being part Scottish, surely it was in my genes.

The teacher in charge came from Nasbey the heart of curling in New Zealand. She had represented NZ multiple times and was keen to encourage the next generation of female curlers.

When I met her she told me how I could travel the world and play for New Zealand if I stuck at it. I honestly don't think she realised how profound and life-changing her words would be. I had never been on an aeroplane and had dreamt of representing NZ in sports.

My friends and I quickly formed a team. We had only played for a few weeks when we entered High School nationals naively believing we would completely smash it.

We lost every single game ...

But this turned out to be an awesome lesson in not letting failure stop you from pursuing your dreams. My advice to you is to learn to lose well. I've lost more games than I have won but I have learnt the most from the games I have lost. In losing so often when I was younger I developed relentless determination. I knew from experience that when things got tough to keep pushing. We could have all given up on curling after that. We had come into it with such high expectations of ourselves and been crushed. But we were hooked on the game.

The spirit of curling pulling us in. There are very few sports where you can be absolute enemies in the game and then once the game is over be best friends giving one another advice for the next game. I also loved that it was not only a physical game but a mental game requiring a high level of strategy.

Over the next few years, my team (Sweeping Beauties) had to fight to get recognised alongside much more popular sports such as netball and hockey.

My curling team didn't have an official curling coach but we all had a crazy work ethic which we applied to our studies and sports and ultimately it is the reason we won back to back high school Southland's and nationals titles. As cliché as the saying is hard work works. My next piece of advice to you because I know exams are just around the corner is take your drive to succeed in your sport and apply it to your studies.

The best piece of advice I got given from Ms Neilson was about speeches. I used to hate giving a speech at school but she said I know you hate it but you're going to be giving speeches for the rest of your life at birthdays, weddings, events, funerals and no one enjoys a bad speech so get good at it! English and Maths are so important if you want to become an elite athlete.

I've had to give speeches at events, write articles, blogs, social media posts and give live interviews. I've also had to figure out fundraising for overseas travel, create budgets, work in different currencies and tax systems. I know it can feel like maths doesn't apply to your life as an athlete right now but it definitely does when you reach the international level.

From day one my goal was to represent New Zealand, which meant I took my novice curling a little too seriously at times, treating a social club game as an Olympic final.

In 2015, I nominated myself for the U21 NZ women's team. I remember sitting with all the other curlers waiting for the teams to be announced. I'd had a good season and felt pretty confident that I would make the team.

But growing up as a type A personality isn't easy. It often comes hand in hand with anxiety and self doubt. The desire to perform at an excellence level took its toll on me. I would get so worked up prior to sports competitions worrying I hadn't trained enough or I would throw a bad shot or the selectors wouldn't be interested in me. I became my own worst enemy in curling I would psych myself out before I had even entered the curling rink.

I was beyond upset when my name was not read out at selections that year but I wasn't going to give up.

In 2016 I nominated myself again but when my team lost the final for U21 Nationals, I knew I wasn't going to make the squad. I tried to give away all my gear believing no matter what I did, I would never be good enough. Looking back now I can see I again made the whole season purely about getting selected and didn't deal with the negative headspace I had created for myself which was ultimately my downfall.

During and after that season I'd undergone two heart surgery's because I had been told I was high risk of sudden death. At 18 years old it really forced me to challenge the way I viewed life and what mattered to me. I spent time with a sports psychologist learning how to use overcome the anxiety and pressure to perform.

In 2017, I decided I would give curling one last season but my focus had changed. Instead of concentrating on making the NZ squad, I chose to fall in love with curling again. I didn't want to quit curling feeling bitter about not being selected. Instead, I wanted to have a season where I enjoyed myself. If I wasn't selected I could walk away knowing I had played my best.

This new attitude gained me a spot on the NZ U21 Women's team.

Playing for New Zealand has been such an incredible privilege. Standing on the ice at Worlds wearing a silver fern was a dream that I am blessed to have made a reality. I remember the first time I put on my New Zealand jacket, I was so proud.

I look back and I am extremely grateful I did not get selected the first and second time. It wasn't easy and I had to work hard to prove myself but I believe playing for New Zealand means so much more to me now than it would have if I had just been handed a place in the team. I know why I curl and it is not to be the best (although that would be amazing) I curl because I love it and I love the experiences it has brought me.

Making the NZ squad came with training sessions and strategy discussions at a level I had longed for throughout my high school curling years. I wanted to learn different drills to not only help myself improve but also to help the curlers who were yet to make NZ teams.

Knowledge is powerful but only when we share it to create positive change for the future. I realised there was a need to provide younger curlers with coaching, to encourage them to continue playing and to grow the sport.

I became a New Zealand selector this year because I want to encourage the next generation of athletes. So I'll wrap up my speech with the 4 key things I look for when I am selecting athletes.

Initially we do cut the selection pool down by examining individuals **Skill** are they making their shots, do they understand the game on a higher level to others. This is not always outcome based. I have selected athletes that have not won at competitions because I see they have potential and good skill but are working with a group that is not on that same level.

Next I'll examine athletes **Attitude and coachability**: I am looking for good communication with others, a real passion and love of the sport. Do they ask for advice to improve and How do they respond to feedback. I will select an athlete with less skill but a better attitude over one that is technically better but has a bad attitude because I can quickly raise an athletes technical ability if they want to learn and improve it's far harder when someone thinks they already know best.

I will cut down my options further when I ask about **Commitment**: I go and watch games throughout the season to see if the players are consistently showing up, I'll ask teachers and ice makers and other athletes how often a particular athlete is at the rink and if they are doing any additional work to help improve their game.

The last thing I look at is their **Mental strength**:

I believe in order to succeed in sport you need to tackle your mind. Sports in roughly 10% physical and 90% mental. At the Olympic level all athletes are capable of winning but what separates the winners is their mental strength. How

do you cope with failure? What type of confidence do you have? Is it a cocky confidence where you're at risk of making reckless decisions in the heat of the moment or is it a quite humble confidence that even if you miss a shot you know you can still win.

My challenge to you is to know your why. Why do you play sports? If you can be honest with yourself in answering this then you will know if you need to change it or use it as the ultimate reason for pushing yourself forward to your definition of success.