

**ALL WHITES
WORLD CUP QUALIFYING CAMPAIGN
DEBRIEF**

**For New Zealand Football
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This review involved face to face interviews with over 40 people involved in the All Whites campaign to endeavour to qualify for the 2023 FIFA World Cup. That included interviews with more than 2/3rds of the playing group.
- 1.2 Some clear themes emerged from those interviews and the supporting documentation I was provided with¹. These included:
- a) There was a strong sense that, in the period from the Tokyo Olympic Games through to the intercontinental knockout match against Costa Rica, the team prepared as well as could reasonably be expected in the circumstances. The All Whites played in every available window post Tokyo, generally against reasonably well ranked sides, with a number of the matches played in the Middle East (including at the venue for the knockout match) to ready the team for those conditions.
 - b) Unquestionably, the inability to play matches for much of the 20 months or so prior to the Tokyo Games because of COVID-19 and various lockdowns, stymied some of the team's development. Valuable development time was lost with no matches played in 8 FIFA windows. This included the abandonment of matches scheduled against England and Belgium and potential matches against Mexico and the USA, all world class opposition. However New Zealand was far from alone in that regard and the lack of matches in this period was largely unavoidable.
 - c) Tactically and technically, the players understood and embraced the playing philosophy introduced by the coaches (moving to a far more possession based, high pressing approach than previous All Whites sides have typically adopted). Almost all the players feel this is the right style for the current team to be playing.
 - d) There was a strong view that the camps and the trainings were well-organised, there was a high level of football planning, and the "on the grass" aspects of the campaign were strong. The coaching group deserve significant credit for this.
 - e) Culturally, the team has also made significant strides. Head Coach Danny Hay introduced a number of initiatives to reconnect the team to the history of the All Whites and the legends of the game, and to emphasise a series of values that are strongly "Kiwi" based. In the eyes of most players, these have been very well received. The way in which the coaches have linked the values to on-field actions has also been first class.

¹ Obviously, across such a large group, there were players and staff with very different views but, in most instances, there were clear trends and widely shared opinions.

- f) The work done in introducing rituals (based on Māori tikanga) and of creating a sense of openness and vulnerability has challenged some players but many of the players consider it has been invaluable in bringing the squad closer together. It is crucial this work is continued in the future.
- g) There is no doubt that the coaching style of Head Coach Danny Hay is predominantly autocratic – with a number of players describing him as, among things, demanding and intense. And while he does seek input from his fellow coaches and some senior players, Mr Hay sets the tone and is unquestionably “in charge”. However, while there is a clear trend in sport for more holistic and/or democratic styles of coaching, autocratic coaches are very common in football. Indeed, many All Whites players made it clear they thrive in this type of environment, while others simply felt it was the norm in football and were either ambivalent or had no concerns. Either way, Mr Hay unquestionably has the support of the vast majority of the playing group.
- h) The other coaches also have the respect of the playing group, albeit there was a common view that the team would benefit if they took more of a clear and obvious lead role – rather than leaving most of the explicit leadership and messaging to be delivered by the Head Coach.
- i) There was extremely strong support from the players for the competence and value provided by all of the support staff, including the doctors, physios, the strength and conditioning lead, the mental skills provider, the team analyst and the team managers. This group is highly respected by the players and the coaching group.
- j) At a broader level, never before have the All Whites had so many players playing in professional leagues around the world, the team currently has a strong mixture of experience and youth, and it is clear there is a crop of young players who have recently come into the All Whites system who have a significant amount of talent. In fact, there is a strong sentiment among the playing and coaching group that over the next 4 to 8 years, there is the potential for the All Whites to not only qualify for World Cups but to win games and to perform with great credit. The future for this team could be extremely bright.
- k) Almost everyone I spoke to is also very aware that the All Whites have an enhanced opportunity to qualify for the next World Cup (given the increase in teams and the awarding of an automatic place to the winner of the Oceania Football Confederation). The prospect of playing at the World Cup and the quality of the current team presents NZF with a unique opportunity in the upcoming years to fully invest in the team and use the All Whites to lift the profile of football across New Zealand. It is crucial this opportunity is not lost.

l) Ultimately, the All Whites failed in their ultimate objective because they lost a single game of football to Costa Rica 1-0. The overwhelming sentiment of most of the players and staff I interviewed was that the team did almost everything they could to win that match, they dominated a much higher ranked team in most key facets of the game – but lost to a single goal scored early in the match. The main message was “that’s football”, that it happens in sport from time to time, and the All Whites did what they reasonably could, both leading into the match and while on the field, to be successful.

1.3 But, while there are unquestionably many positives to take away from both the performance against Costa Rica and the All Whites wider progress over the last 3 years or so, beneath the surface there were aspects of this campaign that unfortunately, did fall well short of best practice.

1.4 Some of these were caused (at least in part) by issues beyond anyone’s control. In 2018 and 2019 NZF was in something of a crisis (and repair) mode. It was dealing with serious wellbeing issues in the Football Ferns programme which culminated in the report by respected lawyer, Phillipa Muir (the Muir Report), it experienced multiple changes in leadership and just as some stability was being achieved, COVID-19 struck. The pandemic put its international programme on hold which meant there was no certainty at all about when the All Whites would next be able to play again, what the qualification path to the World Cup would look like or indeed, whether a World Cup could be staged at all.

1.5 Nevertheless, NZF previously commissioned independent reviews of the All Whites campaigns for World Cup qualification in 2010 and 2014, and some of the key gaps identified in those two comprehensive reports were, once again, prevalent in the latest campaign. Going forward, if the All Whites are to fulfil their potential, this simply must change.

1.6 The gaps that I have identified include:

a) The All Whites and NZF’s high-performance staff operated almost entirely independently of each other, in silos, for much of the campaign. Some of the New Zealand coaches and senior players had little trust in NZF’s high performance staff (the CEO being one noticeable exception), and there remains a strong sense within this group that NZF as an organisation lacks sufficient professional football experience.

b) Whether or not that perception is valid is, to some extent, irrelevant - the perception is strongly felt and has existed in and around the All Whites squad for many years. It is not the role of this Review to determine the rights and wrongs of how these views came about. Much of the distrust is historical, but some relate to more recent events. I have quite deliberately not sort to apportion responsibility but have focused on the impact of this separation.

- c) During this campaign, the level of separation has meant the coaches have been very reluctant to share information with certain NZF high performance staff or allow such staff to be involved with the All Whites. That in turn has meant key high performance staff have been severely restricted in their ability to have any material influence on the direction of the campaign, have found it very difficult to constructively challenge or add value, and there has been (inevitably) an inability to provide oversight. I was told this was not the case with NZF's relationship with the Football Ferns staff.
- d) This view was caveated only by the fact that many of the senior players and coaches spoke optimistically about the positive influence CEO Andrew Pragnell was starting to have and acknowledged he was endeavouring to build bridges between the team and the organisation.
- e) It is important to note that a significant number of the players are unaware of this separation, and several made it clear (primarily the newer, younger players) that they have no reason to question NZF's high performance knowledge or expertise. Nevertheless, in my experience, the level of separation that existed in this campaign between the leaders of the All Whites and NZF's high performance staff was significant and falls well short of best practice – it limits challenge, undermines support for the team, creates further distrust and compromises investment and resourcing.
- f) In my experience, strong performing national teams work hand in glove with their national body's high performance unit. And in a football environment, the best performing professional clubs have a strong relationship between their coaching staff and their football department.
- g) In both 2010 and 2014, the reviewers clearly identified that the All Whites lacked a close working relationship with NZF, this compromised outcomes and needed to change. Going forward, ending this siloed approach to the way the All Whites function with NZF (and, its high performance unit) must, in my view, be non-negotiable and this is something all parties must embrace.
- h) In both 2010 and 2014, the independent reviews also emphasised that there was no four year documented campaign plan agreed near the start of each World Cup cycle and expressed the view that the lack of such a plan had compromised performance. Both reports emphasised that without such a plan, NZF and the All Whites team have not collectively agreed what success looks like and what would be done (and invested in) to achieve that success.

- i) Campaign plans are extremely important – they are the road map for the next 4 years - but once again, there was no campaign plan for this latest campaign. I do acknowledge that on this occasion, there were legitimate extenuating circumstances. The impact of COVID was real - it is extremely difficult to plan in the long term when there is no certainty at all about what the future holds including the ability to play any games, – and what funds will be available. And as noted earlier, in the early part of the campaign, NZF was focussed on achieving stability and implementing the findings of the Muir Report. The lack of a relationship between the coaching group and some NZF staff would also have made developing a shared campaign plan very difficult.
- j) But, at the end of the day, I believe some opportunities still existed for a campaign plan to have been put together. Going forward, it is of fundamental importance that such a plan is developed for North America 2026. This should be a key priority as soon as the key appointments are made for the next campaign.
- k) Within the team, while there have been many positive developments, I was told that in the period building up to the knockout match in Doha, the environment became extremely tense. While that is, to some extent, unsurprising given the enormity of the occasion, some players considered the environment became too negative and too intense and some felt this impacted on performance. While that was by no means the universal view, a number of players felt strongly that the environment needed to be more supportive with more opportunities to reduce tension. There are good learnings here for the All Whites unit, which are expanded on in the body of the report.
- l) It is also extremely important going forward that the All Whites have a system where players feel they can deliver feedback openly and that it will be embraced and welcomed. A culture of honesty and transparency is a key ingredient in almost all high performing teams, and it is particularly crucial to the younger generation of player. While the All Whites coaches believe they have an environment where feedback is welcomed, a number of players believe the team will benefit from a more openly collaborative approach where the voices of the playing group are welcomed and heard. In my view this is an important area where improvement is needed.
- m) In terms of resourcing, I have identified in the report where the team could potentially benefit from additional resourcing. While I do not believe a lack of resources ultimately impacted on the final outcome of this campaign, many of the staff working with the team felt the demands of their roles did not easily match the remuneration and this needs to be carefully reviewed.

n) At a broader level, I strongly encourage NZF to consider the future resourcing of this team in a new light given both the much higher prospect of World Cup qualification going forward (and the financial uplift provided by this) and also because of the ability this young, talented side has to raise the profile of the game in New Zealand.

1.7 Based on these findings, I have set out at the conclusion of this report, a series of recommendations I would encourage NZF to seriously consider. In addition to addressing some of the issues identified above (ending the separation between the All Whites and NZF's High Performance staff, an unequivocal commitment to campaign planning, and reviewing the current approach to resourcing the All Whites), the recommendations also include:

- The need for proactive investment in coach development at All Whites level
- Possible ways to introduce greater professional football expertise within NZF including potentially adding high profile former All Whites to the High Performance and Player Welfare Committee
- Suggestions in relation to how the role of GM of High Performance could be filled
- The need for the communication style of the coaching group (led by the Head Coach) to evolve to meet the needs of a wide range of players from a cross-section of backgrounds
- Placing a greater focus on creating a strong culture of transparency and honesty, including ways to improve the scope for player feedback and collaboration (such as the establishment of a more formalised leadership group)
- Ensuring that the team rituals become part of the DNA of the All Whites and that they are passed down from generation to generation; and
- Having the team play as often as possible (ideally in every FIFA window), to set a plan in place to target higher quality opposition and to have the team play in New Zealand more often.

1.8 In relation to this last recommendation, NZF CEO Andrew Pragnell made it clear that playing in each window was the plan for the last campaign, but COVID ultimately made that impossible. He also shares the goal of securing more games against higher ranked teams and playing in New Zealand more often – while pointing out funding restrictions together with New Zealand's world ranking and geographical isolation, make the latter difficult to consistently achieve.

1.9 While that is acknowledged, the potential is here for the All Whites to develop into an outstanding unit and that in turn could have a hugely positive impact on the future of football in New Zealand. The challenge is now for NZF and the leaders of the All Whites, to grasp this opportunity with both hands.