



Review of the HPP Olympic Cycle  
& Performance: From Rio to Tokyo

## SUMMARY OF HEADLINE FINDINGS

Prepared for IS Board

JANUARY 2022





*‘To Win consistently as a Team is to consistently  
Perform better than your Competitors’*

Contents	Page
Overview .....	2-3
The Review Process .....	4-5
Key Themes Emerging .....	6
Crucial Stakeholder Relationships.....	7
Review of Tokyo Games .....	8-9
The 49er Measurement Infraction.....	10
Athlete Support Environment .....	11
Sports Science & Medicine Support .....	12
Culture, Values & Standards.....	13
Management & Coaching .....	14
Communication .....	15
Selection Policy & Process.....	16
Conclusion .....	17

Irish Sailing emerged from the Rio Olympics in a strong position. There was clarity and alignment across the internal stakeholders (IS Board, OSG & Performance Director) on the strategic decisions required in relation to the High Performance programme (HPP) in preparation for the Tokyo Games. These included the successful development of the HP HQ base which has become a significant resource and dimension to the HP environment, the alignment of strategic decisions and the level of funding secured in preparation for Tokyo to optimise performance and results.

It is acknowledged that the HPP has been successful and has created the basis for a very positive future for Irish Sailing. However, it was felt that Tokyo was a disappointing Olympic Games which did not deliver on the high expectations post-Rio, as outlined above. Fewer boats qualified than the expected targets and the performance of the boats which did qualify was disappointing. However, the performance of the 49er crew was a highlight given that they were first time Olympians and suffered a disqualification for two races. Their performance augurs well for the future. Sailing is one of the top three funded sports in Ireland and the expectation was to have four boats qualifying, two in medal contention and one Olympic medal but that wasn't achieved.

The HPP has been in existence since the Athens Olympic cycle and is a well-established, stable and structured programme which has seen its resources and structures evolve and expand over that time. As it progresses into the Paris Games, (its sixth Olympic cycle as a HPP) and beyond into LA, there is a unique opportunity arising out of this review to further refine and enhance the structure, processes and practices for podium success. Irish Sailing has proven that it can produce medal potential through its talent pathway. However, there are concerns around the current status of the athlete talent pathway due in part to a reduction in the allocated resources. (This review did not look at the talent pathway as part of this process. It was believed at the time that the review of the pathway merited a separate review process). However, given that this is a whole cycle review, the impact which funding had on the cycle should be mentioned and was highlighted by management. The Performance Pathway is a well-defined structure but only reached a fully populated position in 2015 which placed a significant strain on resources both financially and operationally.

The purpose of the review was to identify the strengths and lessons learned from the Tokyo cycle and to utilise these findings to inform which aspects of the HPP should be maintained and which aspects could be evolved.

As the HPP prepares for the next two cycles into Paris and LA, it is essential that there is a shared understanding across the IS Board and the OSG in relation to the strategic challenges facing the programme which include the talent pipeline and talent retention, funding allocation and resource optimisation. This is particularly significant given the abridged timeline for Paris.

The IS Board and the OSG are clear on their respective roles in relation to meeting these strategic challenges. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations arising from this review will support Irish Sailing in successfully meeting these challenges to create the optimum platform for success for the HPP in Paris and LA.

The purpose of this document is to provide a high-level summary of the Review and the headline findings. A comprehensive report was issued to the Review Steering Panel which outlined the detailed findings, supporting evidence and recommendations based on the data and information shared during the review and also shares some perspectives and comparatives based on our experience of HP environments.

This review was commissioned by the IS Board in conjunction with the OSG to enable the IS Board, the OSG, and the High-Performance unit to learn from the experiences of the last five years and to develop a plan to deliver strong future performance through Paris and onwards to LA.

The President, David O'Brien, is the main sponsor of the review and the review is supported by a Steering Panel which includes: IS Board President David O'Brien, OSG Chairman Patrick Coveney, IS Board member John Twomey, and former Olympic athlete, Ciara Peelo.

The scope of the review included the following team units:

- OSG: Chair and all members
- IS: President, CEO and Board members
- IS: CEO and Performance Director
- Olympic Team: management, all athletes and coaching/support personnel
- Non-Qualifying sailors: Laser Coach and Sailors
- Irish Sailing Foundation: Chair
- Sport Ireland
- Sport Ireland Institute

The following formed the critical areas for examination during the review (as identified by IS):

- Factors that impacted performances at Tokyo,
- Starting 'platform' post Rio,
- Key strategic choices,
- Organisation and structures for High Performance,
- Critical objectives and milestones,
- Evolution of key personnel,
- Funding and resources

A question set was developed based on the above areas and was signed off by the Review Steering Panel.

Detailed surveys were then prepared for the five groups as follows:

- IS Board, President & CEO
- OSG (Chair & Members)
- Management (Performance Director and Coaching Staff)
- Athletes / Sailors
- Sports Science & Sports Medicine Team

Survey interviews were conducted with the following key stakeholders:

- IS Foundation Chair
- Sport Ireland HP Unit Management and Management at Sport Ireland Institute

In addition, a number of internal documents were reviewed including:

- Rio review document
- Rio to Tokyo strategy document

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to all who engaged in such an active and open manner with the review process and gave so generously of their time. We would like to mention the athletes in particular for their mature, considered and reflective contribution throughout this process. They represented their sport, the HPP and Irish Sailing with distinction.

The following abbreviations are used in this document:

**Board:** *IS Board*

**OSG:** *Olympic Steering Group*

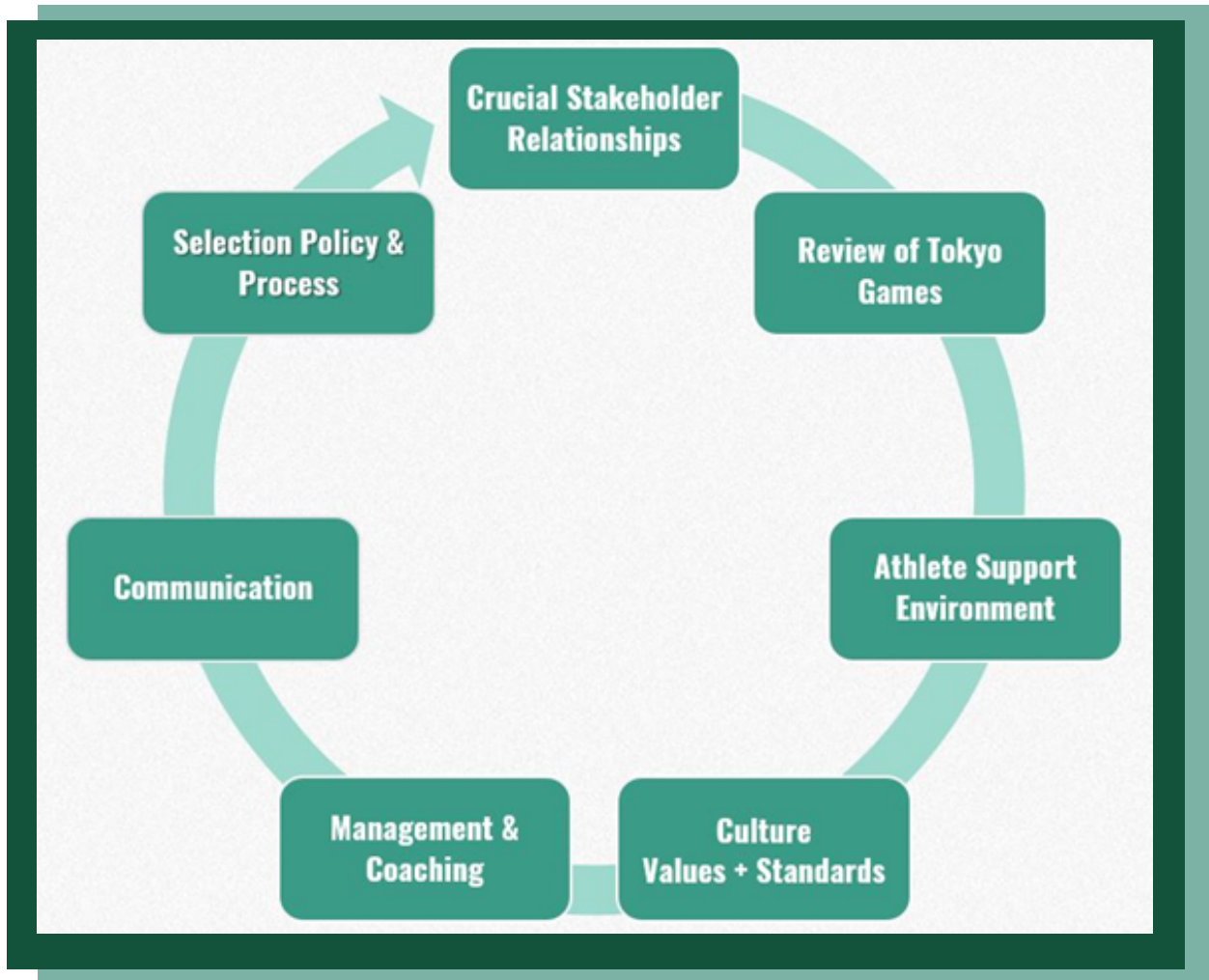
**HPP:** *High Performance Programme*

**PD:** *Performance Director*

**SS & SM:** *Sports Science & Sports Medicine*

## Key Themes Emerging

The emerging themes arising out of our analysis of the data are as follows:





## Crucial Stakeholder Relationships

While the relationship between the IS Board and the OSG is regarded as functioning well, there is recognition of a real opportunity together with a desire to enhance that relationship with improved connection, communication, sharing of information and the return to a member of the OSG (with high performance expertise) sitting on the IS Board.

The OSG is operating effectively and fulfilling its primary role. The OSG could enhance its robustness by considering the addition of an independent HP sport leadership expert to the group and also revising the terms of reference (if required) to allow the Chair to co-opt different expertise (as necessary) to assist the OSG in its work.

The Foundation is regarded by the IS Board and the OSG as a critical investment stakeholder for the HPP. Members of the IS Board would like to know more about IS Foundation's work and its contribution to support and underpin the finances of the HPP. Sport Ireland view the IS Foundation as a positive development to support the HPP.

Sport Ireland's confidence in the IS HPP has been demonstrated in the level of investment the HPP has managed to secure through the Rio and Tokyo cycles. This is acknowledged by Sport Ireland and Irish Sailing. Sailing is a top 3 programme in terms of investment and it is therefore very important strategically to Sport Ireland. Irish Sailing's HPP relationship with Sport Ireland is viewed by the IS Board and OSG as being strong. However, there would seem to be a slight shift in confidence from Sport Ireland's perspective following the performances in Tokyo and, what Sport Ireland believes, to be a reduced level of proactive communication and engagement from the HPP into Sport Ireland on high performance matters. There is an awareness of the need to create a greater alignment around this relationship going forward.

The Irish Sailing Community (the Club base) would benefit from having an increased awareness and understanding of the HPP. The HPP athletes have all developed through the club system on to the HPP. Their journey & their endeavours to be world class should be shared more with club members to enhance the sense of pride and connection the club community have with their HPP.

## Review of Tokyo Games

It would be remiss not to reference the impact that the pandemic had on the work of the HPP and the training and competition exposure and environments of the athletes for significantly important periods in the cycle. While management, coaches and athletes describe themselves as having adapted well to challenges and uncertainty they faced, the impact on preparation and performance cannot be overlooked.

12

The athletes who competed in the Tokyo Games, for the most part, accepted the situation as it was and got on with it potentially because they still had their focus on the Games ahead. There was positive feedback in relation to Fukuroi but at their Olympic accommodation base, athletes reported challenges with a sense of isolation due to the location, travel times to sailing venue from the hotel, lack of facilities, time on their own (leading to over-thinking) restricted movements, sharing rooms, poor quality of food etc.

3

Those athletes who didn't qualify fared less favourably with a number highlighting the struggle with the uncertainty, trying to stay motivated around preparation for competitions that may not happen, not having access to train on the water, training from home and away from home for extended periods which included family concerns for their health and wellbeing etc.

4

Losing the intended main accommodation base was a critical factor in relation to the quality of the team's final taper and preparations. However, we understand that this issue didn't impact the top (larger) nations as they managed to hold their preferred bases due potentially in part to the resources they have at their disposal and a greater ability to influence. Smaller nations don't have the same degree of resources or influence in this regard potentially placing a team like Ireland at an unfair disadvantage.

The container at the Games was highly valued by staff & athletes and they were extremely appreciative of the Foundation for its provision of this critical support.

5

6

The increased workload placed on the coaches around the operational set up, venue compliance administration, and COVID compliance administration placed an undue burden on the coaching staff and must have affected their personal recovery.

Overall, there was a lack of support on site compared to competitors e.g. access to psychology and physio support, boat repairs etc. and management reported the challenge in securing that support for the duration of the Games.

7

8

The absence of a rules expert was also highlighted as a reducing factor. However, this support was available remotely.

Notwithstanding the above, athletes, management & coaches felt their preparation was strong in the lead in, at holding camps and during the Games.

9

## The 49er Measurement Infraction:

The measurement infraction experienced by the 49er crew was avoidable. Both the coaches and athletes highlighted that the cause was due to a harness that had deteriorated i.e. a wearing down of the hydrophobic layer of the harness leading it to absorb more water and therefore increasing its weight.

1

2

The harness was checked too far out from the regatta. There was no protocol in place to identify red flags in the system and appropriate action to be taken and also no checks and balances protocol.

3

Checks were conducted regularly by the athletes and this was noted by the Institute of Sport Director who was at the Games. However, there was an over-confidence in the checks conducted.

4

It is understood that Harnesses were checked and weighed at the test event in 2019. Management only became aware of this after the infraction incident in Tokyo.

## Athlete Support Environment

It is appreciated that the cost profile & context of sailing is very different to many other HP sports and there is a resource constraint in terms of the support which can be provided to the athletes. It is critical to remain focused on creating a support environment that maximises the resources provided through Sport Ireland HP programme funding and those generated by the IS Foundation on an ongoing basis to ensure no medal is left behind due to an absence of a support deemed to be fundamental and essential to athlete performance in a world class system striving to achieve consistent major medal outputs.

1

2

The establishment of the HP HQ base at Irish Lights in Dun Laoghaire is a significant evolution for the HP system and the support environment. It has been very well received by athletes and staff. To cultivate a team identity, a team is enhanced by having a home base in which to develop that identity together. While having a training facility the team can call home is a positive development, opportunities have been identified to make some basic improvements to facilities and equipment at the site, should that be feasible. There is also an issue in relation to accommodation for athletes travelling to Dun Laoghaire and the impact which their current travelling time is having on the quality of their recovery.

## Sports Science & Medicine Support

Much of the support science and medicine resources are focused on the physical conditioning and physiotherapy with other supports such as psychology, nutrition, and medicine being provided on an ad hoc basis. There is significant potential to innovate in this space.

1

2

The more resourced services of strength and conditioning (S&C) and physiotherapy receive good ratings from athletes. They are well regarded and respected by athletes in terms of the programmes and supports he delivers. However, there are some risks that need to be considered regarding having one person covering both roles (given the level of IP on athletes and understanding of the demands on world class sailors) should that person be either lost to the system or absent for an extended period. There is no defined contingency plan around this single point of dependency with a wider responsibility.

Athletes can be less proactive regarding the more ad hoc support services due potentially to the focus placed on these by management or the availability and visibility of these services as an integral part of the support culture.

3

4

Management could be more demanding of the Sport Ireland Institute when making the case for more sports science and medicine resources around the HPP.

5

In relation to optimising the support environment for the HP athletes, consideration should be given to leveraging a major but untapped asset i.e. former athletes who could represent a significant resource to the HP programme in achieving its objectives. These athletes (who have had significant careers competing on the world stage and who have had a very positive experience of the HPP) could be encouraged to share their experiences and the lessons they've learned. There is a young group at present in the HPP and there is significant potential to influence and leverage this incredibly valuable resource to educate, communicate and mentor these young athletes.

## Culture, Values & Standards

The athletes' understanding of the values, behaviours and standards as they apply to a world class environment is limited in its focus. Management recognise there is an opportunity to take a deeper look at the HPP/team culture now that the senior team is centralised at the HP HQ.

1

2

The values, behaviours and standards within the HPP and senior team could be better defined and more representative of the entire team.

3

In terms of a more consistent cadence around reviewing internal practices on a regular basis forming a more deliberate 'lessons learned culture,' management should revisit the existing review practices to ensure that they are more holistic in focus and encompass not only athlete performance but the wider support system and rigour in preparation, coaching and support services.

4

Separate to performance reviews, it would be prudent to implement (if not already in place) a bi-annual operational review to ensure internal systems and procedures are effective, efficient and robust.

## Management & Coaching

The HP programme has a good mix of world class coaches and developing towards world class among their number. The PD is one of the most experienced among his peers in the Irish high-performance sport system.

1

2

The management structure of the HPP went through an evolution after the Rio games with the appointment of a Head Coach. This new role changed the distribution of responsibilities across the PD and Head Coach roles.

3

The importance of the role the PD plays in relation to fundraising with the IS Foundation is established. However, the OSG needs to review the investment in time spent on this aspect of the PD's role to ensure it doesn't distract from his primary accountabilities.

4

Athletes raised the need for greater contact time with their coaches and this warrants further discussion internally



# Communication

Communication is often an area of challenge in these reviews with scope for improvement often highlighted. Overall communication could be more proactive, detailed and consistent around some of the areas and aspects of the programme.

1

There may be systems & processes already developed in relation to these areas but perhaps these need to be reviewed and reinstated. These include:

-  A clear articulation, education and communication on the funding levels which athletes can expect at different levels of programme e.g. carded athlete, training partner, emerging athlete from the development programme etc.
-  A clarity in relation to how athletes are inducted into the programme, what they can expect from the programme and what the programme expects from them. Also increased clarity in relation to the transition from the Academy to the senior programme and what that transition will involve with potentially mentors/buddy system in place to support them.
-  Discussion & communication around onboarding new athletes and more importantly offboarding of athletes who haven't made it or have been deselected for some reason and ensuring that the appropriate time and sensitivity is taken in relation to this communication.

2

As a general observation on communication, there is potential to enhance the overall communication in relation to the HPP, at IS Board & OSG level (as outlined above) and also within the wider sailing community. There is considerable interest in the athletes and the HPP and significant opportunity to leverage this from a communication perspective.

## Selection Policy & Process

The current selection policy and process have been through a rigorous process and are regarded as being robust. However, Covid provided a unique challenge and had a significant impact.

1

2

Consideration could be given to building in a “force majeure” provision to the Selection Policy to deal with unforeseen and unanticipated situations.

3

Communication with athletes who do not qualify needs to be enhanced with the time taken to do this with sensitivity and respect and to explain the context and rationale. The athletes (and their families) need to have a clear understanding of what they are signing up to in terms of the policy and an education around how difficult the qualification process is and their potential prospects of success (based on statistics to date etc.). As outlined above, maybe former HP athletes (successful and not) could provide support and resources around this process.

4

There should be continued openness & transparency in relation to the selection process (especially given the abridged timeline to Paris).

## Conclusion

As outlined above, the purpose of this document is to provide a high-level summary of the Review and the headline findings. A comprehensive report was issued to the Review Steering Panel which outlined the detailed findings, supporting evidence and recommendations based on the data and information shared during the review and also shares some perspectives and comparatives based on our experience of HP environments.

It was a privilege for Uppercut to be asked to complete this review on behalf of Irish Sailing and we deeply appreciate the extremely high levels of engagement by everyone involved throughout the review process. We were struck by the openness of this interaction and the obvious care, concern and passion for Sailing and the HPP. It reflected a deep and admirable curiosity and desire to learn by the President, OSG Chair, Management, Coaching staff and athletes.

The expressed desire by all is that Irish Sailing fully utilise the insights and lessons gleaned from this review to move towards Paris, LA and beyond with a renewed sense of purpose, responsibility, standards and ownership. Irish Sailing has a unique opportunity to own and drive the changes outlined in this report.

I wish Irish Sailing; its Board, OSG, management team, coaches, athletes and support staff every success in the weeks, months and years ahead.



**Gary Keegan**  
CEO - Uppercut

# Uppercut Consulting Ltd



uppercut.ie



uppercut-ireland



@UppercutIrl

