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Interview by Josie Crawley

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TEAMWORK BEYOND THE COURT – LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP, TRUST, AND HIGH PERFORMANCE FROM ELITE SPORT: AN INTERVIEW WITH HAYDEN CROFT

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INTRODUCTION

Associate Professor Hayden Croft brings a unique perspective to the study of teamwork. As an academic, educator, and performance analyst, he has spent years working across both higher education and elite sport. Most recently, he was part of the Silver Ferns Netball environment during their successful Commonwealth Games campaign, contributing to the team's performance analysis and broader support structures.

In this interview with colleague Josie Crawley, Hayden reflects on what he has learned from working within high-performing sport teams. While elite sport and healthcare may appear to operate in very different worlds, Hayden proposes that the foundation traits of high-performing teams are much alike. Whether the goal is winning a gold medal, delivering excellent patient care, or supporting student success, Hayden explains how teams thrive when people understand their roles, trust one another, communicate effectively, and remain focused on a shared purpose. The following interview is based on the edited transcript of an online conversation.



Figure 1. Sport Analyst: Associate Professor Hayden Croft with gold medal, 2026 Commonwealth Games. Photograph: Hayden Croft.

Your career spans both elite sport and academia. Where did your understanding of teamwork begin?

Teamwork started for me as a participant. Growing up, I played in different teams, had different coaches, and experienced different clubs and organisations. Those early experiences showed me that success is rarely about one individual. During university, I moved into support roles through

coaching rugby and performance analysis in rugby and netball, and over time I found myself more interested in how teams function than in individual performance alone.

The interesting thing is that the principles of teamwork are remarkably similar whether you are working in sport or in education.

One of the first things is defining who the team actually is. People naturally assume the team is the athletes on the court. In the Silver Ferns environment, the team is much broader. It includes coaches, management, support staff, and players. Everyone contributes to performance. If you only focus on the athletes, you miss a large part of what creates success. But the membership can be fluid. There are times where we don't travel with the team but rather support remotely. In this situation I don't feel that we are part of the team in quite the same way.

You identified three foundations of effective teamwork. What are they?

The first is role clarity. People need to understand exactly what they are responsible for. The second is minimising role conflict. If people think others are doing their job or responsibilities overlap unnecessarily, friction develops. The third is sustainable workload. People need enough time and capacity to do their work well while still having room for creativity and improvement. When you get those three things right, people tend to become self-motivated and engaged, and they innovate.

For most teams, workload has to be managed. As a team we need to establish what are the key priorities and then focus our energy first and foremost on those, try to be a little smarter each time: there are things we should do, things we shouldn't do (the black and the white). And then there are things that we could do but they're not critically important. With workload, we have to create space and understand that we can chose not to do some tasks; for example, not replying to that e-mail, to maintain focus on the things that are more important in the moment. It's navigating the grey areas, understanding what priorities are. Finding the work that has to get done, doing that and then keeping a little bit of stuff people enjoy but may not be important

What does a performance analyst contribute?

At a technical level, the role involves collecting and reporting information about performance. That includes statistics, trends, and video analysis, and identifying areas for improvement. By looking at certain phases of play where play is breaking down we can identify why they're breaking down and what improvements could be made. But the role is much broader than data. You work closely with coaches to turn the analysed information into knowledge and then communicate that knowledge so athletes can act on it. You have to tie in with the messaging that the coach is trying to convey or the game plan they're trying to work on. You are in a core role, but with other roles around you, so you must fit in with the team.

Over time you also find opportunities to contribute beyond your formal role. Sometimes that means producing motivational videos, solving technical problems, or helping maintain the general environment. Good teams encourage people to step into spaces where they can add value; even if that is making sure the team rooms are set up correctly, the projector works, and speakers are connected. If technical problems aren't resolved, they can drag the focus of a meeting away. You make sure your core role is smooth and operates as efficiently and as effectively as possible, so that you have space and room to step into other spaces where you see fit!

My role with the Silver Ferns started back when I was working at Otago Polytechnic teaching performance analysis. Like many opportunities in sport, it came through relationships and networks more than formal recruitment processes. While teaching performance analysis, I had developed connections within elite sport environments such as the Southern Steel (netball team), where Noeline Taurua was head coach for a year. When an opportunity arose in 2018, I was invited by Noeline [then head coach of the Silver Ferns] into the performance analysis role for our national team.

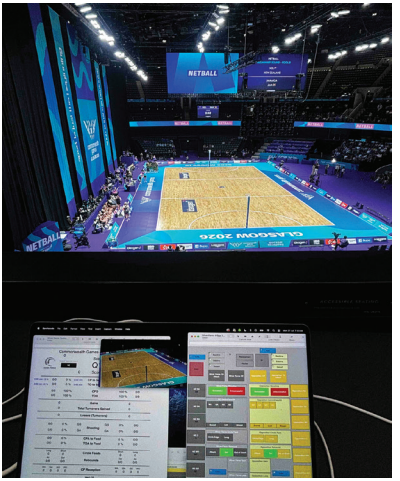


Figure 2. Analyst tools at the Commonwealth Games 2026. Photograph: Hayden Croft.

High-performance sport is often very campaign-based—for example, the Commonwealth Games is the pinnacle event of a four-year cycle. Noeline bought me in to the team to help formulate a high-performance environment, contribute to a campaign, and then continue to build those relationships over time through a collection of short-term campaigns and remote work outside of these. For me, it has been about developing trust and maintaining strong working relationships over several years. The team being satisfied with the work I do means I have ended up staying in that environment. I do want to stay, because I find it a really stimulating and a positive environment to work within.



Figure 3. Glasgow Netball arena at night. Photograph: Hayden Croft.

What are the most important characteristics of a high-performing team?

There are many factors, but leadership is where it begins. I do not think the best leadership is hierarchical—hierarchies are the least resilient in nature. Complex systems that work and adapt together, these are what evolve to be robust. Old fashioned leadership is based on control and power, whereas most high growth companies and evolving organisations are a little bit more dynamic and adaptable. Traditional models tend to be about directing people and telling them what to do without necessarily recognising team members' strengths.

The most effective leadership I have experienced is based on empowerment. You select good people, trust them to do their jobs, and give them space to contribute. In high-performance environments, everyone is there because they have expertise. Good leaders recognise that and create conditions where expertise can flourish.

Watch out for clichés and generalisation about leadership and people, including in formal courses: sometimes they have a top-down, Drill-Sergeant philosophy. Listen to others' advice, but at the end of the day, you've got to formulate your own approach, understanding that teams are dynamic, complex neural networks full of unique humans. That means you can't really generalise answers to problems, not when the problems involve humans. There's not one right way to do things. You need to sit in those thinking spaces—think about everything you're doing, think through problems in the context of the team you're working with. I think that's where you make a huge amount of ground as a high-performing team; leadership that empowers the team.



Figure 4. Silver Ferns training in Manchester, UK.

The Silver Ferns had to bounce back from adversity. It's well documented that in 2025 the Board and the senior management of the organisation stepped in and made changes in the environment and to the team. They used information and made some decisions on standing the coaches down. We were a high-performing team and there are always small areas to work on, improvements to make, but we weren't given an opportunity to address those. This disempowerment made the success at the Commonwealth games a year later so much better. We put a clinical campaign together over the last month at the Commonwealth Games and were able to bring the team and the players together in an incredibly positive manner. The campaign had several phases, stages, and steps of learning for the athletes—and then, the gold. Putting a great performance out at the end is probably one of the biggest highlights for me. It was great to know that we could pull everything together after a really tumultuous year and go back to our processes and the things that we know are effective, that we believe are important, and drive through that to get a good outcome. Leadership is both a science and an art. Science is the factual evidence, information based and structured. Every year I'll bring something slightly different or new into the environment. Not a big change, but an addition to build on top of what we have done previously. You could call this a practice-based evidence approach. Art is understanding people, the feeling and the nuance, the complexity and the timing of it all. Human beings are complex. Generalisations about humans rarely work, one size doesn't fit all. The more we understand individuals, the more effectively we can communicate with them, support them and bring them together as a team. The science and the art—I don't think you can do one well without the other.

You often describe success in terms of "we" rather than "I." Why?

Because no one works in isolation. In elite sport we have coaches, psychologists, physiotherapists, analysts, management, and athletes working together. If everyone pursues their own priorities without alignment, performance suffers. We spend a lot of time discussing what we are doing and why. Alignment is not about everybody thinking the same way. It is about making sure everyone is moving toward the same outcome.

For the Silver Ferns we might have 12 to 14 players travelling, six management people, a physiotherapist, a strength and conditioning coach, a psychologist, a couple of coaches and the performance analyst. The strength and conditioning coach might be trying to get certain recovery in or loading up, but we're driving a different focus and training around skill sets and strategy. There could be a conflict there and we would be working against each other for our own priorities. The same with the psychologist. If I'm giving feedback that's condescending or making fun of players or detrimental to their wellbeing, that works against the psychologist's strategy. To avoid this, we consult and talk constantly around what we're doing so that we, the whole team, work in alignment with each other. This way we have a team environment that's focused on what will make things better and then all the other stuff around that is secondary.

How important is communication in creating that alignment?

Communication is critical, but not simply in the sense of talking. Communication includes behaviour, timing, and authenticity. You can tell people they are empowered, but if your actions show distrust they will believe your actions rather than your words. Good communication requires people to think carefully about the impact of what they are doing and saying. It's not necessarily the words you say, but the way you communicate that tells people if they are authentically valued.



Figure 5. Analyst strategy meeting. Photograph: Hayden Croft.

How do you give effective feedback without negative impact?

Trust is foundational. Teams take time to formulate and to build trust and respect for each other's roles. There will be phases in any team where you're building trust and it can take a long time. An established team might have higher trust, not get on well, or might have new members. You tailor your feedback based on what stage of respect and trust the group is in.

You can only really give constructive criticism if there is already a respectful relationship. If you criticise someone without having a good functioning, working, respectful relationship, that's going to be detrimental to the team. In a new team I would use more open questioning and exploration because I am still learning about the individuals. You need to show you are trying to understand why someone made those decisions or did it that way. You need to listen—that's the whole purpose of questioning, not just get the person to self-reflect. If you question without listening, then you're not authentic and people read or pick up authenticity really quickly. In an established team with strong trust, feedback can be much more direct. The key is understanding the person in front of you and why they made the decisions they made.

You do need to be authentic in your feedback. Telling people they're great all the time without actual authentic reasons builds distrust. Balance that with realism; if we don't do a job effectively, then we'd expect to be called out on that. Feedback does require thinking before you give it [about] how you communicate with people and what you're trying to achieve in the sense of the bigger picture, not just in that incident at that time.

How do you encourage quieter people to contribute?

I do not think every person needs to contribute in the same way. Some people are vocal and naturally visible. Others contribute through preparation, observation, or action. Diversity is a strength. Rather than forcing people to speak, we try to create opportunities that let their confidence develop naturally. It's about fostering people. The goal is not equal contribution in exactly the same form. The goal is effective contribution. Teams are clearly defined by the outcome everyone's working towards. So you work backwards from that outcome and know who can fill the gaps or do the different parts of the role.

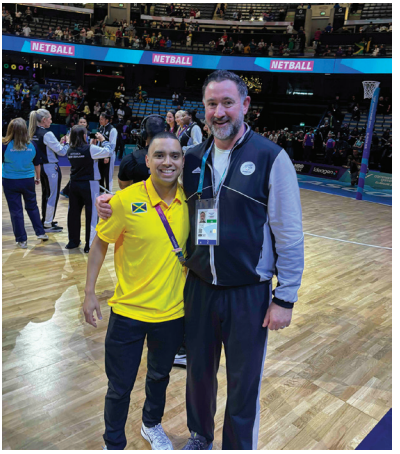


Figure 6. Hayden Croft with a former student, now the Performance Analyst for the Jamaica Netball team. Photograph: Hayden Croft.

Does that apply in both sport and academic teams?

Absolutely. We often see very different personalities within successful teams. Some people lead from the front. Others contribute quietly and consistently. What matters is whether people can perform their role effectively and whether the team values those different forms of contribution. This requires people to be really clear on what outcome everyone is working towards and for individuals to drop the insecure feeling that they have to be expert in everything. Rather, everyone [should] appreciate that each person in a team and each different team have a specialised skill set.

What can healthcare teams learn from sport?

There are strong similarities. Both involve multidisciplinary teams working toward an important outcome. In healthcare, everyone brings specialist expertise. The challenge is understanding and respecting those differences while remaining focused on shared goals. People need confidence that their expertise is valued and that their contribution matters. Respect is central.

What advice would you offer leaders working in high-pressure environments such as healthcare and academia?

Ensure roles are clear. Then be clear about priorities. Not everything can be done at once. Teams need clarity around what matters most. At the same time, people need some autonomy and some opportunity to do work they find meaningful. If workloads become overwhelming, you have to make conscious decisions about where energy is best spent.

How does a team move from being good to becoming excellent?

The first step is defining what excellence actually means. In elite sport that is relatively straightforward because success is often measured through results, trophies, and medals. In other settings it can be more complicated. Once people share an understanding of the goal, what excellence means in that setting, they can align themselves around it. After that, leaders often need to remove barriers rather than create more controls and give people freedom to work without bogging them down with critical analysis of how they're performing.

What final insight would you leave readers with?

Be careful of generalisations. High-performing teams often share similar characteristics, but people and contexts are always different. However, the principles underlying the strongest teams apply whether you are working in elite sport, education, or healthcare.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps Associate Professor Croft's most important message for healthcare professionals is that teamwork is fundamentally a human endeavour. "The strongest teams," he says, "understand individuals, value diversity, build trust, communicate well and remain focused on their shared purpose." Technical expertise, professional knowledge and organisational systems are important, but trust, communication, respect, and understanding remain at the heart of every successful team.

Hayden Croft (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6848-3000) is Head of College (Health) at Otago Polytechnic and a performance analyst with the Silver Ferns. His work spans higher education, leadership, research and elite sport, with a particular interest in how high-performing teams learn and performance. He brings practical experience from international netball and rugby into his teaching, research and organisational leadership.

Josie Crawley (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1011-3335), has been applying teamwork principles while educating health professionals in practice and tertiary settings for over 30 years. She achieved national awards for her tertiary teaching and Editors choice for her reflective writing. Her research platform explores creating transformative learning opportunities, narrative inquiry, and phenomenological experience.