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Schools develop strategies to level the playing field

AFR Weekend, Australia

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Girls in senior school are successfully juggling their academic studies with elite sport performance, writes Janet Stone.

Australia Women remain under-represented compared to men in organised sport, not just as participants but also as coaches, officials, administrators and board members according to government organisation, Clearing-House for Sport.

The profile of women and girls in professional sport has hit the headlines recently in part thanks to the Matildas' sporting success, combined with the gradual rise in popularity of watching and supporting professional female teams and athletes.

Australian schools are successfully cultivating the next generation of professional sports women, while not letting academic attainment slide.

Sophie McIntosh, a year 12 student at Strathcona Girls Grammar in Melbourne is studying for her VCE while playing elite under-age AFL football for the Oakleigh Chargers. Despite this tricky balance she remains a high academic achiever.

"Balancing my academic workload with training can be challenging, but planning out my schedule helps," she says. "I start by prioritising my most important assignments and schedule time to work on these. With focus, I can be productive with the time I have available to study."

Strathcona Girls Grammar offers coaching to students as part of their "wholebeing" strategy. The holistic framework not only focuses on achieving high levels of wellbeing, but also on significantly decreasing students' illbeing, and improving their resilience, explains Jess Mitton, head of house at Strathcona Girls Grammar.

"At Strathcona we have a coaching model called PAW, which stands for Pathways, Academics, Wellbeing," she says. "The program enables our year

10-12 students to meet with their senior mentor at least twice per term to talk

about their goals and devise a clear plan to work towards them."

"Students who partake in high-level sports and co-curricular activities can use the program to map out effective time management strategies in order to successfully balance their commitments and academic studies," she adds.

Some schools have designed tailored programs to support students throughout their sporting and academic endeavours, while being mindful of wellbeing. Pymble Ladies' College, on the upper north shore in Sydney, has

run the Pymble Elite Sportswomen Program (PESP) since 2007.

The program was established after Ellyse Perry was selected to represent Australia in both cricket and soccer at 16 years of age as a year 11 Pymble student. It assists the school's elite athletes in balancing their academic studies with their sporting commitments.

Eligibility for the program requires the girls to be in a state-represented team competing at national championships for team sports, or place at state championships in individual sports such as swimming or athletics.

PESP co-ordinator Skye Halliday

meets with students in the program once a week to review their individualised performance plans. "We set academic goals, long term and short-term performance goals as well as looking at their sleep patterns, and pre and post-training dietary requirements," she says.

"We also set goals that they work towards achieving in terms of their strength and their performance as well as how to work on a growth mindset and build their resilience.

"They also complete self-reflection exercises on their performance and a big part of that is looking at their sports

training commitments and how they're meeting their academic requirements in terms of homework and assessments before working on skill development in order to manage both."

Longer term planning is also part of the program at Pymble, explains Halliday. "We map ahead assessment tasks for the term alongside sporting events and training to ensure any clashes can be addressed in advance and students can still complete assess-

ments."

Many students don't plan on sacrificing their studies for sport after school either. When asked what she plans to do after high school, Sophie says "I'd really love to play AFLW, but I've also got my sights on studying engineering or science at university".

"Getting selected to play AFLW is largely performance-based, so how I play this season will impact if I get picked in the AFLW draft at the end of the year. Even if I do play AFLW, I still plan on studying alongside this commitment."

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Sophie McIntosh (above)



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Pymble Ladies' College in Sydney runs an elite sportswomen program to help students pursue their academic and sporting dreams.