

Former Black Sticks Hockey Great Darren Smith Appointed to Softball High Performance Role

A former Black Sticks great is swapping his hockey stick for a softball bat.

Darren Smith, who played 212 games for the Black Sticks and was the national men's team assistant coach for six years, takes up a new role next week as Softball New Zealand's high performance director.

Smith, 41, has just returned to New Zealand after almost three years as national women's team coach in Ireland.

Softball New Zealand chief executive Tony Giles said Smith stood out as the best candidate because of his experience in elite international sport, as a player and coach.

"What I looked for was the capability to start with a greenfield site and design, build and implement an internationally recognised programme that would lead to world class performances in the medium to long-term," Giles said. "This appointment, I believe, will speak volumes to the credibility of our intended HP programme."

Smith, who left for Ireland after ending his Black Sticks coaching role after the 2012 London Olympic Games, said he was "looking for opportunities outside hockey" on his return.

He said the softball job stood out. "It's a fantastic opportunity to work in a different sport. I think softball is a great game, it's played by a number of people around New Zealand and the Black Sox [men's national team] have got a great history which is second to none.

"But I also think the women's programme has made some good progress through how the age-group teams have performed and the most recent world championship results [for the White Sox]. "We are really hopeful that an Olympic berth is made available for softball in 2020 at Tokyo. That would be a real attraction for the women's game, which I think has a lot of potential."

Smith played a few years of junior softball, as "catcher and reserve pitcher" for the Kaikorai and Green Island clubs in Dunedin, before devoting himself to a hockey career which included three Commonwealth Games tournaments between 1998 and 2006 and two World Cups.

After 11 years as a Black Sticks player, he became assistant coach in 2007, stepping down in 2012 after a 17-season involvement with the team. Smith doesn't expect he'll have to do "any hands-on softball coaching" in his new job. "There's plenty of top softball coaches who can do that."

But he said high performance principles and practices were transferable and he would "work hard on trying to develop player pathways and trying to grow the sport in the high performance area".

Smith will initially be based at High Performance Sport New Zealand's (HPSNZ) Auckland headquarters where he won't have far to turn for expert softball advice. Eddie Kohlhase, the first New Zealander to win world championship gold medals as a player and a coach, is a HPSNZ Senior Performance Consultant.

Although Smith officially starts his new role on Monday, he has already met Black Sox coach Mark Sorenson and White Sox mentor Kevin Gettins. "Those two gentlemen will be invaluable in leading softball into the future."