

New Zealand's [longest-standing football academy](#) has been through the wringer the past few seasons.

Covid-19, staffing fall-outs and the rise of another academy just up the road left Olé in a “lull” and

That was until fresh blood – with extensive international and professional experience – came in to help re-ignite the academy that holds so much history.

After seven months in the gig, the academy's new technical director and head coach, Alan Koch, told the ***Herald*** that Olé had been in a bit of a “lull” in recent years, but things had “really started to crank” again.

Koch, who has previously worked in the Major League Soccer competition in America, said Olé had “gone through some changes in the last little while”.

“To be honest, I think any organisation that's been around for 25 years is going to have its ups and its downs and I think a bit of a backlash post-Covid happened here at Olé – just like it happened in, many places – things kind of slowed down a little bit.”



Olé Football Academy technical director Alan Koch welcomes the competition from the Wellington Phoenix Academy. Photo / Supplied

“You’re never going to be able to knock it out of the park every single year,” Koch said.

Since being established in 1997, Olé has been considered New Zealand's premier football academy developing [some of New Zealand's most talented players](#): All Whites Elijah Just, Ryan Thomas, Callum McCowatt and Nando Pijnaker and junior Football Fern Maya Hahn, who switched national allegiance to Germany.

For much of the past decade, technical director [Declan Edge has been at the helm](#), and Ben Sippola is behind him as they partnered with clubs like Auckland's Eastern Suburbs, and Team Wellington in the National League, and Western Suburbs AFC locally. Different to a typical club's strategy, Olé's goal was to get players up to a standard to get them overseas playing professionally.

Through that mission, they continued to compete at the top level domestically, constantly producing talent until the bubble burst in 2020.

The ***Herald*** understands the staff fallout began before Edge left for a bigger opportunity with Torslanda IK in Sweden. Sippola also left a year later – and so did their top players.

With no one quite as experienced left taking the reigns completely (until 2023) when Edge and Sippola left, players across multiple age grades departed to other top clubs around the country, including the Wellington Phoenix Academy.

The Phoenix – the country's only professional club – extended their brand in 2013 to include development for younger footballers, which continues to grow to this day.

The Lower Hutt-based academy is very much keeping up with Olé and is the better-performing team of the two in Wellington's top men's league. They have about 150 players across five boys' and three girls' teams.

Though Koch doesn't think the Phoenix's rise has affected Olé directly, he does appreciate the competition.

"I think that the Phoenix being here [in Wellington] is great for each other because we're both, we're both doing the same thing, but we're both doing it in very, very different ways.

"If you go to the Phoenix, you go to the Phoenix to try and make it to the Phoenix first team – that's what professional clubs, that's what their mandate.

“But [Olé's] mandate is kind of unique,” Koch explained.

“It's what attracted me to come here is we're here to develop and produce players for all the clubs.

“We don't have a professional first team that, so we use the world as our motivator to get the players to different opportunities – and it's what the guys here have done in the past.

“It's what's allowed players to go play for other professional clubs.”

The exodus across the past two seasons left Ole (and Western Suburbs) struggling to compete in the top competition. In 2022, Western Suburbs not only missed out on National League qualification but came close to relegation from the Central League.

After Koch came in this year, Olé has been much more competitive domestically only narrowly missing out on the summer National League.

Koch said: “We are disappointed not to make the National League after chasing a Top 4 position all season. However, we are incredibly proud of taking the club from near the bottom of the table to near the top, we played a lot of under-18 players in our first team this season and doubled our points total from last year.

“The future is bright for this group,” Koch believes, and says the club's recent downfall was just “cyclical”.

“You go through your ups and downs and I think [Olé] had some amazing moments in its history.

“We just went through a little bit of a lull and I think everybody can feel we're heading back in a positive direction and we want to go back and achieve special things and maybe even do even bigger and better things.

“We have the framework here. It's a pretty special place.”