



Tall Blacks' endorse berry recovery powers

by Anne Hardie

Sujon Berries in Nelson invested substantial money to prove its blackcurrant powder matched its claims and now scientific research and some of the country's top athletes have given it the thumbs up for its ability to help performance and speed recovery.

For the past five years, some of New Zealand's top athletes from basketball and rugby players to cyclists and triathletes have been using Sujon's blackcurrant powder and endorsing its beneficial effects, but it still needed the science to prove its worth.

Now independent research at Chichester University has shown the powder dramatically lowers the accumulation of lactic acid in the muscles and improves recovery after exercise.

Results show it decreases peripheral resistance by 16% which means it increases blood flow and that helps clear waste products in the body during and after exercise. It also increases cardiac output by 26%, allowing an athlete to maintain a lower heart rate during physical exercise so that they can train harder.

All good news for the business that grew from John and Sue Gibb's berry garden 30 years ago to pioneering the frozen berry market in New Zealand and now research-backed health supplements.

In that time they have seen research within the blackcurrant and wider berry industry, but John said much of it had been generic research and little of it bankable.

"The majority of the research the industry has done so far is for anyone to use," he said. "But the industry needs to be bankable and to be bankable it needs to be customer focused."

So the company had "taken the highest risk of all" and invested in product awareness in a bid to turn it into commercial success.

"Here's a product that works and we have the science behind it – and athletes who have been using it for five years. It's a bankable product unique to New Zealand."

The plan now was to attract investors to grow the business and one way of doing that was through the New Zealand Trade and Enterprise Better by Capital programme which has been working with Sujon Berryfruit for a few months. The programme guides businesses through the capital-raising process by providing expertise and introducing them to capital networks within New Zealand and overseas.

Getting the scientific research and the endorsement of athletes was critical to growing the business and the company presented the findings at a function in Nelson last month (June).



Tall Black Mika Vukona, flanked by John and Sue Gibb, wanted to endorse their Sujon blackcurrant powder.

powder to get through intense "chunder" training sessions on the beach, she carried out her own "rough science" trial with the team using the Sujon blackcurrant powder and a placebo mix. Blood tests following the tough training sessions found a definite difference. Some of those on the placebo mix looked sick after demanding training sessions, which was a common response, whereas those on Sujon blackcurrant powder coped better, she said. While on tour overseas, the team suffered less coughs and colds than in the past and Dallison said the blackcurrant powder was the only difference. Now the science told them what the difference was and why.

The lactate accumulation was 14% lower at aerobic capacity which meant less lactic acid in the muscles and the increased blood flow decreased the total peripheral resistance by 16%, which basically helped them recover faster by clearing waste products including lactic acid, faster.

"As far as we are concerned, with our athletes, it makes a huge difference to their performance. It's about performance and recovery. Our athletes are believing this is happening and now we've got the science to back it up."

Science showed the blackcurrant powder helped athletes' performance, so Dallison said the next step was looking at what it could do for general health.

New Zealand Tall Black Mika Vukona also spoke at Sujon's presentation and told how he had been pretty sceptical about the powder back in 2009 when he trialled it. He described the physical stress for Tall Blacks during training and campaigns that had the athletes "putting their body on the line."

"With Sujon things started to happen. Those training sessions were easier. For your body but also in your head - you're more alert. So I'm a big believer in Sujon."

So much so, that he approached Sujon Berryfruit to ask if he could endorse its blackcurrant powder because he wanted to give something back.

Like the Tall Blacks, Triathlon New Zealand head coach Greg Fraine spoke of an exhausting training regime that was challenging physically and mentally for the athletes. Each year the athletes attended a challenging mountain camp to train at higher altitude and some athletes found their bodies would not shut down at night due to all the toxins.

"You can't train a tired athlete. The biggest thing is performance recovery so you can train more frequently and lift their standard."

His athletes found Sujon blackcurrant powder helped with the performance recovery process, so much so that the entire squad now took it in the morning before training and in the evening after training.

"Now athletes are asking for it because they believe in it."

New Zealand Trade and Enterprise regional manager for Nelson/Marlborough Lynne Korcheski also spoke at the presentation about the need to add value rather than relying on exporting more primary sector products.

High quality raw materials in New Zealand meant it was well placed for the health industry and customers were looking for brands with a high value of trust. So companies such as Sujon Berryfruit that had invested in research had the advantage of marketing high-value nutraceutical products, she said. **G**

Presenting the scientific research was New Zealand Tall Blacks' manager, Claire Dallison, who was convinced the blackcurrant powder was having a beneficial effect on the athletes after initial trials and now recommends it to the team.

Managing a national team of top athletes meant Dallison was constantly offered new health supplements and she was always cautious about trialling and adopting anything new. Whereas the blackcurrant powder she decided was a good food anyway and suitable to offer the team.

"We get so many things poked under our nose as a national team and this is one of the products I'm happy for them to take."

After a positive response from a couple of the athletes using the blackcurrant