

"You would get more spring out of the road surface on Lambton Quay," he said.

So after a ho-hum season Te Puni shifted this time to Auckland to work under the national high jump coach Bish McWatt.

In June 1986 came his 2.18m which was 3cm better than any other New Zealander had achieved. In trying for 2.21m at the Pacific Conference Games in the same competition, Te Puni had the mortification to pivot his body over the bar and actually stand up only to see the bar gently topple over.

During the PCG he beat the two top Australians and thus earned the top ranking in Australasia. He was considered a certainty for the Oceania team at the World Cup in Canberra but somehow John Atkinson of Australia who had cleared 2.28m in 1984 was chosen instead. Atkinson who was under an injury cloud, should never have been selected and he cleared a miserable 2.10m at Canberra to finish last in the field.

Te Puni said he was told by the American record holder (2.36m) Jimmy Howard that he (Te Puni) had the strength, speed and potential to clear 2.28m and should be looking for an American scholarship or international competition.

"I regret it now but I turned down a four-year athletics scholarship at the University of Washington in 1983 because it had come too quickly in my career after I had competed at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games and cleared 2.13m as an 18-year-old (finishing ahead of both the Aussie competitors).

"By 1985 I couldn't get a scholarship I had tried for, and money was a problem for my competing overseas. Over the years I've received \$4000 in grants from the NZ Sports Foundation and some domestic travel assistance through the national squad but in the meantime I've spent all my available cash on training and competing and I've lost job promotion opportunities and wages."

Te Puni was a strong prospect for the 1986 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh. He only needed to clear 2.19m to qualify but he developed a knee tendon injury which today is still not cleared with his specialist reluctant to operate. As well, Te Puni was not 100 percent in tune with the coaching methods of McWatt.

"It's my belief that Bish bases his methods on strength training whereas that doesn't really suit me. I think I need to concentrate more on speed and explosiveness. Mike (Beable) sees me as a power jumper who should develop more as a speed jumper. I haven't really developed the technique of speed jumping because Mike was the only guy in New Zealand who could teach me. He took me from 1.85m to 2.17m in only three seasons."



Te Puni cleared 2.14m whilst injured in an effort to qualify for Edinburgh but he was not selected. The winning leap at the 1986 Commonwealth Games for the bronze medal was 2.14m achieved by Canadian Alain Mettells whom Te Puni has beaten in three out of three competitions.

Late last year when this interview took place, Te Puni was in a quandary. He was working in Auckland as a hospital orderly in order to have more available time for training but he was trying to get a job in Wellington now that the Newtown Park track was at long last upgraded and now had the best high jump apron and track surface in the country. His winter training had been curtailed through his knee injury which had inhibited full pressure in jumping and weight training.

Te Puni said he was hopeful of coaxing Beable into resuming coaching him.

"I lack motivation and Mike simply gets me going. If he says be somewhere at a certain time, I'm there. I've got to decide whether I can jump whilst carrying an injury and try qualifying for the 1987 World Champs in Rome or have an operation and give most of the 1986-87 season away.

"But I want to realise my potential. I want to achieve 2.30m. Dwight Stones cleared a world record of 2.32m at aged 22 in 1976 and then he didn't improve until 1984 in the USA Olympic trials when he cleared a USA record 2.34m at aged 31."

Te Puni also competes successfully in the 110m hurdles event and at the 1986 national championships he came home fourth, clocking a hand-timed 14.6 seconds.

Te Puni whose father is Mita Raremoana Kariki Te Puni of the Ngati Porou (ex Ruatoria) tribe, says he studied Maori at Tawa College.

"A lot of people think of me as a Greek or Italian because I look a little Continental and because so few Maori

people have been dedicated to athletics."

Te Puni says the only other Maori high jumper he has seen at national level is Peter Ranganui of the West Coast North Island centre who cleared 1.95m as a colt (under 18) at last year's national colts championships.

From a family of a sister and two brothers, Roger is the sole national identity in the family.

Te Puni is a likeable, perky and outwardly confident person who hit the top of athletics in New Zealand quicker than almost anyone else in the sport's history here.

Te Puni said his meteoric rise hasn't been too quick, "but I've had the wind taken out of me - making the Commonwealth Games at 18 (the second youngest in the overall New Zealand team) and then missing out of the Games at 22."

"Overall, highjumpers are treated fairly poorly. We get ripped-off in some places. Sometimes running events interfere with the high jump. On occasions last season, officials in Auckland turned off the lights at the Mt Smart Stadium mid-way through the high jump event. Some officials couldn't give a damn about field events like the high jump. But actually it is one of the most dramatic and exciting of athletic events."

To prove that Te Puni is an "athlete" and not simply a high jumper, in 1984 he competed in the Canterbury decathlon championships and scored 3,800 points after the first day and was heading for 7000-plus points.

Finally, the typical Te Puni high jump is: running in from right to left, taking a 30 metre approach and running on an acute curve. He finishes his run parallel with the bar before taking off on his left foot in a Fosbury Flop technique which is driving off the free knee, arching the back and flicking the heels over the bar. Easy try it sometime.