

THE 2013 NZRPA PLAYER AWARDS WINNERS

Each year, our members honour the best and brightest in the NZRPA annual players' awards – the players' choice. We are pleased to introduce two new awards focusing on the Players' Women's Player of the year for both Sevens and Fifteens. From peer to peer, these are who the players thought shone in the 2013 season capping another great year for New Zealand rugby. We chat to the winners about their achievements and where they're heading this year.

PLAYERS' WOMEN'S XV'S PLAYER OF THE YEAR

AMIRIA RULE

THE CHRISTCHURCH SCHOOL TEACHER, WHO MADE HER BLACK FERNS DEBUT IN 2000, RETURNED TO THE NATIONAL TEAM FOR THE SERIES AGAINST ENGLAND LAST YEAR AND WAS BACK TO HER BEST. THE 30-YEAR-OLD WAS AN INSPIRATIONAL FIGURE AT SECOND-FIVE, HELPING THE BLACK FERNS SWEEP THE SERIES 3-0 IN THEIR BUILD-UP TO THIS YEAR'S WOMEN'S WORLD CUP.

NZRPA: What was your on-field highlight?

AR: It would have to be redeeming ourselves during the English test series. In game two, we were 9-7 down with time up on the clock but I felt there was always belief we could score a try. Seeing Selica Winiata score after 10 phases and 95m was an unbelievable moment.

NZRPA: And your off-field highlight?

AR: Getting myself conditionally fit again after two children. I worked extremely hard to make sure I was competitively threatening on the field again. The sacrifice of time away from

Kupa and Mila made rugby personal so I had to ensure it was worthwhile and I was doing the best I could.

NZRPA: What does this award mean to you?

AR: I'm flattered to be recognised by my peers and I guess it's nice to be acknowledged for the efforts you put into a game you love.

NZRPA: What are your aims for 2014?

AR: I want to keep working hard off the field to push myself physically where I've never gone before. As a team, we want to build from where the Black Ferns left off from last year, in preparation for World Cup in July.



AMIRIA RULE

PLAYERS' YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR

IHAIA WEST

THE 169 ITM CUP POINTS ONLY TELL A FRACTION OF THE IHAIA WEST STORY IN 2013, AS THE HAWKE'S BAY FIRST-FIVE JINKED, STEPPED AND BLASTED HIS WAY THROUGH AN ARRAY OF OPPOSITION DEFENCES. THE 22-YEAR-OLD HELPED THE MAGPIES INTO THE CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL AND HAS RECENTLY BEEN CALLED INTO THE CHIEFS AS INJURY COVER.

NZRPA: What was your on-field highlight?

IW: Winning the Ranfurly Shield against Otago was incredibly special. It was a long time coming for Hawke's Bay and it was pretty cool to bring it home.

NZRPA: And your off-field highlight?

IW: I had a nephew born last year and it was great to spend some time with him and his older sister. The Shield parades through Napier and Hastings were right up there too, seeing the whole province come out.

NZRPA: What does this award mean to you?

IW: It's really cool to get the votes from other players and be recognised by them. Hopefully they haven't noticed me too much and target me on the field!

NZRPA: What are your aims for 2014?

IW: I'm just looking to have another big ITM Cup with Hawke's Bay and really push for a Super 15 contract in 2015. If opportunities come up in Super Rugby this year, it will be a great bonus.

PLAYERS' SEVENS PLAYER OF THE YEAR (WOMEN)

KAYLA MCALISTER

FORMER SILVER FERN NETBALLER AND NORTHERN MYSTICS PLAYER KAYLA MCALISTER ENJOYED A BREAK-OUT YEAR IN THE ALL BLACK WOMEN'S SEVENS TEAM. MCALISTER'S NEW ZEALAND TEAM WON THE WOMEN'S RUGBY WORLD CUP SEVENS TITLE WITH A 29-12 WIN OVER CANADA IN THE FINAL IN MOSCOW, BACKING UP THEIR WIN IN THE INAUGURAL IRB WOMEN'S SEVENS WORLD SERIES AFTER VICTORIES IN THREE OF THE FOUR ROUNDS IN 2012/13.

NZRPA: What was your on-field highlight?

KM: Definitely the Women's Rugby World Cup in Russia, playing on an international stage with the world's best men and women. It was a great experience, as well as representing our country and families, returning home with the cup.

NZRPA: And your off-field highlight?

KM: Being part of a group of well-bonded 'sisters' and a tight management team, traveling to six different countries representing New Zealand and my family in the black jersey.

NZRPA: What does this award mean to you?

KM: It is very special! Receiving an award within New Zealand rugby is a huge honour and I appreciate the people around me and those who voted.

NZRPA: What are your aims for 2014?

KM: I want to play to the best of my ability and, as a team, to be competitive at each tournament on the IRB circuit this year [Atlanta, Brazil, China, Amsterdam].

PLAYERS' SEVENS PLAYER OF THE YEAR (MEN)

TIM MIKKELSON

DURING ANOTHER MAGNIFICENT SEASON WHERE THE ALL BLACK SEVENS SIDE WON THE HSBC SEVENS WORLD SERIES AND RUGBY WORLD CUP SEVENS, TIM MIKKELSON WAS UNDENIABLY THE MOST INFLUENTIAL AND CONSISTENT PERFORMER. ONE OF THE FITTEST MEMBERS OF THE SQUAD, MIKKELSON PLAYED IN BOTH THE FORWARDS AND THE BACKS AND ALSO STEPPED IN AS CAPTAIN AT THE END OF THE SEASON TO LIFT THE WORLD SERIES TROPHY. HE WAS SUBSEQUENTLY NAMED AS THE IRB SEVENS PLAYER OF THE YEAR.

NZRPA: What was your on-field highlight?

TM: Winning the Sevens World Cup was definitely the highlight. New Zealand hadn't won since 2001 and I missed the last World Cup with a shoulder injury so to go and win it in Russia was pretty special.

NZRPA: And your off-field highlight?

TM: We do a lot of traveling but I'd never been to a place like Russia before. It was an eye-opener – I thought it would be freezing like you see in movies but it was 35 degrees and beautiful.

NZRPA: What does this award mean to you?

TM: We had an awesome year winning the World Series and the World Cup and having rugby peers pick you as having a great season is great. I played every tournament, stayed injury-free and worked hard on keeping my fitness and that certainly helped.

NZRPA: What are your aims for 2014?

TM: I went to the last Commonwealth Games and one of my big goals is to try to go back and win another gold medal. We've got a great squad this season and we're also hoping to defend our World Series title.



TIM MIKKELSON

NZRPA

BY THE PLAYERS
FOR THE GAME.

PLAYERS' PLAYER OF THE YEAR

BEN SMITH

BEN SMITH'S LIST OF 2013 PLAUDITS ISN'T JUST LIMITED TO HIS TRY-SCORING ABILITY, THOUGH THE EIGHT TRIES IN SIX RUGBY CHAMPIONSHIP MATCHES FOR THE ALL BLACKS WILL LIVE LONG IN THE MEMORY.

IT WAS ALSO HIS FLEXIBILITY - FILLING IN AT CENTRE ON THE END OF YEAR TOUR - AND HIS DURABILITY WHICH SAW HIM CROWNED NZRPA PLAYERS' PLAYER OF THE YEAR, AFTER HE STARTED IN EVERY ALL BLACK GAME IN 2013 AND PLAYED EVERY MINUTE OF THE HIGHLANDERS' CAMPAIGN.

NZRPA: What was your on-field highlight?

BS: Winning the Rugby Championship in South Africa was definitely the on-field highlight. That was a pretty special game that defined our season. We'd played South Africa at Eden Park and it was a tight game, plus they'd lost a couple of guys and wanted revenge back in South Africa so it was a big challenge to overcome, especially in Johannesburg. It was such a big occasion and we were all up for it. Both teams ran it and it was a great spectacle.

NZRPA: And your off-field highlight:

BS: When you're in the All Blacks, you get the privilege of traveling to some pretty interesting places and my off-field highlight was going away on the end of year trip to Japan, France and the UK. I'd never been to Ireland and it was great to see somewhere new, to see the difference places and experience the difference cultures.

NZRPA: What does this award mean to you?

BS: It's pretty cool that other people playing rugby chucked my name forward and it's always pretty special to get recognition from your peers.

NZRPA: What are your aims for 2014?

BS: It's important to just take one campaign at a time and we're keen to get some respect back down south so I just want to play consistent rugby for the Highlanders first off, especially being co-captain with Nasi Manu. I want to contribute to that team as best as I can - if I can do that, hopefully I'll be able to move up and do the same for the All Blacks.



BEN SMITH

PLAYERS' OFF FIELD ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

PACIFIC PREVENTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAMME

PPDVP TIMELINE:

2009 - SAMOA

2010 - SAMOA/TONGA

2011 - TONGA

2012 - COOK ISLANDS

2013 - GUAM

RUGBY IS A TEAM GAME AND THAT HOLDS TRUE OFF THE FIELD AS WELL. JUST LOOK AT THE RECENT NZRPA PLAYER AWARDS, WHERE THE OFF-FIELD ACHIEVEMENT AWARD WAS GIVEN JOINTLY TO ALL 65 PLAYERS AND ADMINISTRATORS WHO HAVE TAKEN PART IN THE FIVE YEARS OF THE PACIFIC PREVENTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAMME. WE TAKE A LOOK AT HOW THE PROGRAMME HAS EVOLVED AND GROWN.

Cam Ronald remembers vividly the meeting he had in 2009, when Hurricanes PDM Steve Symonds and New Zealand Police's Karen Smith crept gingerly into his office with a wild idea.

Former policeman Ronald had been running a programme helping Pacific Islands police do a better job around domestic violence, working with them in-country since 2005.

Smith and Symonds' idea, they explained, was to send rugby players on the trips too, helping the anti-violence message target those who needed to hear it.

"Women in the Pacific Islands know that domestic violence isn't OK but those young men growing up in families are the ones we need to influence," Ronald says. "I could see a whole lot of risks to their initial proposal, unless we did it really well, so we carefully selected people who wanted to do it and they agreed to allow us to do police checks. Both organisations took a risk by doing it but we were committed to seeing what we could achieve together and fortunately, the programme has been and continues to be an enormous success for everyone involved."

The 16-strong group on the first trip - which included Piri Weepu and Victor Vito - had an immediate hurdle to overcome. They landed in Samoa just two weeks after the devastating tsunami which wiped out entire villages and killed 143 people.

But the local Samoan police insisted they continue their 10-day trip, bringing hope and inspiration to the affected residents, while the players went above and beyond by also contributing

to the humanitarian effort. Amid scenes of such tragedy, it was a resounding success. Then-police commissioner Howard Broad hosted a morning tea for the players on their return, presenting them with certificates and plans were quickly drawn up to return to Samoa in 2010, as well as expanding to Tonga.

“We’ve seen a number of players come back from these trips empowered and inspired”

Since then, the programme has also been to the Cook Islands and, last year, to Guam. In total, 65 people, former players and coaches, have been involved in the five years.

Symonds believes the secret to the success of the programme has been that it hasn’t just been the Pacific Island population benefiting, with huge growth also visible in the players who have gone.

“For some reason, these trips seem to open guys up,” Symonds says. “They get to experience island life at grass roots level, learn about the culture, speak in public at schools and in villages, complete media interviews and learn about domestic violence and its impacts. The opportunity for personal growth and development as part of this programme is as wide and varied as the individuals who attend.”

The PPDVP programme links very closely with the international White Ribbon Day on November 25, which is a day for men to show they are against violence towards women. The programme is funded by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through their NZ Aid programme.

NZRPA player services manager David Gibson is delighted the programme is thriving after five years and attributes much of the success to the attitude the players take away with them.

“By signing up to support the programme, the players don’t just sign up for the week,” Gibson says. “Agreeing to work with Police and support non-violence as a role-model means they have to walk the talk in their own lives. We’ve seen a number of players come back from these trips empowered and inspired and, as an added bonus, more focused on making the most of their rugby opportunities.”

The future is also rosy for the programme. Vanuatu is a possible venue this year, while Symonds believes there is scope for having more than one trip per year.

“It’s getting harder to pick people to go on these trips, which is a good thing, because more players are putting their hands up and the PDMs around the country are pushing their guys hard because they’ve seen first-hand the benefits of going. You could do 10 of these trips each year and fill them no problem.

“The rugby calendar makes it hard, although I’d love to utilise that three-week international window in the middle of the year.”

And, although hard to quantify, Ronald is adamant the programme is achieving its main goal.

“The awareness and understanding of domestic violence has increased in all the countries we’ve visited and there has to be some link with the work we’re doing. There have been increased rates of reporting and people are now talking about domestic violence in the communities, where in the past, they wouldn’t have been talked about.”

And Ronald is also clear that the quality of players going on the trips is making a huge difference.

“I’m absolutely in awe of the young professional people I’m meeting through this thing. They are absolutely clever, talented and smart people that are becoming professional rugby players and that’s been great for me to see.”

HIGHLIGHTS

SONA TAUMALOLO – SAMOA/TONGA 2010

“It was a very humbling experience to be able to join the PPDVP venture into Samoa and Tonga in 2010. I grew up in Tonga and saw the domestic violence in my community as a youngster. I am grateful for the opportunity and proud to be a part of such a special programme as this - to spread the message and support my own people to change this pattern of domestic violence in the Pacific.”

COOK ISLANDS 2012

Netballer Catherine Latu added a new dimension to the programme when she headed to the Cook Islands for a series of TV ads, alongside Tasman rugby player Francis Smith.

“We athletes generally do stuff associated with our sport - that’s easy - but projects like this targeting such important topics, while personally more challenging, are ultimately far more rewarding,” Latu said. The subsequent follow-up visit included league player Awen Guttenbeil, Hurricanes coach Mark Hammett and TJ Perenara and included visits to a prison where they spoke to inmates and to an intellectually disabled workshop.

“Everywhere I went with the police and the players - like schools, the prison, the police station or the creative centre - I came away better and stronger as a person,” Hurricanes hooker Motu Matu’u explained. “How many times can we say that after doing something? Now I will bring what I have learnt home and use it here.”



PLAYERS VISITING THE DEVASTATION OF THE 2009 SAMOAN TSUNAMI

GUAM - 2013

The PPDVP members were hot property as soon as they landed on Guam, the largest island in Micronesia, and by the end of the week, they were the most tweeted and instagrated topic on the island.

They visited five high schools, three middle schools and the university twice in their travels, as well as running six coaching clinics and attending functions with the first lady, and visiting an adult correctional facility that included a sharing session that visibly moved both inmates and guards.

“It was good to talk to the kids about my upbringing and it made me think about life in a different way,” Tim Nanai Williams, who visited Guam after talking with fellow Chiefs players who had been on earlier PPDVP trips, said. “The guys couldn’t tell me why the trips were so good - they just said that it would be life-changing for me and I guess I now get that.”