

# The making of Black Ferns star Ruby Tui: This is not a soppy story

Dana Johannsen 05:00, Mar 13 2022

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Finally, there's an opportunity for women to start making hay off the field, just as their male counterparts have for generations.

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**The hard and horrible parts of life become a huge part of why you do good things, Black Ferns star Ruby Tui tells National Correspondent Dana Johannsen.**

On a stifling Saturday afternoon in the middle of January, the Chiefs Manawa squad are crammed into a conference room at a Hamilton motel for the team's media day.

The players, kitted out in their new jerseys for a new team ahead of a new competition, are assembled in groups around the edge of the room, waiting to be called. There's headshots to be taken, promos to be filmed, social media posts to be banked.

Amid the clamour and the chaos, one voice can be heard above the rest. Ruby Tui.

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“Just be crazy with it,” she encourages one of her young teammates, unused to performing in front of a camera. “Do a shucka!”

She continues to hype the player up, coaching her from the sidelines until the photographer has got what he needs and calls upon the next player to step under the lights.

“It’s worth coming out of your shell for that five minutes,” Tui explains later. “I know it’s uncomfortable. But you only get the opportunity once, and that photo is going everywhere, sis.”

What some of her teammates may see as part of the job to be endured, Tui sees as part of a bigger picture.



ALAN GIBSON/STUFF

Black Ferns sevens star Ruby Tui is hoping to make an impact in the fifteens game this year.

She sees progress. She sees opportunity. She sees her former teammates who never got their due - women like Canterbury legend Casey Robertson, who took Tui under her wing and taught her the finer arts of the game. She sees where women's rugby could get to within the next generation.

And she sees that she has a responsibility to do her bit to help it get there.

Tui's career has straddled two very different eras. She first took up the sport in 2010 when she was at the University of Canterbury and was invited to come throw the ball around on the fields across the road from her student accommodation. She was soon playing club rugby on Saturdays for the Varsity team, and, in her first season playing the game, earned selection in the Canterbury side - "but only because all the Black Ferns were away playing World Cup" she points out.



DAVE ROWLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Ruby Tui poses during the Chiefs Manawa Super Aupiki Rugby 2022 headshots session at the Park View Motel Lodge.

Her selection coincided with a decision by New Zealand rugby bosses to axe the women's national provincial competition that year, to cut costs. And not for the first time, Tui butted hard up against the reality of loving a sport that hasn't always loved women back.

The trajectory of women's rugby, and Tui's life, changed dramatically in 2012 when it was announced rugby sevens would become an Olympic sport. NZ Rugby, wanting to get in on the quadrennial gold rush, started ploughing money into the women's game. It resulted in a huge spike in girls taking up the sport, and with it, clearer pathways, professional contracts for the elite players, dedicated resources, and finally, recognition.

"Our generation of players have lived that change. We've gone from chopping up firewood and doing car washes to raise money, to having everything paid for, business class flights,

everything, and then on top of that you're paid to go," the 30 year-old says, shaking her head as if she still can't believe it.

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"So yeah, I feel very overwhelmed with gratitude that it was our path and our destiny. But at the same time, absolutely, it's a responsibility. It's kind of that whole role model thing, right? Like, if you achieve and you inspire people you become a role model, you don't get to say whether you want to be one or not. And whether you deserve to be one or not. And whether your antics on the weekend reflect that you are or not, we just become one. So we just became responsible for women's rugby really."

And so, Ruby Tui is always "on". She speaks of the women's game, and its people, with an almost evangelical fervour. In Gossy she trusts. And Ty, and Porsch, and Kels, and the rest of her Sevens sisters.

This year, in what will be a groundbreaking year for women's rugby, there is even more for Tui to spruik. There's Super Rugby Aupiki, and later, the five-time World Cup winning Black Ferns will defend their title on home soil. The all-conquering Black Ferns Sevens team also have Commonwealth Games and World Cup titles to defend. Tui wants to be part of it all.



HANNAH PETERS/GETTY IMAGES

Ruby Tui acknowledges her supporters after beating Australia in a trans-Tasman Sevens fixture last year.

When she contemplates the juggling act she has ahead of her this year, Tui is realistic about what to expect.

“Oh, it’ll be chaos,” she says.

But Tui seems to thrive off a chaotic energy. And if you can keep up, you’re in for a ride.

She talks fast, flitting between present speech and her internal dialogue, her pace and delivery confounding the AI transcription programmes journalists use.

But there is a lyricism to her words. Like a modern-day prophet in an over-sized denim jacket embroidered with the message “love is love”, her stories seem to come with built-in metaphors. Even her name seems to have a poetic assonance to it.



ALAN GIBSON/STUFF

Ruby Tui speaks of women's rugby, and its people, with evangelical-like fervour.

Quirky and eccentric are words that come up a lot to describe Tui. So too are authentic and relatable.

Getting deep, she says she thinks her larger than life persona was developed in response to a transient childhood. By the time she reached high school she had already gone to half a dozen schools, as she shuttled back and forth between her parents on two different islands.

"I moved around a lot as a kid, so I always would have to put myself out there uncomfortably, you know, and always be that one who breaks the ice."

Her current ice-breaker is her cat, Manawa – yes, after her Super Rugby side. When it came to naming the kitten, Tui's partner, radio and podcast host Dani Fennessy, had rejected all rugby-themed suggestions. Then Tui pulled off the ultimate sleight of hand.



“What about Manawa?” she asked casually, “it means heart”.

“Awwww it’s perfect, babe.”

What a beautiful coincidence, Fennessy thought, when two weeks later the Chiefs publicly announced the name of their women’s side for the inaugural season.

Tui has herself in stitches retelling the story, needing a moment to compose herself while she wipes away tears. And just like that, her audience is won over.



DAN MULLAN/GETTY IMAGES

Tui lit up the Tokyo Olympics with her play, personality and post-match interviews.

During last year’s Olympics, the Black Ferns Sevens star was winning over much bigger audiences with her eccentric takes in post-match interviews repeatedly going viral.

Tui’s “charming” interviews drew headlines both here (“have you ever been pukana’d”) and internationally (“BBC - better be clear”) with one headline proclaiming she had “stolen the Olympics”.

To understand Tui's exuberance even in the face of a couple of shaky performances from the New Zealand side during the Olympic tournament, you need to go back five years ago to the Rio Games.

There, Tui wasn't herself. Overawed and overwhelmed by the global sporting bonanza that is the Olympic Games, the larger than life Tui shrunk inward.

"I let it be this huge, giant thing that I just kind of survived and got through," she explains.

"It taught me you actually have to make a decision in those big moments. You can go 'oh woah, too big, no, no, no' and just be a passenger. Or you can understand the fact that you were chosen to be put in those moments, and it's a space you can choose to occupy or not.

"I had my silver medal with me every day for the Tokyo journey. And I'd look at it to remind myself like 'c'mon Rubes no matter what happens, whether you get a medal, whether you don't, this is an amazing experience - enjoy it'."



LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Athlete and talent manager Dan Sing, says the demand for brands wanting to align with Tui spiked following the Tokyo Olympics.

Tui's approach has opened the door to more experiences. Her long-time manager, Dan Sing, says within 24 hours of the BBC clip being posted, it had five million views, and he was fielding media requests from around the world.

"For literally the next month, I'd be getting five to 20 media requests a day for her," says Sing.

"We were getting requests from Latvia and Wales, the US. A lot of them were from people who had never watched a rugby game, did not understand the sport, but they had seen Ruby's interviews at the Olympics and wanted to know more about her."

The most important thing to know about Tui is she is more than witty one-liners and viral soundbites. She has plenty more she wants to say.

She is a strong advocate for mental health, self-acceptance, and LGBTQ+ rights, positioning herself at the forefront of a movement for athletes speaking out on social issues.



ALAN GIBSON/STUFF

Ruby Tui has witnessed domestic violence in her own family, and feels she has a responsibility to talk about it.

“I’ve seen too many good people go off the deep end and seen too much talent wasted,” Tui says of her openness about her mental health battles.

Recently Tui, who was born in Wellington to a Samoan father and Pākehā mother, has started talking more openly about her childhood, which was marked by poverty, abuse, and her father’s battle with alcoholism. She says she feels a responsibility to talk about domestic violence in particular, as “it’s something I have seen up close, and there’s a lot people don’t understand about it”.

After her parents split up when she was about seven, Tui moved down south to live with her mum, who started a new

relationship. Tui doesn't remember how soon the violence and abuse started, just that it was "horrible" and "very, very unhealthy".

"That's why we would move so much because there was always drama. I remember once we were living in Golden Bay and there were cops involved, the house was being raided. Everywhere we went it was just chaos."

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After a stint living back with her dad, Tui was convinced to return to live with her mother, who had settled in Greymouth. Tui made a deal with her mum: "I made her promise me that if I came back, she wouldn't make me move schools again."

Her mum kept her word. Early on in Tui's third form year, amid escalating violence, her mother left the relationship.

"My beautiful mother ... she called the cops, everything was in place, I got out of school, and we were taken to the women's refuge. It felt like a little FBI mission," Tui recalls of the time.

"It was horrible, but it was really inspiring as well. I just don't think people realise how hard it is to leave an abusive relationship. It is so difficult. Like, your whole identity becomes wrapped up in this horribleness, you believe how you are treated is what you are worth. So to watch [my mum] get out of it, and stay out of it, f..., she's superwoman eh?"

She tells this story not to garner sympathy. Nor admiration of the obstacles she has overcome. She says no matter what was happening in her life, “sport has always brought me happiness”.



ALAN GIBSON/STUFF

Ruby Tui believes it is important to speak openly about her experiences.

Tui’s message for others is about empathy and understanding.

“I think it’s taught me a lot about respecting that people all have their own stuff, you know? Like if that person can’t get themselves off the couch that day and get to training, they might have a very good reason for it.”

Understanding her father’s alcoholism has been a more recent “learning journey” for Tui. She says she used to laugh it off and not acknowledge the impact it had on her. Now, she has come to the realisation to have a healthy relationship with her dad, she has had to set boundaries. She has one rule – he is not allowed to call her when he is drunk.

“He has kind of given into his illness – because that’s what it is – and accepted it. And I have stopped my expectations with it, which has been a huge weight off my shoulders.

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“So if anyone is going through something like that with their own family members, I would encourage them to set boundaries and explore what that means.”

Before she leaves, Tui has one request: “don’t make this a sappy story eh?”

She pauses for a moment. Her eyes kindle as the big picture comes into full view.

“It’s just life, man, it’s just life. The hard and horrible parts are part of your story, and you can’t change that, but that struggle becomes a huge part of why you do good things too.”