

Vicky Heighway was one of the great inbreak forwards.



BEST OF

THE BEST

The Black Ferns' history spans less than 40 years, but some great players have made their mark in that time. With the Rugby World Cup in England starting next month, **Campbell Burnes**, with help from those in the know, pieced together a GOAT top 15 plus reserves.

We enlisted two Black Ferns with seven Rugby World Cup titles between them, along with Adam Julian, *Rugby News* contributor and author of the Black Ferns' A-Z (which can be found on www.allblacks.com) to sift through the contenders.

Anna Richards played 49 Tests over 20 years for the Black Ferns, and is still immersed in the game, as is current *Rugby News* columnist Kendra Cockesedge, who played a record 68 Tests for her country over 15 years and is just 2-3 years out of active rugby. Yours Truly named both of them as the 9-10 combination, so they didn't have to pick themselves.

There were some very unlucky ones to miss the cut, but I would back this team, at their peaks, to beat England if they were in the World Cup final in September. Most of the starting XV are members of the NZ Barbarians, which tells you much about their standing in the wider rugby community.

Several of today's current Black Ferns, other than the four who made the 23 cut, may make this list once professionalism is further bedded in and they rack up more Tests.

Your feedback on this team is most welcome to editor@rugbynews.co.nz

15 TAMMI WILSON-ULUNIVAYAU (16 Tests, 1998-2002)

Over two winning World Cup campaigns, Tammi Wilson was as sharp as a tack attacking from the back for the Black Ferns. She was also a good goalkicker, and her Test debut against Germany in the 1998 RWC saw her score 30 points, including four tries. The next year she put 36 on the USA, including six tries.

Wilson was a triple international, also representing New Zealand in league and touch. She still holds a handful of Auckland Storm records.

Also mentioned in dispatches were Selina Winata, Manawatu's greatest, who scored 39 tries in 40 Tests from 2008-19, and Victoria Grant (née Blackledge), who captained the Black Ferns in 2010-11 and could play fullback or wing.

14 VANESSA COOTES (16 Tests, 1995-2002)

Vanessa Cootes was scoring tries for fun with her power and pace while Jonah Lornu was making a name for himself.

Her record nine tries against France in 1996 will take some beating, while her mark of 43 tries was eclipsed by Portia Woodman-Wickliffe earlier this season. From the moment Cootes ran in four tries on debut against Australia in 1995, she was hard to stop on the right wing.

She exploded onto the wider rugby consciousness with five tries in the 1998 RWC final versus the USA. Even now, Cootes holds five of the top nine Black Ferns try marks in one Test. Honourable mention to Dianne Kahura, who scored 19 tries in 12 Tests from 1998-2002.

- 15 Tammi Wilson-Ulunivayau
- 14 Vanessa Cootes
- 13 Huriana Manuel-Carpenter
- 12 Kelly Brazier
- 11 Portia Woodman-Wickliffe
- 10 Anna Richards
- 9 Kendra Cockesedge
- 8 Linda Itunu
- 7 Rochelle Martin
- 6 Melissa Ruscoe
- 5 Victoria Heighway
- 4 Monalisa Codling
- 3 Casey Robertson
- 2 Fiaoa Faamauili (G)
- 1 Halyn Annalfeh (née Vaaga)

- 16 Farah Palmer
- 17 Tracey Waters
- 18 Regina Speck
- 19 Maia Ross
- 20 Sarah Hirini (née Goss)
- 21 Monique Hironakaia
- 22 Ruahnei Demant
- 23 Stacey Waaka

13 HURIANA MANUEL-CARPENTER (25 Tests, 2005-14)

Huriana Manuel was a hot stepping centre and key figure in two winning World Cup campaigns.

She and her mother Eliza Minuini were the first mother-daughter Black Ferns duo, so rugby was always in Manuel's blood. Manuel was especially prominent at the 2006 and 2010 World Cups, be it setting up tries or scoring them herself. She also captained the New Zealand Sevens team in its nascent stages. Honourable mention goes to Annaleah Rusu, who was a fine goalkicking centre in 20 Tests from 1996-2002 before Manuel hit the scene.

12 KELLY BRAZIER
(42 Tests, 2009-21)

One of the greats of the sevens or 15s game, people forget that this gifted, triple threat all-round player played 42 Tests for the Black Ferns over 12 seasons.

She could step off either foot, pass sweetly off either hand, and kick goals or kick well tactically, as well as being fit as a black rabbit. Brazier won most accolades in the sevens game, two World Cups in 15s, and the 2013 NZS player of the year. Brazier edged out the highly regarded Lucy Shortland, who started from 1997-2002.

11 PORTIA WOODMAN-WICKLIFFE
(27 Tests, 2013-25)

The superlatives continue to flow for this woman, dubbed Wonder Woodman in some circles, the sole member of the current Black Ferns to make this 15.

Her seven tries against USA in May saw her sail past Vanessa Cootes' record, and she has 45 tries to her credit in just 27 outings. She ran in eight versus Hong Kong at the 2017 World Cup and seven versus Japan before the 2022 RWC. While she can play centre, as she did for the Blues in Auckland, she'll likely still be employed on the wing, where she still does the damage, even at 34 (on July 12). Possessed of a deadly severe and potent finishing power, she overcame two years of self-doubt with a crippling Achilles injury to score tries at will for the Black Ferns Sevens, while also winning two 15s World Cups.

10 ANNA RICHARDS
(49 Tests, 1991-2010)

For nigh on two decades, and through no less than four World Cup wins, Anna Richards ran the cutter with aplomb, her passing game and ability to read the play unmatched.

The 1994 NZS women's player of the year, Richards was able to unlock her potent outside or take control tactically, linking with her pack and halfback in expert fashion. But she was also busy on defence, never more so than in the 2006 RWC final. She was 45 at her last World Cup in 2010, but was still good.

9 KENDRA COCKSLEDGE
(68 Tests, 2007-22)

Kendra Cocksledge was the fulcrum of the Black Ferns for close to a decade, taking over from Emma Jensen in the No 9 jersey. She had a fine short kicking game, vision



Before Portia Woodman-Wickliffe, there was Vanessa Cootes, who scored tries at an amazing rate.

At her best, Vicky Heighway was a world-class lineup operator and used to hit rucks with venom.'

and a wide skilset, and her competitiveness was a hallmark of all the great No 9s. In 2018, she was the first woman to win the Kari Trenman Memorial Trophy as the top player in the land, leading to her being the first woman to adorn the cover of the NZ Rugby Almanack in 2019. Her swansong came in 2022, bowing out as a key contributor in her third RWC victory. Her 68 Tests is a record, as are her 388 Test points.

8 LINDA ITUNU
(39 Tests, 2003-18)

Linda Itunu was abrasive and aggressive both with and without the ball.

As a No 8, she had to see off tough competition in the form of Casey Robertson, Aroha Savage and Charmaine McMenamin, but she relished the challenge and ended her career as a three-time World Cup winner, not to mention sharing the joy of playing for the Black Ferns with her sister Aldora. When she retired in 2018, she had left the Black Ferns in a good place as they paved the way into professionalism.

7 ROCHELLE MARTIN
(32 Tests, 1994-2006)

A place had to be found in the loose trio for the tough, industrious Rochelle Martin, who could play in all three positions, but was perhaps best utilised on the openside.

She overcame severe injury and bigger opponents to leave her imprint on the game and never shone brighter than in the 2006 RWC semifinal, where she gave a magnificent display and scored a double against France. In all, she won three World Cups and countless admirers.

6 MELISSA RUSCOE
(22 Tests, 2004-10)

Melissa Ruscoe, aka 'Fraggle', was a skilled loose forward out of Canterbury with an imposing sporting CV, which showed that she represented New Zealand in softball, rugby and sevens and captained the Black Ferns in eight Tests from 2007-10.

As a reader of the game, she was in the Richie McCaw category. In all, she played 22 Tests and won the lot, claiming two World Cups. She brought many of her qualities into the coaching ranks with Ruscoe edged out Melodie Robinson, who played 18 Tests and won two World Cups.

5 VICKY HEIGHWAY
(32 Tests, 2000-10)

At her best, Vicky Heighway was a world-class lineup operator and used to hit rucks with venom. She formed a dynamic, locking partnership with Monalisa Codling in 19 Tests and won no less than three World

Cups, perhaps at her peak in 2006. In 2009, Heighway skipped the Black Ferns in two Tests and was the NZR women's player of the year in 2007 and 2009. Fiona Richards, sister of Anna, was another outstanding lock in 14 Tests from 1993-2002.

4 MONALISA CODLING
(30 Tests, 1998-2010)

The abiding memory of Monalisa Codling is her starting solo try against England at Eden Park in 2005. She was a tough, aggressive lock who could win ball and scarcely lost a game at club, provincial or international level, and is one of just three Black Ferns to win four World Cups. While that 2005 try was spectacular, she also scored a brilliant and vital one in the 2006 RWC final off a Ruscoe offload. Codling is now the secretary of the NZ Barbarians club.

3 CASEY ROBERTSON
(35 Tests, 2002-14)

Casey Robertson was equally adept at tightened prop or No 8, winning three World Cups and constantly showing her toughness and commitment.

As a prop, the Canadian learned fast from scrum guru Mike MacIntyre. Casey, though her favourite triumph was the 2010 RWC in England. Any Rule of the current team was mentioned while Tanya Kalounivale is a powerful scrummer, but Robertson's body of work is compelling.

2 FIAO FAAMAUSSILI
(57 Tests, 2002-18)

Tough as teak around the track, and world-class with her lineup throwing, Faamaussili captained the Black Ferns to the 2017 RWC crown as well as winning three other titles.

No forward has challenged her 57 Test appearances over 16 seasons, a remarkable tribute to her longevity and hard-nosed approach to the game. Her 35 Tests as captain is also a record.

Her work as a policeman was done around her rugby and she would think nothing of pulling an all-night shift and then playing rugby that afternoon.

1 HAIYIN ANNAPFEN (NEE VAAGA)
(10 Tests, 2002-06)

Toka Natua, of the 2015-20 team, who scored a rare front-row hat-trick in the 2017 World Cup final, was strongly considered, but the claims of Haiyin Vaga,

as she was then known, were palpable on the loosehead side, especially at the 2002 World Cup, while she was whisked up to the 2006 event for injury. Starting in the loose forwards, Vaga soon found her way into the front-row and made her mark in the scrum and in the forwards exchanges. In particular, she was dynamic and powerful on the carry.

THE BENCH

Darrie Farrah Palmer (35 Tests, 1996-2006)
Tracey Waters (10 Tests, 1995-98)
Regina Sheek (25 Tests, 1994-2004)
Maia Roos (32 Tests, 2021-25)
Sarah Hirini (17 Tests, 2016-22)
Monique Hirovavai (24 Tests, 1994-2002)
Ruhlei Demant (44 Tests, 2018-25)
Stacey Waaka (26 Tests, 2015-25)

This is some bench, starting with Farrah Palmer in the No 16 jersey. She was fit, tough and accurate, and an inspiring leader who lifted three World Cups – an unprecedented feat. Tracey Waters was a prime performer in the scrum at the 1996 RWC final. Regina Sheek won two World Cups and could operate effectively on either side of

'No forward has challenged (Faamaussili's) 57 Test appearances over 16 seasons, a remarkable tribute to her longevity and hard-nosed approach.'



No forward has played more for the Black Ferns, and few were tougher, than Fiao Faamaussili.