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Black Ferns leader’s momentous rugby deal

Theme:
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 Black Ferns leader’s momentous rugby deal

Co-authored by Suzanne McFadden, LockerRoom

Black Ferns co-captain Kennedy Simon is the first female 15s player to sign a four-year contract with New Zealand Rugby, and has a magnanimous goal, she tells Suzanne McFadden

It’s a historic breakthrough Kennedy Simon never expected to see in her rugby career.

A landmark for professionalism in the women’s game, the co-captain of the Black Ferns has extended her contract with New Zealand Rugby through till 2028. The four-season deal is the longest commitment signed in the women’s 15s game since professional contracts kicked off in 2018.

“It’s pretty surreal. I never thought it would be a thing in my time,” Simon says. “It’s nice to know what I’ll be doing for the next wee while, too. I can’t wait now for everyone to lock in their futures.”

It gives Simon more time, she says, to realise her goal: “I want to leave the jersey, the team and the leadership space in a better place.”

Since first pulling on the black jersey in 2019, the 23-test loose forward has become one of the best players in the world; unflinching and uncompromising on the field. But she’s been sidelined with an ankle injury lately – watching from home in Hamilton as the Black Ferns crushed the Wallaroos, 62-0, in Brisbane on Sunday.

Suffering her injury in the final 30 seconds of the Black Ferns trial game last month, Simon’s now back training full-time and will rejoin the squad in camp next month ahead of their Northern Hemisphere tour.

Simon (Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Mahanga) made the decision on her rugby future with the help of her fiancé, Solomone Tukuafu, a tighthead prop for the Highlanders.

“Solly asked me ‘Is it going to make you happy?’ And I said ‘Yeah’,” Simon, 27, says.

“We’re both still pretty young. And Solly wants to live the dream here in New Zealand. I’ll always back him, because he’s backed me through my journey.

“It was an easy conversation because we both love our rugby, and it’s the black jersey. You have to take it with both hands while it’s being offered to you, because you never know what’s going to happen. You just have to love every moment.”

The woman who’d be a teacher now if the role of full-time athlete hadn’t become a possibility, says she’s found her “dream job”.

“Now little girls can aspire to be a full-time rugby player. How crazy is that?” Simon says.

Simon was almost lost to New Zealand rugby back in 2017, when she took up a three-year deal with the Hokkaido Barbarians in Japan and was asked to play for the Sakura Sevens, the Japanese sevens side. But when she realised she could be good enough to play for the Black Ferns, she returned home.

She also wasn’t drawn to switch codes and cross the Tasman to play in the NRLW competition, like other rugby players, including her best friend, former Black Fern Chey Robins-Reti.

“Chey’s playing for the Canberra Raiders for her second season in the NRLW and she’s loving it. It’s a five-month competition and they get paid well. At the end of my time here, I wouldn’t be opposed to it. But I’ve never played league before,” Simon says.

“We need to grow our domestic rugby competition, and make sure we’re finding ways to get our nation behind women’s rugby, and not lose players to other codes.”

NZ Rugby’s head of women’s high performance, Hannah Porter, acknowledges Simon’s commitment to the Black Ferns as a significant milestone. “Continued investment in our 15s programme is essential for its growth and competitive edge on the global stage,” she says.

Black Ferns director of rugby, Allan Bunting, describes Simon as “a great human”, driven to always being her best.

“Kennedy is a special player who is an inspirational leader, with her ‘follow me’ style of leadership,” Bunting says. “As an athlete, she is studious and really supports the next players coming through; she has a ruthless mindset when she steps over the white line.

These attributes will be an integral part of our future success as a team.”

The contract milestone aside, 2024 hasn’t been the most triumphant of years for Simon so far.

The Chiefs Manawa side she captained lost the Super Rugby Aupiki final to the Blues back in April; the Black Ferns lost the Pacific Four Series to Canada; then Simon hurt her ankle just before the Black Ferns squad was named to play last weekend’s O’Reilly Cup test. She hopes her fortunes are now on the up.

Simon is no stranger to physical damage. She overcame a freak knee injury in the Black Ferns’ training dojo in 2022, then rebounded from a calf injury just in time to play the last three matches of the Rugby World Cup victory in Auckland. But it doesn’t make sitting out tests any easier.

“I was sad missing out on playing Australia on Sunday, but I knew the team was in a good place. And Ruahei’s such a great leader,” Simon says, of her Ferns co-captain Ruahei Demant.

“It was so good to see the girls building up confidence again. The loose forward trio were phenomenal, which makes it harder for me coming back. But they also make me play better.

“It’s been a beautiful ride so far. There have been a few injuries in there, but it’s all character-building and resilience.”

Since she was named to co-lead the Black Ferns with Demant in mid-2022, Simon has been developing her leadership skills, learning from some of the best to have worn the black jersey.

“I’ve been really fortunate to have Ruahei by my side; her intelligence and rugby knowledge is amazing,” Simon says.

“And then I have some pretty awesome mentors. I’ve had the luxury of working with Richie McCaw, and I’ve had my own people back in the Waikato helping me. I’ve just started speaking with Kieran Reid, whose wealth of knowledge and experience is massive. They all just add little golden nuggets that I can use.

“Something pops up and I’m like, ‘How can I deal with this? How could I have made that better?’ Tapping into how they dealt with, or front-footed, things has been awesome.”

While she leads the Black Ferns into the future, most likely starting with the Northern Hemisphere tour and the second year of the WXV tournament, Simon is also conscious of looking back to those players who came before her.

“We’re in a new era now because we have full professional contracts, where we don’t have to make a morning session training session, and then go to work for eight hours, and come back for the night session,” she says. “Now we train throughout the day.

“We have time to watch the rest of the world and see how they’re playing rugby. We’ve got to be adaptable to change, but I’m also conscious of keeping things from the previous era, especially the pride in our identity.

“Our culture, our waiata, our community service. I want to make sure we hold on to what the Black Ferns have stood for, and keep acknowledging the women before us who made sacrifices and paved the pathway for us.”

On their upcoming Northern tour, which includes a much-anticipated rematch with England’s Red Roses at Twickenham in September, the Black Ferns have work to do to re-establish themselves as the best side in the world.

They fell to Canada for the first time in the Pac Four Series in May, and struggled in the inaugural WXV1 competition at home last season, losing to France and England.

“We just need to understand what we can be,” Kennedy says. “In our Black Ferns DNA, we have a fast, exhilarating, generating space and keeping the ball alive kind of rugby brand.

“What works for England is they’ve got kicking territory and they obviously love a maul. We just need to find the balance and having the chance to play against the Northern Hemisphere sides more often will help us with that.

“We have young players who are brilliant, and the likes of Amy du Plessis, whose confidence and game are just growing. The new-look Black Ferns will be physically superior and a balanced force.”

There are monumental opportunities on the horizon for the Black Ferns. Playing at Twickenham, with its capacity for 82,000 fans, will be “a whole new kettle of fish” for Simon.

“None of the Black Ferns have ever played there,” she says. “If we thought 42,000 fans at Eden Park for the final of the Rugby World Cup was intense, not being able to hear each other over the roar of the crowd, this is going to be eye-opening for our team.”

Leading the Chiefs Manawa side this season was both rewarding and bittersweet for Simon.

“We had our challenges, but I can front-foot that stuff now. I had a couple of sad days after we lost the final, but then I moved on to the next challenge,” she says.

“Last season we came together for the whole four days around each game, and that could have helped us this year, because we didn’t quite get the connection piece right. It might be something that we look to next year.

“Don’t get me wrong, I loved going home every day though.”


Being engaged to a professional rugby player has had its challenges, too. Tukuafu spent the first six months of this year living in Dunedin with the Highlanders. “I saw him for two-and-a-half weeks during that time,” Simon says.


The couple hope to marry next year: “If our calendars align.”


SUZANNE MCFADDEN

Suzanne McFadden is a contributor to LockerRoom, dedicated to women's sport, and is the 2021 Voyager Media Awards Sports Journalist of the Year. [More by Suzanne McFadden](#)

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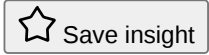
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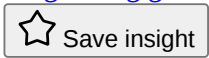


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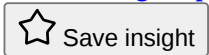
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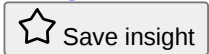
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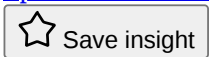


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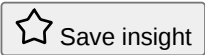
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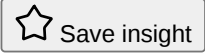
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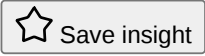


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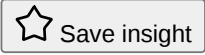


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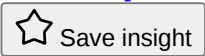
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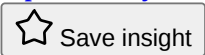
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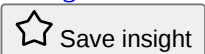
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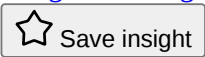
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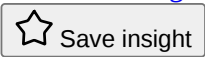
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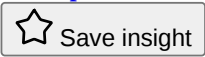
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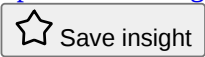
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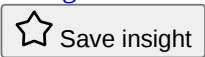
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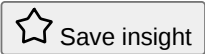


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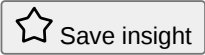
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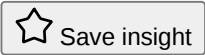


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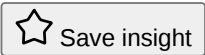
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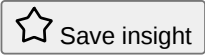


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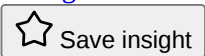
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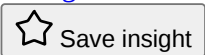
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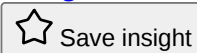
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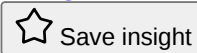
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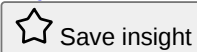
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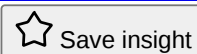
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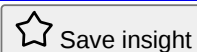


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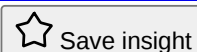


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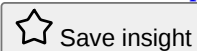
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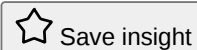
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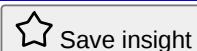
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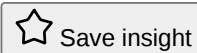
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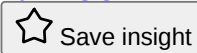
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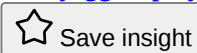
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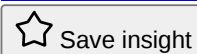
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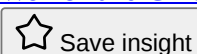
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