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Professional athletes share the struggle of motherhood and their careers

Theme:
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 Professional athletes share the struggle of motherhood and their careers

Co-authored by Bonnie Jansen, NZME

In professional sports, [female athletes](#) face battles beyond the arena, with societal norms often casting a critical eye on their roles as mothers. For top Kiwi athletes who proudly wear both titles of ‘mum’ and ‘athlete,’ the journey is not just about the struggle, but also the profound rewards it brings. On this Mother’s Day, Bonnie Jansen spoke with some of our top sportswomen with children about their experiences.

Amelianne Ekenasio

- Mum to a 7 and 2-year-old.
- Goal attack for the Waikato Bay of Plenty Magic
- Two ANZ Premiership championships
- Current Silver Ferns captain
- 50 plus Silver Ferns appearances

[Amelianne Ekenasio](#) told the *Herald* you can’t find balance when being a mum and a full-time professional athlete.

“That’s literally just a reality, pretty much every single day. You just have to make a decision on what you’re going to sacrifice that day and sometimes you sacrifice time with your family, sometimes you sacrifice training.

“There’s no real secret. When I’m here [with my team], I’m fully here and getting as much in as possible and when I’m home, I’m home 100 per cent.”

Ekenasio commutes from Wellington to Hamilton for half the week to play for the Waikato Bay of Plenty Magic and her kids fairly understand and appreciate what mum does for a job.

“They know mum goes away for work and it’s easier when they can actually see me on TV. They put two and two together that Mum goes away to play netball.”

She said her career has been littered with adversity being a mum.

“Lots of people are quite quick to judge me.

“I’ve been told that I should just stay at home and be a mum, that I probably shouldn’t be back out on court [and] I obviously don’t have my priorities straight anymore.

“It’s a constant battle... we’re more harshly judged than male sport.”

Ekenasio says having kids made her a better player.

“I actually played my best netball after I had my son - my first baby. I think because it just really grounded me, gave me like more of a purpose in life.

“I’m just really grateful that I have a family while having a career at the same time. Being a female in sport you see so many athletes either waiting until the end of their career to have kids and this is not what I want to do.

“There’s just more to life than netball.”

Kate Henwood

- Mum to a 9 and 4-year-old.
- Loosehead prop for Chiefs Manawa
- Two Super Rugby Aupiki seasons
- Five Black Ferns appearances

Kate Henwood said her 9-year-old daughter is fascinated that her mum played club rugby with Black Ferns before being called up to the national team in 2023.

“She was saying, who’s that Black Fern... is that person in your team?

“That was a bit exciting [for my daughter] that I was just playing alongside some of these girls.

“Moving on to now where I am a Black Fern myself, she doesn’t think I’m cool, but deep down, she’s probably a little bit proud of it.”

Henwood says she returned stronger to the sport after having kids.

“I definitely would say it gives you a lot more grit than I had when I was younger. It’s probably more of an age thing too. It’s just the mental side of being an athlete. I probably deal with it quite well given my experiences in life.

“I had children first and never thought I would come back to the Black Ferns later in life.”

In advice to other female athletes contemplating when’s the right time to become a mother, Henwood said “If you are planning on having children or wondering whether to do that, it will happen when it’s supposed to happen for you.

“Your path is your own.”

Erena Mikaere

- Mum to a 14-year-old.
- Goal-keep for the Waikato Bay of Plenty Magic
- 13 years playing in the New Zealand/Australian ANZ Netball Premiership
- One Silver Ferns appearance

Erena Mikaere says being a mum and a professional athlete has hard days.

“It has been a tough ride. I’m sure my daughter resents netball for taking her mother away when she probably wants her mum at the side of her netball court.”

Mikaere too has faced misconceptions.

“Right before I was pregnant, I made the NZ under-21 squad and then I fell pregnant with my daughter around the age of 20.

“I had someone say to me to my face that ‘Oh, well, you’ve ruined your career now’.”

“For me, I was like, thank you for the fuel to fire me [up] to never finish trying to strive to be what I want to be. So that probably has been my biggest driving motivation to make it... and I wanted my daughter to know that whatever she wanted to do, she could do regardless of anything that happens in life.”

Mikaere said with her daughter being so closely involved, she’s found her own love for the game.

“Netball has been great in her 14 years of life. To have her at the side of my court when she was little and behind the bench.

“I breastfed while she was young and I was on the bench at the Magic.

“I probably still am not her favourite player, she would openly say that her aunt Casey [Kopua] was her favourite player.”

Mikaere also reported her daughter is following in her footsteps.

“She came to the training, and she is a young shooter herself, and she jumped on court to train against us, make up some numbers, and she was hilarious.

“She has said a few times she doesn’t like, not the pressure, but the surroundings of having to play well because she is my daughter.

“I said to her - because she’s a goal shoot, thankfully, and I could never shoot the ball - you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“I have a lot of credit to my parents and my mum. My daughter will not leave my mum’s side, they are best friends, and they allow me to be able to play, which is great to have that support.

“I probably don’t say it enough, but I’m so grateful for everything that she’s done for me to allow me to do this. And essentially, my daughter has allowed me to do the same.”

[Bonnie Jansen](#) is a multimedia journalist in the NZME sports team. She’s a football commentator, passionate about women’s sport and was part of the Te Rito cadetship scheme before becoming a fulltime journalist.

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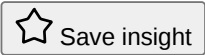
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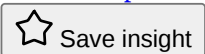
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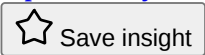
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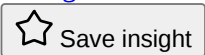
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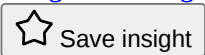
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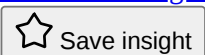
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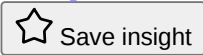
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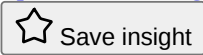
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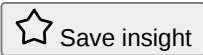
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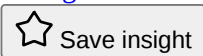
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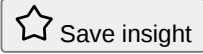
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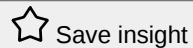
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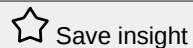


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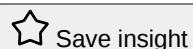


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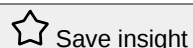
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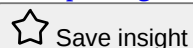
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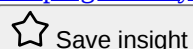
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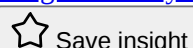
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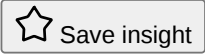
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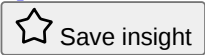
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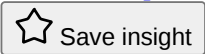
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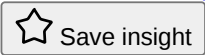
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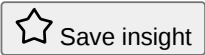
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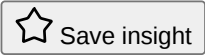
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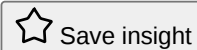
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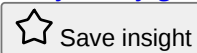
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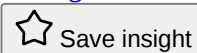
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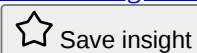
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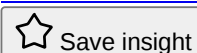
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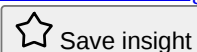


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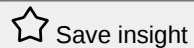
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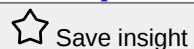
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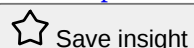
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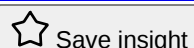
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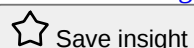


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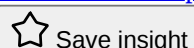


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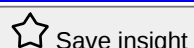
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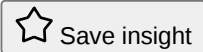
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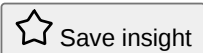
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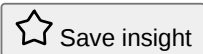
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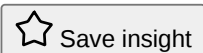
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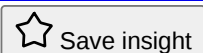
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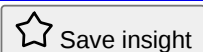
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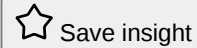
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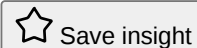
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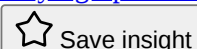
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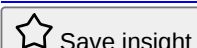
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