

PLAYER RECOGNITION

Josh Blackie, Seilala Mapusua and Hale T-Pole 2019 Kirk Award Recipients



FROM LEFT: JOSH BLACKIE AND HALE T-POLE

JOSH BLACKIE, SEILALA MAPUSUA AND HALE T-POLE ARE THE LATEST RECIPIENTS OF THE NZRPA KIRK AWARD IN RECOGNITION OF THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THEIR FELLOW PLAYERS THROUGH THE WORK, TIME, ENERGY AND SKILL THEY PUT INTO ESTABLISHING PACIFIC RUGBY PLAYERS, THE INDEPENDENT REPRESENTATIVE BODY FOR PACIFIC ISLAND PROFESSIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS.

Pacific icon and one of the first Polynesians to wear an All Black test jersey, Sir Bryan Williams presented the award to Josh Blackie and Hale T-Pole on behalf of the trio at the ASB Rugby Awards in Auckland last night. Speaking from the United Kingdom, former captain of Tonga, Siale Piataua said, "The three men have all sacrificed a lot to build the foundations of what Pacific Rugby Players has become. As ex-players, they have been instrumental in bridging the gap between players and unions, and also building support for Pacific Island players worldwide."

Each of the three 2019 Kirk Award recipients have had successful careers in their own right, between them representing New Zealand

Sevens, Tonga, Samoa, Highlanders, Blues, Otago and Southland. The trio – who all played alongside each other at various times – went on to ply their trade overseas before returning to New Zealand to carve a special place in the rugby landscape. Having identified the need for a respected professional organisation to support Pacific Island players and to unite Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands, they created Pacific Rugby Players.

Josh Blackie, who won a Commonwealth gold medal for the New Zealand Sevens side, started working voluntarily for the International Rugby Players Association while he was playing in Japan. This led to him taking the role of start-up project manager and CEO of Pacific Rugby Players, which is now managed by Aayden Clarke. As an employee of the International Rugby Players Association, Josh contributed significantly to the expansion of the representative body for international issues of importance to players and the game, its formalised relationship with World Rugby, and the transfer from New Zealand to its Dublin-based offices. Josh then took up a role at Ernst and Young and now works at High Performance Sport New Zealand. Both Hale T-Pole and Seilala Mapusua

have played in Rugby World Cups representing their Pacific nations of Tonga and Samoa respectively. Both continue to work and volunteer in rugby. Hale was the founding chairman of Pacific Rugby Players and works as a rugby director for the Singapore-based Asia Pacific Dragons team, providing opportunities for players from the Pacific Islands and those with heritage in the islands. Seilala is also a Pacific Rugby Players board member and works as a Coach Development Officer for Otago Rugby.

In the development of the Pacific Rugby Players, these three players were supported by fellow players and Pacific Rugby Players board members Deacon Manu, Siale Piutau, Jack Lam, Akapusi Qera, Faifili Levave and other key people. The trio and their board formed valuable relationships and connections around the globe thus creating a credible voice for Pacific players in such organisations as International Rugby Players and World Rugby.

While there is much work still to do in the Pacific Island Rugby space, the Pacific players now have a voice due to the efforts of three people who wanted to give back to fellow players. Former Samoan international Jack



FROM LEFT: HALE T-POLE AND SEILALA MAPUSUA

Lam said, "What Hale, Seilala and Josh did in forming the first ever Pacific Players Association was pioneering. The work they put into forming this association was paramount by bridging the gap between the Pacific unions and players, they became the voice of the Pacific players, which was long overdue."

"This is a well-deserved achievement for their work, which a lot of the time goes unnoticed, and they can be proud of what they have accomplished. I'm excited for what the future holds for the association and Pacific rugby knowing it is in good hands. Malo lava."

Surprised to receive the special award, Josh Blackie commented, "For me it is guys like Hale and Seilala, who have stuck their necks out in their community to make a difference, that deserve this. We have played a small part of something that is a much bigger picture, but we are just only scratching the surface."

His shock was mirrored by Hale T-Pole. "I am very humbled to receive this, but the fight for Pacific Island rugby is constant. We are breaking down barriers, but we need change and actions. We hit brick walls all the time, which is challenging, but then you see our young players crying when they sing the national anthem and it motivates you to keep striving for better. We need New Zealand Rugby and people around the world to support us and walk the talk. We need real action that will improve the game and player welfare for

our people. It is time for change," he said.

His sentiments were backed up by fellow recipient Seilala Mapusua, who was unable to attend the awards ceremony. He said, "I am very honoured to receive such a prestigious award. I am not sure we have done enough to deserve it, but I am humbled to be part of it and grateful to the NZRPA for all the work they have done helping the players and the Pacific. We will keep on working hard as there is still so much work to be done. It has been a tough road, but with support we can keep trying to get Pacific rugby and our players in a better position."

NZRPA Chairman David Kirk MBE, after whom the award is named, said, "The work that Josh, Hale and Seilala have done over the years with support from the people around them has been instrumental in setting up a credible and respected voice for Pacific rugby players at the top level, which is where the true difference can be made for Pacific players, who are such an important part of our game."

New Zealand Rugby Players' Association CEO Rob Nichol said, "The commitment, passion and care that Hale, Seilala and Josh have shown to their fellow players and the effort they have put into Pacific rugby player welfare – and still do – is truly admirable. They are all extremely humble men who have just gone about their work under the radar, so are outstanding recipients of this prestigious award."

Award name

The NZRPA Kirk Award was established in 2005 and named after NZRPA founding chairman and former All Black captain David Kirk MBE. Kirk led the All Blacks to their first Rugby World Cup title in 1987. Previous recipients include Conrad Smith, Richie McCaw and Tana Umaga, in recognition of their off-field roles in helping establish the commercial and employment partnership between the players and the game's administrators, which has underpinned the professional rugby environment and achievements ever since.

2016 recipient – Justin Collins
2017 recipient – DJ Forbes
2018 recipients – Fia'o Fa'amausili and Keven Mealamu

David Kirk biography: Former All Black, David Kirk, captained the All Blacks to their first Rugby World Cup title in 1987. A medical doctor, Rhodes Scholar and former advisor to the Prime Minister, David was awarded an MBE for services to rugby in 1988. The former Fairfax Media CEO and Chairman of Trade Me, Kathmandu and Forsyth Barr, sits on several boards, is a trustee of several charities and is the co-founder and partner of Bailador Investment Management. The author of two books, David was inducted into the World Rugby Hall of Fame in 2011. Unknown to many, David has served as the Chairman of the New Zealand Rugby Players' Association since its establishment in 1999, and this award is named in recognition of his outstanding selfless contribution and leadership in this regard.