

PLAYERS PERSPECTIVE

ROSS FILIPO PLAYING OVERSEAS



Ross with Neemia Tialata [L] and Dan Carter [R] 2007.

ROSS FILIPO KNOWS A THING OR TWO ABOUT PLAYING RUGBY IN DIFFERENT TEAMS. HE HAS PLAYED FOR 12 DIFFERENT TEAMS INCLUDING THE ALL BLACKS, JUNIOR ALL BLACKS, MAORI ALL BLACKS, CHIEFS, CRUSADERS, WELLINGTON, HAWKE'S BAY AND MARLBOROUGH. HE HAS PLAYED IN FRANCE FOR RACING METRO AND BAYONNE, AND IN ENGLAND FOR THE WASPS.

The 37-year-old says: "I feel extremely grateful for the amount of growth you get out of the experiences of playing overseas, the history and culture your family get to experience and the people you meet make it a very special time."

However, the lock also admits it is not always as easy as it sounds playing overseas and there are plenty of challenges along the way.

Ross thought he'd retired from rugby however he got an SOS call from the injury ravaged Chiefs so went back as injury cover.

Out of the blue an opportunity from Racing Metro came off the back of an outstanding performance for the Chiefs in Rotorua in a match that Ross describes as one of the highlights of his career. He takes up the story.

THE TRUTH

Everything you get told is not always true. So roll with it.

It took a lot of hard work and sacrifice for my family, especially my wife.

The French tend to do things together with the men only. Men go out for team dinners and the women tend to not be invited to things.

ON MAKING THE DECISION TO GO

Making the decision to go overseas the first time was harder when I was offered

a contract with Bayonne because I had a six-month old baby. Moving away from our support network when you are learning how to become a parent was the biggest factor.

ON THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

The language was a big barrier in that area of France at the time in 2009. They were staunch, you either spoke French or didn't speak at all. You had to try to speak the language. It was tough going initially without any prior practice. I would strongly advise anyone going overseas where they speak a foreign language to take some lessons before you go.

ON THE FAMILY'S EXPERIENCE

Things like setting up a family doctor and your day to day stuff was hard. At that time international players were not as common but now clubs have more support with the influx of foreign players.

It was hard for my wife Louise. When we arrived I had only been there two days and I was off on a two-week rugby camp. For that two weeks Louise was on her own and it was left up to the other foreign wives to help her but it was fair to say to we were shell shocked.

We had come from the Crusaders with a huge support network to the other end of the scale. In saying that, the second time round was so much easier.

We did talk about just me going but as it was for a whole year I didn't want to miss out on that. A massive amount of credit has to go to my wife who put her life on hold again to follow me again with footy.

I had a decent handle of the language, we understood what we were going to. Racing had exceeded our expectations and there was a really good support network.

Our kids were a bit older eight, six and three years old. We couldn't get our youngest into kindy as they are reserved for working mothers. Our middle child had to go back to a pre-school because they don't start school till they are six. However it was actually the best thing for her as it helped her ease into the foreign lifestyle. She hated going at first but by the end of it made lots of friends and enjoyed it.

On the flipside for my son, his experience was not as great. He was fully immersed in

a French speaking school. He was treated differently as he was the only foreigner. Things got lost in translation. It was hard for us as parents to see him go through this challenging experience. In a child's life a year seems to go on for ages. Outside of school, we tried to make the kids have lots of cool experiences, so we tried to show them as much of the Paris history and culture as we could. We took them to away to get first-hand history experiences like visiting Rome. There were some real highs and some lows.

Apart from our son's experience everything was fantastic. Because Louise and I had a better understanding of what we were heading into we could make it a better experience for the kids.

ON CLUBS AND EXPECTATIONS

It really depends on the club. If the club is well organised for foreigners it makes it easier. So I would recommend you investigate what sort of support the club has for foreigners. Be straight up when you ask questions as the goal posts do change, so you have to be flexible and roll with whatever comes. You can feel quite isolated at times. You naturally gravitate to the other foreigners. You do build strong relationships with these people as you are living in a bubble together.

I was lucky I had people like Dan Carter and Casey Laulala from the Crusaders, Chris Masoe from Wellington, Ben Tameifuna who I played with at the Chiefs and Joe Rokocoko from the All Blacks. As I had played with them before so it was nice to have that familiarity. Louise knew the partners so that made it easier.

There are some amazing people in France who are willing to bend over backwards. You need to buy into the culture to reap the rewards. You can't carry on the way you did at home.

Going to Wasps in London was so much easier as they spoke English. The transition was easier and quicker but the weather was a real challenge.

ON THE RUGBY

On the rugby side of things in my first stint because I didn't know what to expect, I found they were different. Their rugby culture and mind-set was nothing like how we

approached it in New Zealand. You just have to adapt. It was frustrating but it is what it is. Go with an open mind that it is not going to be like it is in New Zealand and that makes it easier.

Be realistic that they don't play or train the same way you did in New Zealand and you will be better prepared. We bussed everywhere and some of the trips were 12 hours!

I knew what to expect with my second trip to France so took my open mind. They have a teacher-student hierarchy so you just do your job. You don't say much just get on with it. Racing Metro want to play like a Kiwi team so they are more receptive to input.

They want to implement new ideas and grow the club. I found by doing extras at the end the coaches would watch and learn. You can indirectly influence things by showing things instead of telling them. Once you gain their trust they ask you more questions.

As we were in Paris we flew everywhere and it made a big difference compared with the hell bus trips from my first time.

On the plus side it was good to have other Kiwis in other teams you play. Every week you would run into people you had played with or against. It was like everyone had moved to Europe. The year was capped off winning the Top 14 Championship.

At Wasps the coaching staff changed while I was there so you had to get use to another coach and his new set up, which was to be expected.

My wife and I were ready to come home so we decided to come home a year early as we had been away three years and I went back to the Lions in Wellington. From there on to the Chiefs picked me up and the rest history. [Ross won a championship.]

FINANCIAL TIPS

Make sure you save as much as you can. Have a good experience but try and set yourself up for your return home. The rugby career is so short, so make the most of it. You don't need the newest of everything, you are better off planning for the future for post rugby. Money buys you time for when you come back as it takes a while to get yourself sorted again when you get back.

MOVING TIPS

Don't accumulate too much stuff. If it is a short-



New Zealanders at Racing Metro.

ROSS FILIPO'S CAREER SNAPSHOT

- Super Rugby titles – 4
- French Top 14 Championship
- Ranfurly Shield – with Wellington
- End of Year Grand Slam
- Tri Nations title
- Maori beating the British Lions in 2005

term contract just take bare minimum. Think of what you need to survive and halve it. With kids you naturally accumulate a lot of stuff so keep trimming the fat. When it comes time to leave give it to other people with kids or donate it to charity. I gave a bag of my kit to a homeless guy on the street because it was so cold. I wanted to give it to someone who needed it.

STOP AND ENJOY IT

Try and stand back and take it all in. You get to do something that a lot of people only dream off. Take time with the kids and the partner to absorb it – it is pretty special.

TRANSITIONING BACK TO NEW ZEALAND

After coming back from Racing Metro, I went to Hawke's Bay and played for the Magpies. I felt good when I came home and I kept playing. I was still playing well. I didn't enjoy the new laws but was glad to get the opportunity to play in Mitre 10 cup at 37. I am going to keep fit because you never know what is around the corner.

However it is time to get a job and get back into the real world. I enjoyed coaching. I coach a club side called Hamilton Marist and took them to a club title three-peat, so I have the bug for coaching but just have to explore my options.

The kids settled back into New Zealand life really well and are happy to be home.

I am supporting my wife in her endeavours as she has supported me for so long which I am extremely grateful for. It is a team effort and now it is time for her to pursue her goals while I work quietly behind the scenes to establish a career.

NZRPA Player Transition Support Services

The NZRPA has Tim Weston as their dedicated staff member to assist players prior to going overseas and when they return home. Players are encouraged to touch base with Tim before they head overseas to receive useful information and connect with other players who can assist with their transitioning experience. This service is for both players going overseas and those returning. **For more information email Tim. Weston@nzsra.co.nz or call 0800 PLAYER.**

THE NZRPA Rugby Club for retired professional players

The NZRPA are working to establish a thriving network of retired New Zealand Professional Rugby Players across the country to provide camaraderie, networking, support and advice. There are a series of events held across New Zealand for the past players alumni so they can connect, network and share stories.

To register for the NZRPA Rugby Club database please send your details to Tim.Weston@nzsra.co.nz

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Winner!

Matt shot this Fallow Buck in Central Otago with his Tikka rifle and trusty sidekick Summer the Labrador.

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