

MANAGER FAREWELL



BARRETT, COLES, SMITH AND PAKU PAY TRIBUTE TO STEVE SYMONDS



When a player drives his own personal development, it is one of the most satisfying parts of being a Personal Development Manager (PDM), says Steve Symonds, who is moving on after 10 years as the Hurricanes and Wellington PDM.

World Rugby Player of the Year Beauden Barrett has given high praise and recognition of Steve's work in the capital city: "Steve has been a big part of my personal development over the years. He would always make time to discuss any matters. He cared so much about the players and wanted the best for us. I would always leave one-on-one meetings with Steve feeling clear, certain and happier, probably after laughing at one of his jokes. I know he will be valued wherever the next stage of life takes him and his family. He's left a great legacy and can be very proud of what he has achieved at the Hurricanes."

Steve is equally complimentary of the players he has worked with: "There has been some great support from players for the programme and it is humbling to have a lifetime link with players. I have also had great captains who supported the

programme. It has been a privilege to build such special relationships with players and the people I have worked with."

One of those captains he worked closely with is Conrad Smith MNZM. Speaking from his home in France, Smith said: "I was lucky enough to work with Steve for almost his whole time with the Hurricanes. He proved to be a massive asset to the team and I know all the Hurricanes players during his time could speak about how he has helped us all, individually, as men dealing with the challenges that professional sport throws up.

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"His influence has seen the Professional Development Programme within the Hurricanes and around New Zealand move significantly forward, from a set-up that helped players that were looking for help, to one that is a lot more proactive in my opinion, and is constantly encouraging players to make the most of their time in the rugby environment.

"On a personal level, I've also seen Steve go above and beyond his role as PDM, during some pretty tough times within the Hurricanes club, where he would passionately highlight issues we needed to deal with and, more importantly, suggest ways the problems could be solved. His efforts may not receive recognition in a newspaper but will be long remembered by all the players."

Steve states that for him success will be measured on where the players are 10 years after rugby. Are they good men? Are they good dads and husbands? Do they have meaningful careers? "That is the difference between us and coaches. They get judged on results but our results and programme is life lasting."



The Hurricanes celebrate winning the Super Rugby final in 2017.

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Having worked with hundreds of players over his tenure, Steve says: "Helping players to enhance their lives outside of rugby has been really humbling. Many people go into the environment to enhance their rugby, and my focus was different and extremely rewarding and challenging.

"I believe we are heading in the right direction, our players are extremely privileged to have this programme and they are starting to understand that, and the more people in rugby that adopt that mindset the bigger successes we will have."

He claims that it wasn't always that way. Over his 10 years in the role he has seen many changes: "Players will be the first to admit there was a bit of reluctance and not much motivation. Despite some great success stories there was still a bit of apathy."

Steve says the relationships he has built have been the stand-out for him: "Catching up with players when they come back from overseas is always great. When many of the boys came home for the funeral for Jerry Collins it was sad time but a special time for our rugby family."

One player who has greatly benefited from a proactive approach to his personal development is new Manawatu CEO Shannon Paku.

Paku who introduced Steve to the Hurricanes in the changing shed on his very first day in the role said: "Steve is a top man. He has been fantastic for a large group of players who have come through the Hurricanes and Wellington programmes. He takes the time to get to know the individual and their support network and takes a holistic approach towards the players. He has got a good way of building trust with his special demeanour and style. He invests his heart

and soul into improving the players and encouraging them to grow as men.

"Since being out of the rugby scene I have always kept in contact with him. It has been and will always be a very important relationship for me."

Steve has been a stand out for his innovation and there are some special highlights for him. They include getting the players to create a business producing a charity calendar which featured photos of the players. They had Jimmy Gopperth as the company CEO, Shannon Paku as the marketing person along with Tamati Ellison. Other players were allocated various roles and they

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raised \$60,000 for charity.

Part of the money raised contributed to a pilot programme in the Pacific Islands in a joint venture between players and the police. The goal of the programme was to raise awareness around the need to change attitudes and actions towards preventing violence in families in the Pacific. The inaugural trip was so successful that it extended to become a national project with rugby players and sportspeople from all over New Zealand visiting the Pacific annually for many years. It has included trips to Guam, Tonga and Samoa twice, the Cook Islands and Vanuatu.

Former Blues, national Sevens player and now chaplain at Kings College in Auckland Onosa'i Auva'a, who attended the trip to Vanuatu, said: "Steve was

such an inspiration to us all. His strong values, compassion, sincerity and genuine desire to help people are evident and were key fundamentals to making these trips such a growth experience for us all and life-changing for many of the people we touched."

Another highlight for Steve were the numeracy and literacy programmes that he started at Wellington Academy with Weltec which were used across the country: "It's hard for players to go to the next level when they struggle to read and write. It is humbling when players say I am doing this so I can read to my kids, or I am writing a story on my family coming out from the islands, so the player could document his family history. Family is a huge part of understanding people."

A player who Steve has spent a lot of time with and who understands how important family is to Steve is Hurricanes captain Dane Coles: "Aside from the personal development programme, Steve has been a massive part of our improvement and success. He made huge contributions and we adopted many of his ideas on how to improve our culture. We have a special connection. He is someone I have really enjoyed working with over the last 10 years and we wish him and his family all the best for their future. I know our friendship will continue and we will reminisce on the rugby days over a few quiet."

"I have had a lot of time on my hands due to concussion and injury and Steve was of one my number one guys who supported me. He really helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel. Personal development is so important, and Steve really helped me improve that. If you plan ahead and use your Personal Development hours wisely you will transition better after rugby."



Steve (back row far left) and his PDM colleagues.

“Steve is an all-round good bloke a really good mate and will be sorely missed by those of us who worked with him. He is a thinker, an innovator and a dynamic leader in the personal and professional development of players and his PDM colleague.” PETER SINCLAIR



Steve in his role as PDM.

Steve’s affinity for helping young people derived from his own unconventional pathway into rugby and the mentors he had in his life. He grew up in Paraparaumu and left Kapiti College at the age of 15. He says this contributed to his desire to help mentor people as he had some older role models in his life and they made a huge difference. He started doing a cadetship but left that and ended up working in the post office.

He met his wife Jill on a Rotary youth leadership course when he was 17 and they married when he turned 24. The man who pushed him to go on the course, Glen Mitchell exposed Steve’s leadership skills, believed in him and got him out of his comfort zone which is something that Steve is eternally grateful.

At the age of 19, he went to work for Shell Oil and spent 13 years there doing seven different roles including helping set up Shell’s fuel card programme. While he was with Shell he did some university business papers on training and development.

In his early thirties, Steve took voluntary redundancy and he remembers standing on his deck in a suit thinking to himself “What the hell am I going to do? I have two kids.”

He applied for a job and didn’t get it, so he rang the woman back and asked her why. He then went to meet with her to get some feedback. That woman, Emma Norris, ended up being a crucial mentor to Steve, creating a career pathway for him which included him going back to university to do a post-graduate diploma in human resource management over 18 months. During that time, his wife Jill, who is now a deputy principal, worked as a teacher while he was the stay-at-home dad and continued his studies.

He became the Relationship Manager

at Sport NZ and went to the Paralympic games before making the life decision to spend six months travelling with his wife and young kids.

Upon his return to New Zealand, he joined the board of Paralympics New Zealand and then applied for and was selected for the PDM role with the Hurricanes and Wellington.

He did the dual role until last year when it was split with former Phoenix football player Ben Sigmund taking over the PDM role for Wellington and the two formed a tight bond.

One of the many people Steve formed close ties with was former Highlanders PDM Peter Sinclair, who is known as The Whisper or The Godfather in rugby circles. Peter, who has known Steve since he started in rugby, said: “Steve is an all-round good bloke, a really good mate and will be sorely missed by those of us who worked with him. He is a thinker, an innovator and a dynamic leader in the personal and professional development of players and his PDM colleagues.”

Steve wishes to acknowledge the support of his wife and children and the network of people he has met. Reflecting on over a decade of helping people, he said: “I have loved the player-facing aspect of the role. There are some players who I wish I had been able to impact more. I have had some great moments with some great young men around the game and their life. People underestimate our potential for impact and I know that we have changed some people’s opportunities in life greatly and I suspect we have probably saved a few lives as well. Some of the proudest

moments from my ten years are ones that only the player and I know are special, the ones that not everyone else notices.

“There are three things I believe are important when working with any group of people. Firstly, it’s not important the way it’s said, it’s important the way they hear. Secondly, it does not matter how we teach, it matters how they learn, and thirdly, never give your opinion on a situation, simply work together on the solution. The art of being good in this space is to adapt your style for their learning or development needs.”

Steve will now take some time out to do some travelling with his family before starting a new position as the National Training and Development Consultant with Rabobank New Zealand, which he will start in the New Year but will maintain his rugby friendships. A new Hurricanes Personal Development Manager is in the final stages of being appointed.

Reflecting on his career in rugby, the keen hockey man said: “I look forward to the day I get to sit on Dane Cole’s deck up in Paraparaumu where we both come from, with a beer in hand talking about the good old days, remembering the players and staff and the success we enjoyed while here and beyond. There will be some great yarns.”