



IN DEPTH / OLYMPICS 2024

Black Ferns Sevens hero Sarah Hirini made match-winning play with possible broken cheekbone

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Dana Johannsen, in Paris

Right before she made the break that sealed an Olympic gold medal, Sarah Hirini took a heavy knock to her face.

Pinned down on their own line and clinging to a 14-12 lead, Hirini broke through the Canadian defensive line and charged downfield. She did not have the legs to go end-to-end, but the Black Ferns managed to get it wide and in the next phase of play Hirini threw the last pass to Stacey Waaka who slid in for the match winning try.

It's likely the Black Ferns Sevens co-captain was carrying a broken cheekbone through those match-winning plays. Hirini was sent for an assessment soon after receiving her second successive gold medal with the champion Sevens team.

It was just another brutal injury Hirini sustained for her team.



An inspirational leader in the Black Ferns Sevens team, Sarah Hirini made the crucial break in the gold medal match at the Paris Games. Photo: Xinhua/Xu Chang/ AFP

She shouldn't really have even been at the Paris Games. Not according to conventional medicine, anyway. At a Doha tournament in December last year, she **ruptured the anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee**.

Nine months minimum is the time frame that athletes are usually given for an ACL rupture. But Hirini managed to get herself back in the selection frame for the Olympics in six-and-a-half months, doing enough to convince coach Corey Sweeney she could make an impact in Paris.

Amidst the post-match celebrations at the Stade de France on Tuesday night (local time), Sweeney and Hirini embraced. The emotion of the moment was writ large on her broken and bloodied face.

Sweeney's message to his star charge was simple.

"All I said to her was: 'I'm really proud of you'. Because not many people can do what she's just done."



Hirini was in recovery from knee surgery at the end of last year. Photo: Instagram/sarah.hirini

'Performance habits like I've never seen'

This was not a game for the ages. As Portia Woodman-Wickliffe will tell you, all things being equal, it was probably the Black Ferns worst performance of the Paris 2024 tournament. The victory was built more on the team's tenacious, gritty defence than the speed and attacking flair they are renowned for.

But when the few opportunities presented themselves, the Black Ferns seized on them. Hirini's inspired break, five minutes into the second half, was one of those moments.

"She's this person that drives performance habits like I've never seen, so in seven months the work that she has done to get back to this moment gives you the confidence to know that in pressure moments she will stand up," said Sweeney.

"The one thing you know about [Hirini] is her determination and mindset. Under pressure, she will give you everything she's got. She's pretty banged up at the moment. It's no surprise she did that - she's a special person and to do that without any rugby under her belt in seven months."



Hirini and teammate Michaela Blyde with their gold medals at Paris 2024. Photo: Iain McGregor / www.photosport.nz

The making of women's rugby in Aotearoa

Hirini couldn't join her jubilant teammates doing the media rounds late into the night outside Stade de France. She was selected for doping control, and then needed to be properly checked over by medical staff.

But Hirini has never been one for the limelight. She would much prefer the focus be on the team's departing stars Woodman-Wickliffe and **Tyla King**, who both announced in the lead-up to these Games that this campaign would be their last in the black jersey.

Like Hirini, the two veterans are among the first generation of professional women's players in New Zealand, joining the sevens programme when it was in its infancy.



Gold for New Zealand in the women's rugby sevens 27' 29"

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The inclusion of rugby sevens on the Olympic Games programme changed the trajectory of women's rugby in New Zealand. It also changed the trajectory of the players' lives.

After the match, **Woodman-Wickliffe** sported not only her gold medal won in Wednesday's final, but gold from Tokyo three years earlier, and her silver medal won in Rio in 2016. Each one told its own story.

"It's hard to explain 12 years of work, sacrifice, passion, love, fear, crying, all into one word. So I think it's just gratitude," she said.

"You know, I'm absolutely grateful for the moments that I've been able to be a part of with the girls, the team, my family."



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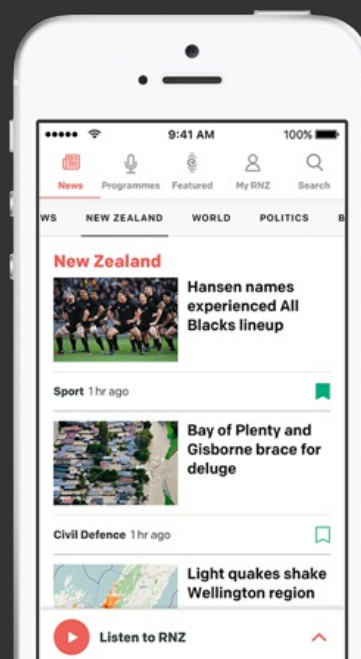
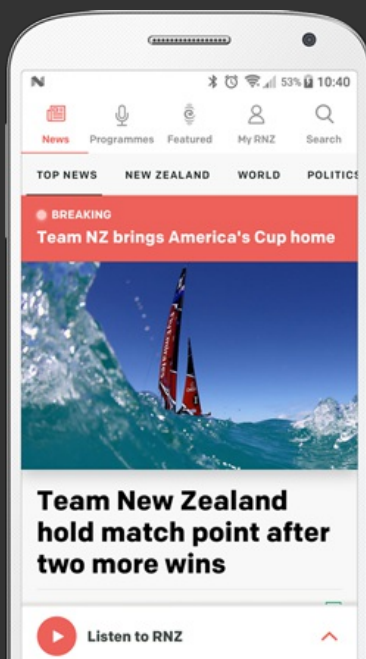


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