

PLAYERS FUTURE-PROOFING

ANIMAL INSTINCT

AT 21 YEARS OLD AND BEING A SELF-CONFESSED LATE STARTER TO THE GAME, MICHAELA BLYDE ALREADY HAS AN EYE ON THE FUTURE AFTER RUGBY. SHE HAS EXPERIENCED HIGHS AND LOWS AND BEEN ON WHAT SHE CALLS A STEEP LEARNING CURVE, GAINING SOME VALUABLE LESSONS.

Even though she has been awarded the DHL Impact Player of World Sevens Series and was the top try scorer after crossing the chalk an impressive 40 times in one season, and having been to the Olympics as a travelling reserve, she is acutely aware of her life post-rugby and has already started planning for it.

Michaela is currently studying a Certificate in Animal Care at Otago Polytechnic with her goal being a career in the agriculture industry. She is the first to admit that with her education on track her sevens has picked up. She knows that to be the best player on the field, she has to have her off-field life in order and keep growing as a person. "When I turned up to training, I was in a happier place because I had my off-field criteria right and had a really good balance of training and studying."

Incorporated into her correspondence study is a practical component, which she is fulfilling by doing work experience at the Tauranga SPCA. Michaela loves the fact she gets to be surrounded by puppies and kittens while learning about working in the animal industry. "People would be quite surprised how much work is involved at the SPCA," the dairy farmer's daughter said.

"Grabbing the strays can be quite challenging. There are new animals coming in all the time, including chickens and turtles. There is a wide variety of species. Everyone has to do everything including cleaning the cages," Michaela said. She also reckoned that it has put her off getting a bird or a rabbit due to the amount of waste they produce! However, she is interested in studying vet nursing once she completes this qualification, but is open to anything in the animal space.

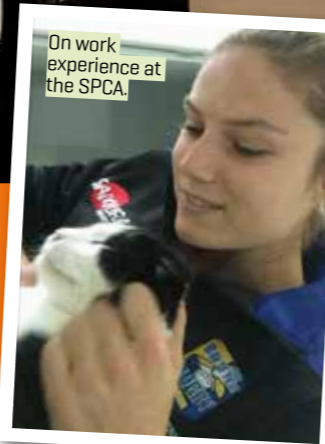
Michaela's entry into rugby was unconventional. She didn't start playing properly until she was 15 years old, after having a dabble at touch rugby at the age of five and playing soccer from age nine until 17.

Growing up just outside of New Plymouth with an older brother and younger twin brothers, it was Michaela's mum, Cherry, a former Black Fern, who spiked her interest in rugby. Her mum, who was working at Taranaki Rugby as a Rugby Development Officer, told her about the Go For Gold campaign. At the time, Michaela was in year 12 at New Plymouth Girls' High School and had just started playing rugby.

Michaela, and her mates Gayle Broughton and Lauren Bayens, tried out and made it to the camp stage. They attended a camp at Waiouru in mid-2012. She vividly recalls that it was freezing. She had never played at that level, so it is fair to say she was



Michaela and her World Sevens Series trophies.



On work experience at the SPCA.

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apprehensive to be playing a game against Black Ferns in the brutal, snowy conditions.

After that camp, there was no looking back and Michaela continued to go to camps and learn the game. Getting her head around playing for school and Taranaki, and learning the game so she could play at the next level took some getting used to.

Her first tournament was in October 2013. It was the Oceania tournament in Noosa, on Australia's Sunshine Coast – a much more favourable climate than Waiouru! It was an eye-opener for Michaela, who was just 17 years old and was still at school. It was such a rapid learning curve for her, given she was representing her country while she was still learning the sport. She still had to focus on growing as a person, but there was no denying that she was eager to learn both on and off the field.

Her dad took a break from the farm and turned up to surprise her at the tournament. She says it was quite emotional for her to pull on her black jersey for the first time with her dad there

in the stands. "It was quite a scary start to my sevens career because we were playing against Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, who leave everything on the park and are super physical. When they play against New Zealand they all seem to pull out another ten per cent of intensity and power.

"I had to focus on using my strength, which is my speed, and try to stay away from them and get around them."

She continued to play at regionals and for Taranaki at nationals in 2013, and also played for her school in the Condor Sevens, which was the first time New Plymouth Girls' High had been to the competition. They made the final, going down to Hamilton Girls. She was named Player of the Tournament and was also named in the tournament team. "It was great to go back to a school level where it is less intense and more fun."

Michaela started her playing career at the highest level, so it was important for her to keep playing at school and for Taranaki to help with her learning of the game and to further develop her skills while still having fun with her mates.

She finished her schooling, then with her Taranaki team qualified for the National Sevens in January 2014 where they came fifth.

In February 2014, she made her World Series debut alongside her Taranaki teammate Gayle Broughton. She went with the team to Atlanta in the United States, and Sao Paulo in Brazil. She described herself as an understudy to the talented Portia Woodman, with an eye to the future. The team won in Atlanta and came second to Australia in Sao Paulo.

Around the same time, Michaela began a Bachelor of Sport and Exercise through correspondence at Massey University.

In early 2015, she again went with the national team to two tournaments – Atlanta and Langford, in Canada – both of which the team won.

She then played Dubai in December, which was their last and worst finish of the 2015/16 season, where they placed fifth. Michaela said it was a tough tournament as she played strike prop, not her usual position on the wing. "I just had to focus on learning and development in my core roles of scrums and lineouts."

Michaela says she developed a huge appreciation for the forwards and found it exciting to be in the engine room expanding her positional knowledge. She was keen to be versatile and add to her position offering in the team, but admits you learn more from the losses than the wins. It was a feeling she didn't enjoy, but she says she learned about their workload, going into the tournament "stuffed", and made changes accordingly.

For the 20-year-old, 2016 was set to be an exciting year. Again she went to Atlanta, Victoria in Canada, and Sao Paulo. She also found out she was going to the Olympics in Rio. However, she was excited to be going to Rio for the first 20 seconds then realised she most

Michaela is known for her strength and speed.



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likely wouldn't be playing, which was a bitter pill to swallow. She went to the games as a travelling reserve.

"I was super disappointed not to make the team when I had played the most tournaments in that year, but as a player you just have to suck it up. I won't lie, as a player you want to be in the team, so it was character-building. My family and the support I got from my teammates and the perspective I got from people meant it was a great learning experience. Just the experience of the Olympics itself was cool.

"The sevens girls kept us involved as much as they could and we continued our preparation as if we would play because you have to be ready for anything at this level."

She was nervous watching the final while being helpless on the sideline. When the whistle blew, she thought of the four years of preparation the team had been through, and the fact that they hadn't achieved their goal of winning gold. "I felt disappointed for the girls who I felt would be worried about letting down their family and friends, which in reality was not the case. Most people would be crying from joy at winning silver, but for us it took a while for that to kick in."

The initial shock wore off after about 48 hours and then it was time

for the team to enjoy their wonderful achievement and celebrate the fact they had a silver Olympic medal, which in anyone's book is an amazing!

In the lead-up to the games, Michaela put her university studies on hold as she found training and then coming home to read about more training was a bit of overload. She then started exploring different options and decided to pursue a different educational avenue – one that allows her to make the most of her love of animals.

Michaela played in every tournament of the 2016 series, which started in Dubai where she was named player of the tournament, and finished in Clermont-Ferrand in France. There they clinched the World Series Title and she was presented with the DHL Impact Player of World Sevens Series. She was also the top try scorer of the series and was named in the World Series Dream Team along with Black Ferns sevens teammates, Ruby Tui and Portia Woodman.

Michaela is trying to keep her goals clear by challenging herself both on and off the field. She brings flair and skills to her game while continuing to learn and develop her knowledge of the agricultural industry, so she's ready when it is time for her to hang up her boots.