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Revealed: Portia’s next career step Black Ferns superstar Portia Woodman-Wickliffe announces an international move – for her and her wife, Renee – to “the luckiest club in the world”. They speak exclusively to Suzanne McFadden

Theme:
Voice & Visibility

 Revealed: Portia’s next career step

Co-authored by Suzanne McFadden

After hanging up her black jersey, Portia Woodman-Wickliffe’s next chapter will take her to play rugby in Japan, with her whānau also in the thick of the action.

Woodman-Wickliffe, who played her last game for the Black Ferns Sevens in their Olympic final victory a month ago, has signed a contract to play for the Mie PEARLS in the Japanese 15s tournament.

And her wife, Black Fern legend Renee Woodman-Wickliffe, also joins the club – contracted as assistant coach.

Their daughter, Kaia, will travel with them to Japan in late October, with the 15s season running from November till February 2025.

“Ultimately, I want to have babies by the end of next year,” 33-year-old Portia says. “But retiring from New Zealand Rugby after the Olympics has given me opportunities to try new things. And at the top of my list was Japan.

“There were opportunities to go to different places. But I want to enjoy being at home for now, then go to Japan and explore all the opportunities that go with that.”

There’s been plenty of postulating over her next step since the double Olympic gold medallist announced her retirement – noises around playing professional sevens in the United States, to switching codes to play in Australia’s NRLW league competition.

“I like keeping everyone on their toes,” Portia laughs. “Apparently, I’m playing for the Warriors... who knows?

“But I also want to go back to playing netball – social netball – and social touch. Dad [All Black Kawhena Woodman] finished playing rugby club rugby when he was 55, so I think I’m going to be the same.”

But there were a few key reasons why she chose to play 15s rugby with the Mie PEARLS first.

“Leading up to the Tokyo Olympics, the Black Ferns Sevens went to Japan every year for five years and I loved it; the people and the culture. To give Kaia this experience, to take Renee to Japan for the first time, it’s a win-win situation. Doing it all together is the best thing,” Portia says.

“New voices, new people on the field – I’m usually pretty good at picking up languages – so I’m excited for the challenge.”

Portia Woodman-Wickliffe’s name is, of course, synonymous with sevens rugby – crowned the world’s top women’s sevens player of the 2010s decade, she won three Olympic medals and two Commonwealth medals in the code. But she’s been an equally dynamic 15s winger, winning two World Cups and holding the record for the most tries scored in a Black Ferns test match (eight against Hong Kong at the 2017 World Cup).

The PEARLS have had a strong Kiwi connection in recent years. Black Ferns Sevens captain Sarah Hirini played sevens with the club last year during a sabbatical from her NZ Rugby contract. And triple New Zealand international (Black Fern, Kiwi Fern and kickboxer) Janna Vaughan is head coach of the PEARLS.

“When Sarah played over there, she raved about the community, the environment and the girls... the whole club was amazing,” Portia says.

“With Janna Vaughan at the helm of the coaching staff, I lived with her – in Kelly Brazier’s ‘halfway house’ for sevens players – and I played alongside her for a while, so I’m really looking forward to working with her too.”

Portia is also okay with having her wife instructing her what to do on the field: “She’s done that our whole rugby careers.”

Renee Woodman-Wickliffe won three World Cups over 13 seasons, before retiring from international rugby after the 2022 World Cup victory at Eden Park. Her coaching credentials include the assistant coach role at the Bay of Plenty Volcanix in last year’s Farah Palmer Cup.

But she still gets to pull the boots on – she turned out for the Blues in their successful Super Rugby Aupiki season this year, and on Saturday she returned to her roots, playing at centre for the Thames Valley Vixens in their 48-10 victory over Wairarapa Bush in the Heartland competition.

“Retirement is just a word. Last season I was coaching the Volcanix and ended up selecting myself and playing. I tell everyone I don’t have itchy feet, when I actually do,” Renee laughs. But she can’t see herself on the field in Japan.

She’s following in the footsteps of Olympic sevens gold medallist Kelly Brazier, who took her wife Talia and two sons, to Japan where she coached the Brave Louve sevens side in 2023.

“I’ve played alongside Japanese girls and I’ve coached a few in the Bay of Plenty Volcanix. They’re beautiful people, really respectful, and they listened to everything I said,” Renee says.

She played test rugby in the backline right next to Vaughan, a pacy wing, who joined the Mie PEARLS as a sevens player in 2018. Vaughan is thrilled to have both Woodman-Wickliffe women involved with her club.

“Portia’s on-field accolades speak for themselves,” she says. “Her experience within the game will be a huge asset to the team and the wider PEARLS club. But more than this, I know she’s a great person with a huge heart and a valued teammate – who I’m just pleased I don’t need to tackle ever again.

“Having Renee sign with us as an assistant coach is the icing on the cake. Her wealth of knowledge and rugby IQ is invaluable and she will play a pivotal part for our campaign and winning the national title this season. Her ability to connect players and bring positive connections and culture to our environment is also significant.

“We are the luckiest club in the world.”

Mie PEARLS general manager, Hisashi Saito, says the club feels honoured to sign two Black Ferns legends.

“PEARLS motto is ‘From our home city Yokkaichi to the world’ and in order to raise the team to a more global level and for the development of women’s rugby in Japan, we’ve been aiming to acquire the world’s top players. It’s a great honour to have world-class individuals like Portia and Renee join the team,” he says.

The Woodman-Wickliffes, who’ve just returned home from a European holiday after the Paris Olympics, will live in the city of Yokkaichi, in the Mie Prefecture. The PEARLS will initially compete in the Kansai regional 15s tournament before playing in the national championship.

While 11-year-old Kaia is finding the idea of the move a little “overwhelming”, Renee says her daughter loves rugby.

“She’s very much into her own space of playing rugby, going to training and playing with friends. She’s been following us since she was a baby, and now she knows rugby is her sport, she’s excited about playing. She doesn’t really care what we’re doing,” Renee says.

“Her role model is [Black Fern] Katelyn Vaha’akolo, and that’s okay because we love her. She’s an amazing player and person, and she’s also real big on TikTok.”

Coaching could be the long-term future for the Woodman-Wickliffes, though Portia sees her role as more of a skills clinic coach.

“I don’t think I’m a team coach – that’s definitely Renee,” she says. “She’s so good at connecting with people, treating people as humans first, then rugby players, whereas I just get too stuck on the rugby.

“We have thought about eventually heading into head coach and assistant coach roles. But that’s a fair few years away – after maybe three or four babies.”

For now, Portia wants to pursue more TV commentating and ambassadorships, and continue playing sport – now that there’s a clearer professional pathway for women.

“Now we get to travel the world and experience it like you’ve seen the men doing for years,” she says. “You hear all these players going to France and Japan on big contracts and now we can have that experience, it’s really exciting.”

The United States already has the Premier Rugby Sevens competition, but will launch its first professional 15s competition, the Women’s Premier League, in 2025; France is starting a SuperSevens women’s tournament this year. And Portia has already expressed an interest in trying her hand at rugby league.

“It’s just trying to decide which one you want most and which ones work for our whānau,” Portia says.

Adds Renee: “I’m excited to just carry her bags and take the photos.”


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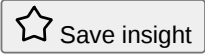
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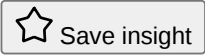
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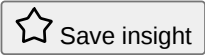
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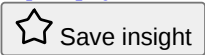
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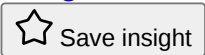
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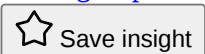
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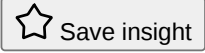


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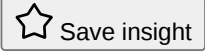


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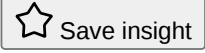


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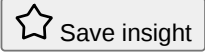


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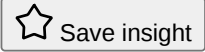
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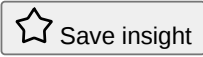
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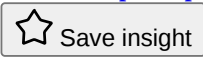
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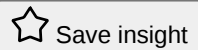
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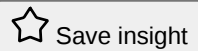
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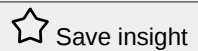
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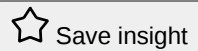
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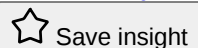
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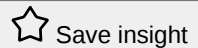
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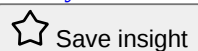
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