



RUGBY'S MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

After a broken arm brought Ma'a Nonu's 2014 season to an end, the explosive player is back on top and talks to MMH about his impressive longevity in the game.

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STATS

Name: Ma'a Nonu
Position: Second five-eighth
Age: 33
Height: 1.84m
Weight: 108kg
Super Rugby Caps: 155
Super Rugby Points: 250
Super Rugby Debut: Round 1 2003 v Crusaders, Christchurch
Clubs: Hurricanes 2003-11, Blues 2012, Highlanders 2013, Blues 2014, Hurricanes 2015-
Test caps: 94
Test points: 130 (26 tries)
Test debut: 14 June 2003 v England

MA'A NONU MADE HIS TEST DEBUT AGAINST ENGLAND IN 2003 AND WAS A PART OF THE 2011 WORLD CUP-WINNING ALL BLACKS TEAM. WITH 94 CAPS, HE IS RAPIDLY CLOSING IN ON 100 TESTS. IN APRIL 2015 HE CELEBRATED 150 SUPER RUGBY GAMES. THIS IS AN INCREDIBLE ACHIEVEMENT, HELD ONLY BY A SELECT FEW – AND HE WAS THE FIRST BACKLINE PLAYER TO DO SO.

In another record (for an active player), Nonu scored his 50th Super Rugby try, against the Chiefs in May. As a player, Nonu has it all. He has mastered inside and outside Centre, positions that have distinct differences and require specific skills and expertise. He is 33 years old, which seems irrelevant given the supremacy of his form. Remarkably, Nonu and his All Blacks and Hurricanes team-mate Conrad Smith hold a record partnership of 50 Tests and 50 Super Rugby matches in the centres. They're like the Rodgers and Hammerstein of rugby, writing their own magnificent records to a player-perfect tune.

Nonu may be at the top of the game but he never expected as much. He understands the symbolism and power of the All Black spirit and whilst the World Cup win is an obvious highlight, he considers just making the team as his greatest achievement. When

he first came onto the rugby radar, Nonu was cited for his incredible explosive power. That power remains a potent part of his game – yet Nonu could never have settled on being an exciting, powerful, raw player. He has spent his career fine-tuning and expanding his repertoire. He has developed his skills and techniques to display incredible ball skills – including the ability to unload perfect passes with one hand, a fearsome defence, a fine boot and an enviable line-breaking record! What's more, he has that elusive quality, an instinct that has him always one step ahead of most players.

Nonu has an understated, though deadly, determination. He doesn't regard the brief, six-week period at the end of the season as an "off-season". Rugby for him is pretty much a 12-month job. This type of commitment highlights the importance of attitude in scaling the heights.

In fact, the beginning of 2015 marked the first pre-season training Nonu has done in about seven years. It was a consequence of having endured a broken arm during a Test match against South Africa in September 2014. The sizeable and relatively fresh scar on his forearm is testament to the severity of this fracture.

Most commentators have hailed Nonu's superb form this season and his team, the Hurricanes, finished the Super Rugby season first overall. One wonders how Nonu managed to return to form so quickly and successfully.

Nonu says he was mindful to rebuild his fitness routine in stages.

He recalls, with refreshing honesty, a sense of "almost stage-fright" prior to his first post-injury game. It seems natural that one would have some nerves, but how many elite athletes readily acknowledge this? Not many. It's Nonu's ability to look openly at all aspects of rugby – the psychological and physical – that surely contributes to his impressive longevity. He adds that "fitness-wise, it took me a couple of games to get in, but it was back to normal after that".

Nonu emphasises the importance of recovery in longevity. He regularly uses water immersion therapy, hot tubs and ice baths. Trigger point exercises are another core element in recovery too.

Nonu possesses a supernova force. He is capable of unpredictable, stellar explosions whereby he boldly breaks defences; much to the excitement and triumph of fans.

When a player breaks the line, it can bring a packed stadium to its feet with anticipation and commotion. It's a dangerous moment when everyone knows the defence is at risk and a try is in the making. To make this happen is no easy feat. Indeed, in modern rugby many would argue that defensive strategies have adjusted – as well as law changes – to the extent that defence presently dominates the game. So how does Ma'a Nonu so often manage to get fans to their feet as he finds a weakness in the opposition's defence and thunders through the line? It's not chance or fluke. It's the result of vigilant preparation, dedication and an

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instinct that enables Nonu to capitalise on his expertise.

Nonu says his biggest lesson has been to continue learning, to continue improving, “As I progressed I tried to add more skills to my game, to overcome deficiencies in my game. I’ve been playing a long time and I’m still learning now”. It’s this type of attitude that one finds in common with most champion athletes.

Nonu cross-trains by running and doing “a lot of rowing”. He’s also been practising yoga for eight years. He emphasises the importance of health and nutrition, maintaining that “education” is fundamental. Players and individuals need to understand the basics of nutrition and exercise in order to be healthy.

To generate his explosive power and speed, Nonu engages in plyometrics, “I do a lot of explosive jumping, a lot of power sessions. It gets you springy”.

In rugby, Nonu is both feared and respected. He’s the type of player whose physicality and presence makes the game look easy. People expect Nonu to nail opponents and set-up spectacular tries almost on tap. It seems as though he has an almost mythical stature. Indeed one only has to watch him perform the haka to see a warrior spirit shine. What’s more, his fierce on-field demeanour has resulted in more than one player prematurely off-loading the ball rather than meet him in a tackle!

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But so personable is Nonu that I had to work hard to remind myself of this when we chatted. One of the nicest things about him is his honesty. He has a great inner strength that allows him to face life without pretence. He readily concedes that his path to success was not untrammelled. Yet he never gave up and he wants to encourage others not to back down either.

He believes in confronting challenges. Adding that context is largely irrelevant, personal or professional, the spark of strength required to face our challenges is the same for all of us. It must come from “deep down inside, in yourself”. Sometimes this requires “a leap of faith” and “you just have to make the right decisions and something comes along, and go for it”. The unassuming Nonu never expected to be an All Black. He simply worked hard and embraced opportunities along his path.

Nonu has an exciting future, on and off the field. This is a star who isn’t about to fade. He’s also much more versatile than many perhaps realise, with a strong interest in film development.

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