

Anna Richards: The greatest woman player the rugby world has ever seen, Anna Richards is more responsible for the development of the game to the stage it has currently reached in New Zealand than any other person. She was an ever-present in New Zealand teams from the second one, picked in 1990, until she called it a day in 2010 having played a record 58 matches (out of a possible 67) and 49 of the possible 54 tests. When she retired Richards was 45 years old, but still in first-rate physical shape. She was an extraordinarily dedicated athlete, one who never cut corners, and had to be the last active test player anywhere in the world who had a four-point try on their CV.

Born in Timaru, Anna Richards was a true pioneer of women's rugby in this country. She initially represented Canterbury in the pre-NPC days but moved to Auckland in 1989, and drove the game onwards and upwards through her personal efforts and example. On arrival she played for Waitemata and Roskill Districts for one season each before arriving at Ponsonby in 1991, but was destined to move once more (to College Rifles, the club she spent the rest of her career with) in 1996. At every level teams Richards was associated with were particularly successful; below international level her reputation and ability attracted a number of players to her clubs or provinces and Rifles, in particular, has shown 20 years of benefits as its team is always one of the strongest in Auckland. In a career lasting quarter of a century from her first club games with University in Christchurch, she seldom knew what it was to be a part of a losing side.

Although Richards had all the skills and could kick goals as well, she was more a facilitator on the field than a heavy points-scorer. This was despite the teams she played in being dominant to such an extent that scores of 70, 80 or beyond were not rare and some of her colleagues set records that will last many a day. Always much in demand, she appeared as a loan player with both Otago and Manawatu, and spent off-seasons in club rugby in Italy and England.

A halfback or first-five, Richards controlled the game in many ways but always preferred to attack with ball in hand. As a result the New Zealand teams of her era played at a pace and skill level their opponents could not match; it was little wonder the Black Ferns were unbeaten for more than eight years (2001-09, 24 tests). Auckland teams were even more dominant; since the NPC began in 1999 Auckland has won all but two and one of them (2006) was decided when the Black Ferns, including Richards among 14 Auckland players, were away in Canada at the World Cup.

Richards tended to be one of those players who make an ideal first lieutenant rather than being a regular captain; Farah Palmer had that job for most of her New Zealand career with Richards very much the senior pro. It was a sharing of responsibility that worked perfectly, and suited the temperaments and styles of both women to a tee.

Honours for Richards poured in towards the end of her career; it was almost as if she had only recently been discovered and everyone felt they needed to make up for recognition missed. Amazingly, she was only once a winner of the NZRU award for Women's Player of the Year – in 1994, the first year of the award. After that she was so much a part of the fabric of the game her contribution tended to be overlooked but in fairness it was shared around; the first double winner was Victoria Heighway in 2007 and 2009.

There was less uncertainty about international honours, at least on the playing field. Anna Richards went to five World Cups, despite a seven-year hiatus between the first in 1991 and the next; she was part of four winning teams at this tournament (1998, 2002, 2006 and 2010) and was inducted into the World Rugby Hall of Fame in 2014.

If Richards was to win the Steinlager Salver, the NZRU award for outstanding lifetime achievement, it would not be out of place and neither would it be premature; perhaps this is something the central union should seriously look at. It would be a fitting tribute to one of the country's most important rugby figures of the last 50 years and more.



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