

Woodman-Wickliffe eyes another Olympic gold in women’s rugby, loves the Jonah Lomu comparisons

By Steve McMorran
The Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — As a child, Portia Woodman-Wickliffe had competing dreams of sporting success.

She adored New Zealand rugby great Jonah Lomu and wanted to be like him on the wing. But at the time, the pathway for girls in rugby was narrow and difficult to follow.

Woodman-Wickliffe also hoped one day to represent New Zealand at the Olympics. In pursuit of that dream, she regularly took three busses after school to an Auckland sports stadium where she could run track, mostly sprints.

Dreams of rugby and Olympic success didn’t mesh until a women’s world series launched in 2012, three years after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted rugby sevens into the games. When it made its Olympic debut in 2016, Woodman-Wickliffe was on the New Zealand team that won silver in Rio de Janeiro. She went one better in Tokyo in 2021, winning gold for her rugby-mad country.

This month, Woodman-Wickliffe hopes to elevate her game even higher when New Zealand will defend its title at the Paris Games.

The 32-year-old Woodman-Wickliffe is arguably the best-known women’s rugby player on the planet, just as Lomu in his heyday was the best-known player in the game.

Lomu reshaped rugby in the 1990s with the mixture of size, speed, and strength he brought to his position as a winger. Woodman-Wickliffe has done the same for women in her 12-year international career.

She’s been the world player of the year in sevens and 15s, the sport’s traditional format. In May, she became the first woman to score 250 tries in the rugby sevens world series. She’s already the leading try-scorer in women’s 15s.

In 15s, she was a member of New Zealand teams which won the Rugby World Cup in 2017 and 2022.



Lomu’s four-try performance in New Zealand’s 45-29 win over England in the semifinals of the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa left an impact.

“I was watching a replay of him walking over the England boys in the World Cup and I said, ‘Dad, I want to be the female Jonah Lomu.’ And he said, ‘OK, Bub,’ and didn’t pay too much attention after that,” she says of a conversation with her father when she was nine.

“If people call me that or compare me to Jonah Lomu, that’s incredible, because I still feel I’m a little netball player trying to play rugby. So to be compared to Jonah Lomu it’s insane, and you don’t get used to that.”

Family affair

Woodman-Wickliffe’s father, Kawhena Woodman, was an All Blacks winger, as was her uncle, Fred Woodman. Her parents were school teachers and named

RAD RUGBY. Portia Woodman-Wickliffe of New Zealand is seen in action during the HSBC rugby sevens series in Singapore in this May 4, 2024 file photo. Woodman-Wickliffe, the so-called Jonah Lomu of women’s rugby, is aiming for another Olympic gold. A silver medallist in 2016 when rugby sevens made its Olympic debut, she was bitterly disappointed after losing the final to Australia. She became an Olympic champion in Tokyo and is determined to defend the title when she lines up in Paris. (AP Photo/Suhaimi Abdullah, File)

her Portia after the character in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*.

When there was no opportunity for girls to play rugby at her high school, she was encouraged by her aunt Te Aroha Keenan, who was a deputy principal and a New Zealand netball representative, to play netball. It is similar to basketball but with a seven-a-side format and strict rules on player movements on court.

Her first opportunity to play rugby came earlier when the coach of a local boys’ team heard Woodman was fast enough to beat boys and older girls and invited her to join. She was the only girl to play for that club.

But Woodman-Wickliffe continued to play netball as her primary sport after high school, having given up on the hope of reaching the Olympics in a track event.

She also saw netball as her best chance of being a professional athlete and became a member of one of New Zealand’s pro franchises.

Then rugby came knocking again, almost inevitably. In 2012, New Zealand Rugby launched a Go For Gold campaign, designed to identify female athletes from other sports who might be able to join a national women’s sevens team.

At that stage, sevens was coming to the 2016 Olympics and New Zealand Rugby saw an opportunity to compete for a gold medal.

From 800 women who tried out, Woodman-Wickliffe was one of 32 chosen for a training camp. For a time, she combined rugby and netball but in 2012 she played for the New Zealand women’s team, the Black Ferns, for the first time, breaking her arm in her debut match. Forced to choose between netball and rugby, she chose rugby and has been a

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	2	8				3	9	
	5	6	1		3	2	7	
		2	3	1	9	8		
		9	8	7	5	6		
	4	5	9		2	7	1	
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Difficulty level: Medium #28395

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last issue’s puzzle

Puzzle #19256 (Easy)

All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

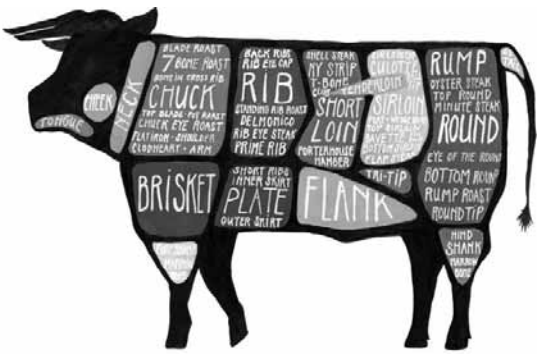
6	8	1	4	9	2	7	3	5
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