

BLACK BEAUTY

KEVIN ROBERTS takes issue with “anti-sports snobs” and says what’s good for rugby is good for New Zealand.

Okay, so I’m biased. I’ve been in love with rugby since I was an 11-year-old kid in Lancashire. I was converted forever to the All Blacks by Earle Kirton, Mac Herewini, Chris Laidlaw and Waka Nathan. Magical mythical men who passed and ran wherever they were. It was all pace and space – the forerunners of Carter, Muliaina and McCaw.

These days, when I watch a game I still feel like a kid. And I watch a lot of games. As worldwide chief of Saatchi and Saatchi, I need to constantly travel, and, as much as I can, I plan my business meetings around the international rugby calendar. Funny, that! Last year I watched the All Blacks play at Twickenham, Cardiff Arms, the Stade de France and from the Baker St pub on 1st Ave, New York.

It was like watching the most beautiful machine at full throttle, with all parts working effortlessly as they should. This team are the new black magic. They have depth, understanding, skill and self-confidence. And as the haka in the Cardiff dressing-room showed, they have a determination not to be intimidated or pushed off course.

I have no doubt Graham Henry and his council of wise men have created a team that will play beautiful rugby and will get better every game in this year’s Rugby World Cup.

Nick Farr-Jones, the brilliant former Wallabies captain, believes that to win the World Cup you need five players who could walk into the world 15 tomorrow, five on the fringe and another five solid test players. Add seven subs of the same quality and you have the 2007 All Blacks.

Worldwide there’s deep respect for the All Blacks. Even Stephen Jones, the *Sunday Times* rugby correspondent, is not immune to the power of Black. I had dinner with him in London recently and he sang the praises of New Zealand’s passion for the game – at grass-roots and elite levels – and believes we have taken rugby to a new level. (Mind you, it was midnight and after a bottle or two of Cloudy Bay!)

The respect in which the team are held goes back a long way. And for good reason. Since their creation, the All Blacks have won 73 percent of the tests they’ve played. At home the win rate is more like 90 percent.

Despite the ramblings of the wishy-washy, rugby remains one of the essential ingredients that make up the New Zealand identity (see John Reynolds’s masterwork *Clouds* for the manifestation of this identity in all its Kiwi glory). There will always be anti-sports snobs who reject this. These are the same people who roll their eyes at the prospect of building any world-class venue to host World Cup 2011. But they ignore history and the significant role the All Blacks have played in establishing an independent New Zealand spirit.

Lloyd Jones has written about

this in his riveting *Book of Fame* on the 1905 Originals. That team travelled to Mother England by steam. They were unknown, unfancied and yet unbeatable.

Before Gallipoli (and all it did to develop a national character), the original All Blacks began what we are about, projecting a unique identity onto the world, showing old empires that small, young countries can be conquerors. Edmund Hillary, Peter Jackson and others have developed and diversified this idea, but it began with a black jersey and a determination to win.

When John Kirwan was given the black jersey, he tells me, it felt heavy as lead. Three older All Blacks told him the number 14 jersey was his only on loan. On loan from legends like Bryan Williams, Grant Batty, Stu Wilson and the many who preceded them.

In that typically understated way that characterises so many

Full throttle: players like Dan Carter (foreground) are the heirs to the greats of the past.



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things Kiwi, New Zealand holds its history in high regard.

The All Blacks are a link to the first surprising moments of recognition that we are different from the English or the Scots. More important, they are a modern assertive expression of how that difference has developed into a proud and dynamic national identity.

I’m an adopted New Zealander. When I am sitting in the stand watching the pre-match haka, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It’s a moment that speaks to me more fluently than any rendition of the national anthem, no matter how beautifully sung (and Hayley West-enra did us proud in 2006).

To the rest of the world this speaks loudly, too. I meet business leaders every day who are at the top of their game. Often, all they know about New Zealand is that we breed unstoppable men called All Blacks. And that alone says a lot about us. It says we’re tough, competitive, fearless, professional, disciplined. It says we are winners. It says we can beat anyone even if we do have to travel a long way to do it.

When I was a member of the New Zealand Rugby Union board, we found corporate sponsors – global companies like Adidas, who understood the value of the All Blacks and wanted to join the family. These companies recognised the All

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Vital ingredient: the All Blacks have become a key part of New Zealand’s identity.

Blacks’ values, their beliefs, their spirit.

New Zealand recognises the value of having the All Blacks as global ambassadors. If I have my way, their global reach may get even bigger.

Late last year I was appointed chairman of USA Rugby. The US has committed to rugby and introduced world rugby’s most forward-looking governance structure. A new board with six independent directors, two international rugby players and one representative of grass-roots rugby. This isn’t some honorary position. We have serious ambitions about making rugby a truly global sport and to do that North America has to become a serious player.

It once was. In fact, the US is the reigning Olympic rugby champion. It last won gold in 1924, after which the sport was dropped from the Games. Now, about 80,000 Americans play rugby, but the sport has a low profile and no television coverage.

I think we can turn that around. American football, baseball and basketball are huge domestically but US teams don’t often get the chance to pit themselves against overseas equals.

We’re planning for a massive explosion in grass-roots rugby. We want to see a million players, almost all of them amateur. That’s what builds devotion and loyalty to a sport. Then we need a nucleus of

30 to 40 players who are pro or semi-pro.

Nigel Melville, a former England captain, is our newly appointed CEO and president of rugby operations. Peter Thorburn, the former North Harbour coach and All Black selector, is head coach of the US Eagles national team. We have set very steep goals: to get a team to the quarter-finals of the World Cup Sevens by 2009 and to the quarter-finals of the 2011 World Cup. This year’s World Cup may be tough: our group includes England, South Africa, Manu Samoa and Tonga!

The International Rugby Board wants us to do well because it wants rugby to grow. We should all want this. More teams, more spectators worldwide, more sponsors, more heroes to look up to.

Jock Hobbs, Chris Moller and the NZRU have all been very supportive and have seen what a vibrant US could do for New Zealand.

No matter how big the game becomes, no country has a rugby tradition as rich, deep and unified as New Zealand. We already consider the All Blacks world champions. When the game is established in the US they’ll walk taller still. And that will open more minds and more doors to the home of the All Blacks.

There is an opportunity here and it’s huge.