

Niniwa Roberts

Hockey

Early years

Niniwa Roberts was born on 1 June 1976 in Takapuna, Auckland. By the time she was four, her family had moved twice: first to Singapore, then to Wainuiomata, Wellington. But the travelling she remembers from her early years was “following Mum and Dad around the sports field”. Between them, Niniwa’s parents played cricket, tennis, rugby, golf, and hockey, and also ran in marathons. The passion for sports was a “family thing”.

As a young hockey player, Niniwa remembers another kind of “family” – the mothers, fathers, and older siblings of the members of the Wainuiomata Hockey Club. Whenever Wainuiomata kids had to compete in nearby Wellington, Niniwa’s “hockey family” would take turns getting the players there and back and supporting them at their games.

Games were on Saturday mornings, and Wainuiomata was foggy and cold. At the start of every weekend, Niniwa had to clean her boots. By the time the games ended, her boots were filthy again – and inside them, her feet felt like ice blocks. “Why am I playing this game?” she wondered. She hated the cold and the chores – but she loved the feeling of playing for a team. In fact, hockey wasn’t the only game Niniwa was good at – she loved tennis, too – but when she had to choose, the team sport won.

School days

When Niniwa was thirteen, she was sent north to a te reo Māori immersion school in Ruatoki, to connect with her mother’s iwi, Ngāi Tahu. She lived with her aunt and grandmother while attending school.

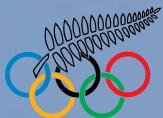
Leaving home to go to rural Ruatoki was a huge change for Niniwa. She was a city girl, she wasn’t fluent in te reo, and – worst of all – there was no hockey! But Niniwa’s whānau came through for her. Led by her grandmother, Niniwa’s whānau started their very own team, and played in the Whakatane league. “Run, run, Niniwa, run,” her aunties and nannies would scream as they hit the ball to her.



The Wainuiomata schoolgirl's hockey team beat Karori 3-0 at Bryan Heath Park on Saturday.

Kura Kaupapa Māori

Ruatoki was the site of New Zealand’s first official bilingual (English and te reo Māori) school. The school opened in 1896, but became officially bilingual in 1978. The school Niniwa attended was total immersion, meaning that all instruction took place in te reo Māori. These schools are called Kura Kaupapa Māori. The philosophy and practice of these schools reflect Māori culture and values, strengthen the language and encourage community participation.



Travel and inspiration

After she finished school, Niniwa played in the national hockey league, and was even part of an extended New Zealand squad. Despite this, she never imagined she could make it into a team representing New Zealand against the world. She was in awe of the skill of the older players, some of whom had been on the team for many years and were legends to Niniwa.

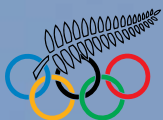
So in 1999, when Niniwa was 23, she decided to play hockey outside New Zealand. She travelled first to Germany, where she played a season of indoor hockey. Then she went to Holland, where she played a season of outdoor hockey with a Dutch team (Amsterdam Hockey Club). It was there that she first began to imagine herself as a possible Olympian. Five of the athletes in that team had competed in the Olympic Games. They were better than Niniwa – but not that much better. Niniwa began to think: “If I can play with these guys... then surely I can play against them”.

With that in mind, she travelled to Sydney to watch the 2000 Olympic Games. For the first time, she imagined what it would be like to be competing in such a big event: cheered on by family and friends, representing New Zealand on the world stage.

Hockey had been Niniwa’s passion for as long as she could remember. But it took her year overseas to turn that passion into an ambition. What would it take for Niniwa to lift her game to the level of the team she’d seen play in Sydney? She realised that she had plenty of talent – and in a way, that was letting her down. She was coasting on the skills she already had. She needed to develop her fitness, strength and speed to give her an edge. She returned to New Zealand and worked as a massage therapist at Capital Sports Medicine while pursuing her goal. Both her boss, legendary multisporter Jill Westerra, and her mentor Suzie Muirhead – an experienced Black Sticks player – were telling her to get out there and run, just as her whānau had told her, ten years before.



Playing for Wellington in 2001



The training paid off. As a new Black Stick, Niniwa debuted in international games in 2001. She developed her reputation as a strong forward and goal-scorer during the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, where New Zealand placed fourth.

2004 Athens Olympic Games

To choose the team for the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, coach Ian Rutledge put the squad of about twenty-five women through six months of training. The squad was based in Christchurch for this period. Once again Niniwa travelled to a new place – this time, for total immersion hockey. Games and practice were day-in, day-out. There were even planned social events, such as pottery evenings, to build team unity. “We were eating and breathing hockey,” Niniwa remembers. And she loved it.

After six months, the Olympic team of sixteen women was named. Following the announcement, Niniwa called her parents with her news: “I’m going to the Olympic Games”.



Playing for the Black Sticks in 2001



Niniwa shooting to score, the Black Sticks Women vs. the Ukraine, 2004



All of their training together had turned the Black Sticks Women into a tight unit of players. Heading into the Olympic Games, they were focused on their skills, the competition, and winning their games. However, chef de mission Dave Currie had even bigger plans. He wanted all of the New Zealand athletes to feel like members of a larger team – supporting and relying on each other. This was the ‘One Team, One Spirit’ plan that had been trialled at the Manchester Commonwealth Games. Before the athletes arrived in the Olympic village, the support crew spent weeks decorating it with a Kiwiana theme. Each athlete was greeted with a haka, and once a member of the New Zealand team had settled in, he or she joined in the haka to welcome the next arrival. This focus on Māori culture was coordinated by Amster Reedy, a respected kaumātua. Ngāi Tahu offered up a mauri stone, or touch stone, to impart strength to the team. Ranui Ngarimu, of Ngāi Tahu, and Te Aue Davis, of Ngāti Maniapoto, wove a kākahu for the New Zealand flagbearers to wear in this and future games, and it was presented to the Olympic Committee by the Māori Queen Te Atairangikāhu. Past New Zealand Olympic legends, such as Sir Murray Halberg, were present to inspire the team. It worked for Niniwa, turning the whole New Zealand team into a bigger family.

At the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, finishing in sixth place had gained the Black Sticks Women a lot of attention and improved their world standing. They came sixth again at Athens – and Niniwa scored six of her team’s goals in the tournament.

New life, new goals

Selection for the Black Sticks Men and Black Sticks Women is extremely competitive, and Niniwa was dropped from the team shortly before the Commonwealth Games in 2006. She’d played in one Commonwealth Games and one Olympic Games – she could have decided to retire. But she didn’t think the game was over for her yet.

Niniwa decided to try her luck overseas, and signed a contract with a club in Hamburg, Germany. However, she had barely arrived when she realised she was pregnant. She returned to her partner, Hamish, in New Zealand. Their first daughter, Isabella, was born in January, 2007.

Being dropped from the New Zealand squad in 2006 had left Niniwa with a feeling of unfinished business with New Zealand hockey, so her plans changed again. Before her daughter was even born, she was planning her return – all the way to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.



The New Zealand team marching in the Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games

The Athens Games were special to the whole New Zealand team for another reason. In World War II, New Zealanders were sent to Greece to reinforce the defending army. Many of the New Zealand soldiers who died in that campaign were memorialized in the Phaleron Cemetery, near Athens, and the New Zealand Olympic team paid a special visit to the cemetery to remember their fallen. For the New Zealanders, competing at Athens reinforced these ties between New Zealand and Greece.



Niniwa, Isabella and Hamish, 2007

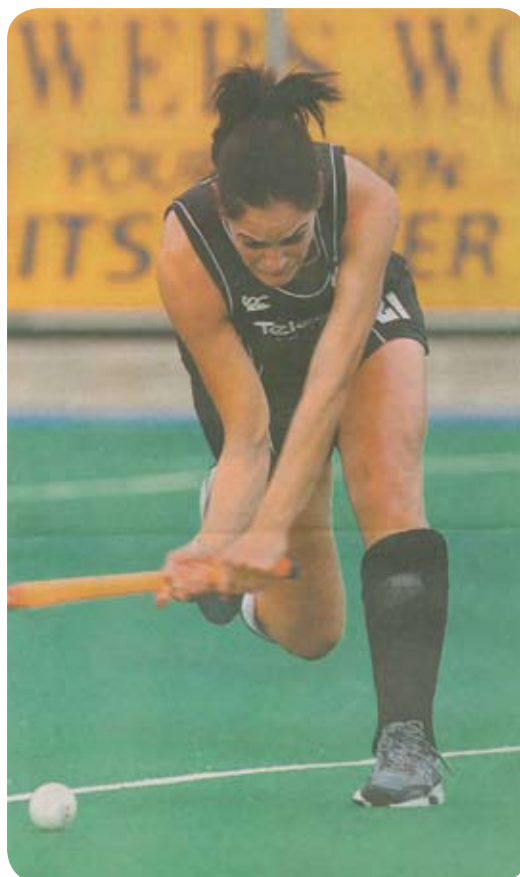


She knew it would be hard. She called up another player, Michelle Hollands, for advice. Michelle had also had children and gone back to competitive hockey. “Nin, you’ve got to make sure your families are going to support you,” Michelle told her. So Niniwa called family meetings with both her parents and her in-laws to get “buy-in” for her new Olympic goal.

During 2007 and 2008, Niniwa and Hamish were also renovating their house – as if starting a family and training for an elite sports event weren’t enough! They moved in with Hamish’s family, who helped Niniwa look after Isabella. There is a saying that it takes a village to raise a child – that was true for Niniwa, Hamish and Isabella. It could also be said that it took a village to get Niniwa to the Olympic Village.

If hockey had been tough before, it was tougher now that she had to balance caring for Isabella with the demands of training. After giving birth, she was in completely different physical shape. Even her hips felt “weird” when she went running again. A special coach, Rob Nicholson, helped her get back into hockey playing shape.

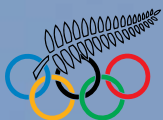
Once again, Niniwa’s approach and dedication worked. Playing in the national hockey league in 2007, she helped her Wellington team win the tournament, and was awarded most valuable player of the year. This saw her named in the Black Sticks again in August, in time to play in the Oceania Cup, which determined whether the team qualified for the 2008 Olympic Games.



Playing for the Black Sticks, 2007

In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the final against the Australian team in the Oceania Cup was a special triumph for the Black Sticks Women. The Australian Hockeyroos are considered one of the top teams in the world, but for once, New Zealand beat them.

“We’d always looked up to Australia,” Niniwa remembered. Now they’d not only qualified for the Olympic Games, but they’d earned the respect of their opponents. They finally felt like they were on a level playing field.



2008 Beijing Olympic Games

At the start of the Black Sticks Women's first Olympic game against Japan, Niniwa heard from the stands, "Go Mummy!" It almost took her breath away. Playing in the Olympic Games with her family watching – with her daughter, her sister, her partner, and his family, all in the stands – was a golden moment.

This was followed by a near disaster. Niniwa slipped, hurting her knee badly enough that she worried she'd torn a ligament. This would take her out of the Games completely. She had a moment of sheer horror – she'd put in so much training, asked so much of her family and spent so much time away from her daughter. How could it end after ten minutes' of play?

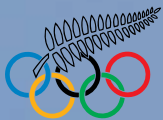
Luckily, her injury wasn't that bad, and Niniwa played through the campaign. But that might have been the only luck the team got in the Beijing Olympic Games. Despite their fine performance in the Oceania qualifier, despite the dedication of coach Ken Towns, and despite the efforts of Niniwa and everyone around her, the Black Sticks Women lost each game.

For Niniwa, the flip side of the Olympic Value of *Pursuit of Excellence* was accepting failure. She felt as though the team that had gone to Beijing had never quite managed to work together. Seeing her coach's disappointment made Niniwa think, not just, "What could we have done better?" but, "What could I have done better?" It was a hard question to answer.



The Black Sticks Women vs. Germany, 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

A sense of personal responsibility, and of responsibility to a group, are both very important in team sports. Niniwa believes that both come to her through Māori values. She was a natural leader early in her life – a skill brought out by activities at Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club, and also by being the oldest of four children. But being a leader, or a good team member, didn't mean being the star of the show. It meant leading by example. It meant representing your values through your actions. It meant helping each team member do their part and support each other. This, to Niniwa, was whānaungatanga in action.



Being a role model

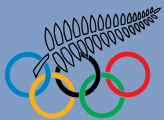
Giving back

After Beijing, the new Black Sticks coach, Mark Hager, wanted fresh faces for a team that could perform together all the way to the London Olympic Games in 2012. Niniwa returned to the national league, and to coaching. It was time, she felt, to give something back to her sport.

One player she has coached from an early age is her sister. Niniwa's twin sisters, Aniwaka and Anita, were born when she was nine. The difference in age made her a natural role model for her sisters. Just as Niniwa followed her mother into hockey, Aniwaka followed Niniwa.

Being a role model is more important than ever for Niniwa now that she has two daughters of her own – Isabella gained a baby sister, Sophie, in 2011. While Aniwaka is carrying on the family's hockey tradition, it's too early to tell if Isabella or Sophie will also fall in love with the sport. When she was growing up, Niniwa's parents supported her without pressuring her, and she wants to raise her daughters the same way. Meanwhile, as a coach, as a supporter of the new Māori hockey league and when speaking to schools about her Olympic experience, Niniwa will be part of the larger "hockey family" for some time to come.

In 2012, Niniwa took a year off playing hockey. For a change, she decided to focus on individual sports – staying fit through half Iron Man and triathlon events. A huge change for someone who once found running the low point of her favourite sport – and a living example of the joy to be found in effort.



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