

Kiwi Love

Ah, New Zealand, how do I love thee?

Let me count the ways.



BOB LATHAM

1. I love that your motto for the Rugby World Cup, which you hosted (and where I spent time in September and October), was “a stadium of 4 million”—and that it was actually true. There is not another country where the DNA of one sport is so ingrained in the culture. And during the RWC, in remote fishing villages or the tini-

est hillside vineyards, every single citizen was conversant in the match results from the tournament.

2. I love that your national team, the All Blacks, facing the enormous pressure of a stadium of 4 million people, won the World Cup with a tight, physical 8–7 victory over France. And—due to injuries—they did it with their fourth-string flyhalf, showing the incredible depth of talent they have. That is akin to an NFL team winning the Super Bowl with a fourth-string quarterback. Your citizenry deserved the pride that comes with that crown.

3. I love that your political leaders are true fans like the people they serve. Your prime minister, John Key, attended two of the four United States Eagles’ pool matches and we were not even playing New Zealand. The fact that your public officials consider themselves part of the throng was evidenced by my encounter with Harry Duynhoven, the mayor of New Plymouth, where the U.S. played two of its matches. Mayoral status brings with it the title of “Your Worship.” When I addressed Duynhoven as “Your Worship,” he stared me in the face and said, “‘Harry’ would be fine.”

4. I love that you were able to overcome tragedy and disaster earlier this year, specifically the earthquake in Christchurch—a city that could no longer host seven of the RWC matches. Many in your country consider the Christchurch area to be the spiritual home of New Zealand rugby, and it is fitting that the All Blacks paraded the championship trophy through the streets of Christchurch (as well as Auckland and Wellington).

5. I love that your national team players are part of your local and national communities, and are known by everyone as simply “Richie” or “Dan” or “Sonny Bill” (yes, the latter is from New Zealand and not from Texas).

6. I love that the people of New Plymouth held a memorial service for the U.S. team on the 10-year anniversary of 9/11 where townspeople spoke from their hearts in their church, and where the reverend revealed that he long had an eagle tattoo on his bicep, to the delight of our Eagles.

7. I love that your 4 million people seemed to follow every team and every player. I traveled with U.S. team captain Todd Clever from New Plymouth to Auckland for a disciplinary proceeding after the U.S. victory over Russia. On the plane back to New Plymouth, the flight attendant came to our seats and said the pilot would like to know if Clever was going to be eligible to play in the Eagles’ next match against Australia, New Zealand’s archrival. We were as pleased as the pilot as we reported that he was.

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8. I love that small towns on the South Island adopted teams from countries such as Georgia and Romania, studied their history and their players, and attended matches in those teams’ colors.

9. I love that the president of the New Zealand

Rugby Union and former All Blacks great, Bryan Williams, following the awards banquet the night after the final, led an impromptu sing-along with his guitar in the host hotel bar, up to and beyond last call. We could not picture our own Bud Selig doing the same thing in a hotel bar in St. Louis after the Cardinals won Game 7 of the “World” Series.

10. Finally, I love that your spirit is so infectious that it causes reciprocal sportsmanship. In the final—the All Blacks versus “Les Bleus”—only one team would be able to wear their preferred color. The other would have to wear a lighter alternate jersey. French team manager Joe Maso won the coin toss and the right to select France’s color. Remarkably, he deferred to New Zealand, thereby allowing the All Blacks to wear their iconic color as a show of respect and appreciation for their hosting of the event—a magnanimous gesture. But it was no more than what you deserved. ■

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