



CODE OF CONDUCT

Modesty, integrity and fearless bravado make the All Blacks – and their talisman Beauden Barrett – a perfect match for their new sponsor Tudor, as REVOLUTION discovered during a recent encounter that was humiliating and edifying in equal measure.

BY NICK SCOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY GEORGE POWELL

The All Blacks' Beauden Barrett.

A man's crown jewels connecting sharply with the pointy apex of an inflated rubber bladder is never a moment of unadulterated joy. When the triceps and biceps that spin-passed the ball into his nether regions with such ruthless precision were those of All Blacks half-back dynamo TJ Perenara, the experience can be called "excruciating" without fear of hyperbole.

It's a crisp, sunny November morning, and I've pitched up to a Twickenham playing field – bringing with me early-stage flu, a mild touch of Amstel's Revenge and a foot twinge that'll turn out to be a twanged tendon – to take part in a training session with four members of the most successful sporting franchise in history: All Blacks Beauden Barrett, Vaea Fifita and David Havili, as well as Perenara.

It's hard to describe what it's like engaging in a sporting activity with its most elite practitioners, when the last time you played the game in question was 25 years previously on a rain-soaked Romford playing field (the extent of my rugby credentials is hinted at by the retro Spurs shirt shrink-wrapped around my goosebumped torso). These are men who can, with a casual flick of their forearms, send a ball spinning 20-plus metres like a slo-mo movie bullet, maintaining a perfect 180-degree trajectory all the way, and hit the dead centre of a plastic hoop hung on an upright post every single time. From anywhere in the right half of the pitch, these guys can palm a ball, then watch it follow a graceful arc before it strikes the crossbar with a clatter that sees all birds in the vicinity flee from the trees.

And yet, for all their power, skill and precision, you will not find a bunch of more mild-mannered, gentle and modest sporting heroes. The training session complete (and my zero per cent record in that hoop game intact), we repair to the team hotel for a conversation with Beauden Barrett, the fly-half and 2015 World Cup winner who had just been handed the All Blacks captaincy in the absence of regular skipper Kieran Read.

CAPTAIN ACTION

Barrett's performances on the field since he kicked nine points in his 2012 international debut against Ireland saw him win the World Rugby Player of the Year award last year. The *Daily Telegraph* earlier this year called him "the world's best rugby player". But all the accolades just make him giggle with embarrassment. "I just have to laugh to myself when I hear that," he says. "I'm only as good as the players around me. I'm heavily reliant on them giving me what I need to do my job. Oh, look, it's a great honour and privilege to be spoken about in that way – but I know I've got plenty to work on in my game."

So, he doesn't believe he's reached a pinnacle, then? "No way! Turning up and feeling like you've done it is the worst thing you can do. Until the day that I retire my challenge is to be the best I can be." Has even gaining the captaincy not stoked that remarkably dormant ego? "It's actually the first team I've ever captained – including school," he laughs. "Naturally we lead every week – it's just this week I have a 'C' next to my name."



This spread (clockwise from top left): Vaea Fifita, David Havili, Beauden Barrett and TJ Perenara; Barrett coaches the newcomers; perfect timing from the All Blacks and Tudor; Nick Scott and Beauden Barrett; New Zealand's stars watch over their charges.

Barrett grew up gazing at the stars – in the very literal sense that light pollution didn't feature highly during a childhood growing up on a dairy farm in Pungarehu, close to Cape Egmont Lighthouse in the Taranaki region of New Zealand's North Island. Look out to sea here and 1,500 miles of Tasman Sea stretch between you and Australia, while behind you, beyond the snow-dusted majesty of quiescent stratovolcano Mount Taranaki, only a verdant island just over half the size of Britain separates you from the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

The upbringing Barrett and his seven siblings had was as industrious as it was idyllic: their father Kevin – a robust lock in 167 games for Taranaki, nicknamed "Smiley" for the joyful demeanour with which he tore into players on the pitch – would expect them to do their fair share in the cowshed. "There was a great sense of team spirit within our family," Barrett says, "thanks to all having to pitch in to help on the farm or around the house – it was a real team effort."

Barrett's mother, a proficient basketball player, would encourage her son to run the 3.5km home from school barefoot. "It was to train for cross country, and just to keep fit," he says. "The school bus would do a big block around where we lived, and I was able to take the short cut home, so one of my brothers or sisters would carry my bag home for me and the idea was to beat the bus. Most of the time I could."

Just as many a soccer great spent their formative years honing their skills on urban streets or African beaches, Barrett and his brothers learned to play rugby kicking a ball around the farm, with all the sweat and tears, age-gap hierarchy and slack rule-keeping that entails. Then, in 2001, the family spent 16 months in County Meath, Ireland, where his father ran another dairy farm, allowing the Barrett boys to further sharpen their skills playing Gaelic football. Their upbringing clearly paid off: Beauden, Scott and Jordie became the first trio of brothers to be selected for the same squad earlier this year, for a test match against Samoa ("You see everyone else on the team as a brother, but they're blood brothers," he laughs).

A WINNING PARTNER

The humility and team spirit with which Barrett, his brothers and their teammates conduct themselves is a major factor behind Swiss watchmaker Tudor's decision, earlier this year, to add them to a portfolio of sponsorship partners which also includes David Beckham and Lady Gaga. The sheer reputation for winning – that historical record of more than 77 per cent – also makes them worthy partners.





But there's more to it than that. Since its founding almost a century ago, Rolex's sister company has garnered a reputation for durability and derring-do. Is that, to Barrett, another part of why they're such a good match? "Yeah, for sure. That's the way I like to play the game – I'm not going to be conservative or safe out there; I'm looking to express myself, and without worrying about failure." Tudor's "Born to Dare" tradition seems particularly fitting when it comes to a player who tears through a cluster of oversized bruisees like a knife through butter. "I'm not going into something half-hearted," he says. "Rugby would be a boring game if we weren't daring, and we were worried about failure."

The pressure off the field is, he says, pretty intense too. "It can take it out of you on the mental side – the expectations, pressures, the build-up: but that's all part of it – it's not supposed to be easy." Rather than intimidate Barrett, though, the All Blacks' hallowed reputation actually beefs up his "Born to Dare" factor. "Putting on the shirt for the first time, it sounds silly, but I sort of felt a transformation. The first game I played, I came on off the bench and was just ripping into tackles and imposing my body like I'd never done before. It's just the power of the jersey. Over time with the team, though, I've learned that it's what you bring to the jersey that's most important – it's only borrowed. One day, that'll be passed onto somebody else, so you never know when the last opportunity will be."

Today he's wearing the stainless-steel Black Bay Black ("It's so versatile – the only time I don't wear it is when I'm at the gym or out on the training field"), while the Black Bay Dark in black-PVD steel is another firm favourite. "I'm really looking forward to going to Geneva and learning about how they're made start to finish, so I can really appreciate the beauty behind them," he says.

It'll be the latest rarefied experience in a twisting life narrative that currently sees the 26-year-old Beauden Barrett marvelling at what – uniquely – he sees as his own good fortune. "Going from a small-town dairy farm to the All Blacks is the ultimate. And once you're lucky enough to be part of that set-up, you realise the influence on the world that we have and the support that we get – even in South America or Asia or Europe. The reach and the power is unbelievable. You almost feel: 'Who gives us the right to do that?' It's a true privilege."

Much like getting to share a sports field with, and make a fool of oneself in front of, the greatest practitioners of any sporting endeavour on the planet, then? ★



Clockwise from opposite page top left: Nick Scott hits the highs; a game of touch rugby; a team for a day; Scott reflects on the day – his instruction, his try and his painful encounter with TJ Perenara.