



## Profile: Laurent Simutoga

They say that opportunity knocks but once, so when Laurent Simutoga, who was touring with the New Caledonia Under 15 rugby team in 2003, was offered a place at Lindisfarne, he jumped at it.

Sadly he was unable to persuade his father to agree: Laurent was just 2 years away from graduating with his International Baccalaureate, and dad wanted him to complete his studies.

But forewarned is forearmed, and when the approach was repeated the next year, Laurent had prepared an entirely more persuasive set of arguments. His father agreed, somewhat reluctantly, and so began a whirlwind



journey which took him from New Zealand to France and back once again to New Zealand; back, ultimately, to Lindisfarne, somewhere he sees as a second home.

It was rugby which was the catalyst for this odyssey: a shift from No.8 to Prop, at the suggestion of a Lindisfarne coach, saw his game reach new heights. Such was his proficiency at New Zealand's favourite sport that he quickly caught the eye of the Hawke's Bay selectors.

Laurent recalls signing his first professional contract, whilst still at Lindisfarne. "It was huge;

unbelievable really. There I was in the academy squad with people like Dagg (another Lindisfarne Old Boy), Guildford, Hika Elliot and more."

In 2006 he completed his 2-year stint at Lindisfarne and returned home to New Caledonia for a short break. Whilst there he was contacted by the French Rugby Union. They invited him to go to France and be assessed as part of the National Under 18 squad, where he met up with such luminaries of the game as Wesley Fofana and Mathieu Bastareaud, now the captain of France.

He was quickly signed by leading club Stade Français, one of the most glamorous in the French game, and moved quickly into the French Under 21 side. After a run of injuries that hampered his chances at Stade, he made the move south to La Rochelle. Whilst there, he played a key role in helping them win promotion to the top 14.

But always at the back of his mind he had an element of doubt; had he done the right thing on turning his back on New Zealand, a place he had grown to love during his time there? Playing in France made him financially independent; he did not want to stretch his family's limited resources.

In 2010 he received a call, out of the blue, from Magpies coach Peter Russell, offering him a contract. With a newborn son, he recalled a promise he had once made to himself: to bring up his children in New Zealand. And so he walked away with a year left on his La Rochelle contract and came 'home'. Although this meant a significant financial sacrifice, his desire to relocate his family to a place which shared his values was more important.

And then disaster struck; a change of coach at the Magpies, and Laurent was no longer in their match day plans. He had to get a proper job, something he had never done before, and put in a few years at Hawke's Bay Seafoods. It wasn't the life path he had come to see ahead, but Laurent stuck to it, meeting new people and learning the discipline of a 9-5 job.

And then the wheel of fortune turned once again; another phone call, this time from Lindisfarne's Director of Boarding Glen Petersen, offering him a role as a House Tutor.

Laurent had loved his time at the College, and so he jumped at it. "The offer was a blessing," says Laurent. "For the second time in my life, I knew I had made the right decision."

Since which time he has become a fixture at Lindisfarne. He coaches rugby, including the sevens team he takes to New Caledonia every year. He leads a College Pasifika performance group, and he keeps an eye out for the growing contingent of students from New Caledonia and other Pacific islands spending time at Lindisfarne. Laurent was actually the very first New Caledonian import, the pathfinder, and he is proud of being the beginning of an important tradition.

He's also playing rugby again, after a brief hiatus, inspired by his recent appearance in the New Caledonia Classic tournament. He's still not ruling out the possibility that one day he might eventually become a Magpies player!

Laurent is a loyal Old Boy and a fine example and inspiration to boys regardless of their heritage. As a mentor to youngsters from the islands, Laurent tells each and every one of them to make the most of the many opportunities Lindisfarne creates for them. It was, he says, the biggest opportunity of his life, and he will always be glad he took it, even if it was at the second time of asking!

"Laurent is the ideal person for such a role in the boarding and wider school community. He has a friendly manner, high expectations, an understanding of the challenges of a cultural shift, fluent French, a love of sport and a genuine care for the Pasifika boys in the College – and his imposing figure has also ensured a safe campus as he fulfils a security role around the College at night." - Mr Ken MacLeod, Rector

Photo: Laurent (second from right) performing in the College's Pasifika Group