

A photograph of four children playing football on a grassy field. In the foreground, a girl in an orange jersey is about to kick a soccer ball. A boy in a white jersey is running towards her. In the background, another girl in a white jersey and a boy in an orange jersey are watching. The background is a textured green wall.

FOOTBALL

The Beautiful Game

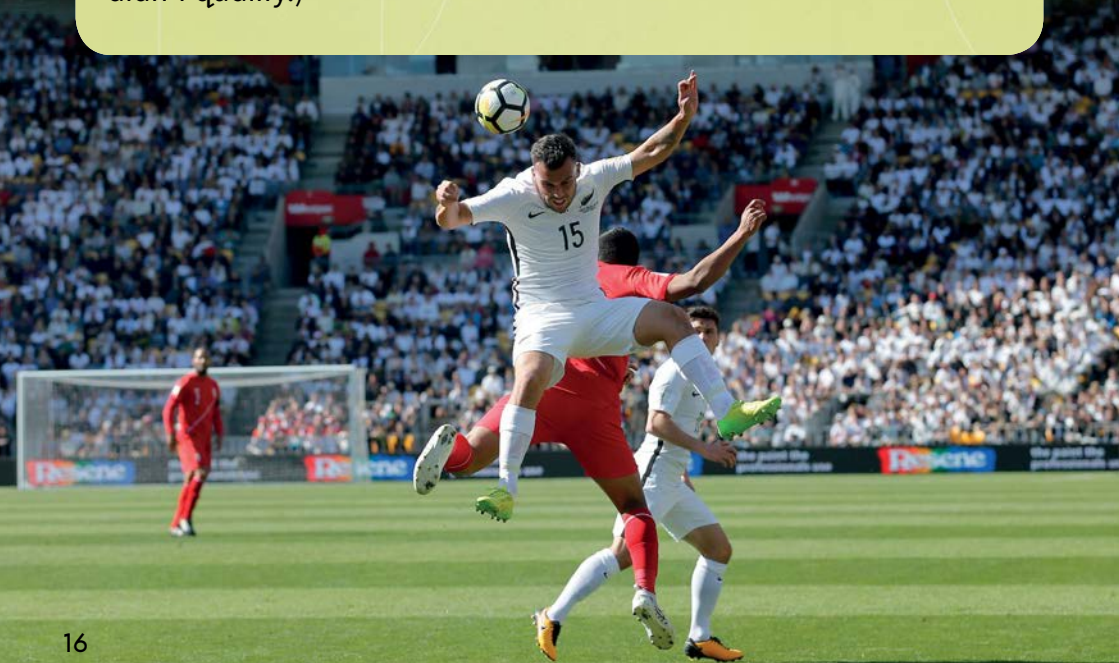
by Steve Watters

What's the most popular sport for Kiwi kids? Rugby? Netball? Cricket? League? Guess again! These sports are played by lots of children, but football is the most popular sport among five- to eighteen-year-olds.

Why is football so popular in New Zealand?

Football is the number-one team sport in the world. It's played by about 250 million people! When the football World Cup is on, football-mad countries often come to a stop. The best players and teams are huge international stars.

New Zealand football teams have been doing well in the past few years. That's another reason why the game is so popular here. It's exciting to see them play against the best teams in the world. In November 2017, the New Zealand men's team (the All Whites) played Peru. The game was to decide which team would play in the 2018 World Cup in Russia. A record crowd of 37,000 fans filled Wellington's Westpac Stadium to watch. (The All Whites drew that game, but they lost a second game in Peru, which meant they didn't qualify.)



Also, a lot of Kiwi kids play football because it's seen as a safe sport. Many people believe that football players don't get as many injuries as those who play other contact sports, such as rugby.



The Beautiful Game

Football is sometimes known as "the beautiful game". Pelé, a famous football player from Brazil, wrote a book called *My Life and the Beautiful Game*, and the phrase stuck. The game is also called soccer in some countries, including the United States. (Soccer is an abbreviation of "Association Football", which is the official name of the game.)

A brief history of football

For hundreds of years, people played games that involved kicking balls around. However, most people say that the game we now call football began in England in 1863. That's when an organisation called the English Football Association started. It made rules for playing the game. Football quickly spread around the world.

In 1904, a world football organisation was set up. It was called FIFA (the Fédération Internationale de Football Association).

Today, 211 countries belong to FIFA.



In 2004, a summer competition called the New Zealand Football Championship started. So far, Auckland City has been the strongest team to take part, winning the competition eight times.

The Chatham Cup

Every year, New Zealand's top club teams play for the Chatham Cup. The cup is a copy of the famous English Football Association Cup (known as the FA Cup). It was given to the New Zealand Football Association by the captain and crew of a Royal Navy ship, HMS *Chatham*, when it visited New Zealand in 1922.



Football in New Zealand

When European settlers came to New Zealand, they brought the game of football with them. Auckland's North Shore club is the country's oldest football club. It started in 1886. The New Zealand Football Association (NZFA) began in 1891.



North Shore Football Club about 1895

A national football competition was set up much later, in the early 1970s. The competition went well for several years but finished in 1992 because there wasn't enough money to keep it going. It costs a lot for teams to travel around the country to play football.

New Zealand has only one professional club side, the Wellington Phoenix. (Professional means the players get paid to play football full time.) The Phoenix play in the top Australian competition. Because it's the only professional club in the country, the team is very important to New Zealand football.

Most of New Zealand's professional footballers play for overseas clubs. In 2017, for the first time, New Zealand named a fully professional All Whites team.



The All Whites

New Zealand played its first international football game in 1922, beating Australia 3–1. Although this was a good start, we haven't had many wins against our neighbour since then. In 1936, Australia beat us 10–0. It's still the All Whites' worst result against another country.

In 1982, the football World Cup was held in Spain, and New Zealand took part for the first time. The All Whites lost their three games, but the team won the hearts of Kiwi sports fans. For a long time, rugby had been New Zealand's national game. It felt like the only sport that people really cared about. But, at last, football was becoming almost as popular.



The All Whites went to their second World Cup in 2010. In the World Cup, teams are put into groups of four. These four teams play each other, and the best two teams from each group go through to the next round (or stage) of the competition. Although the All Whites didn't make it past the first round, they scored three draws, including 1–1 against defending champions Italy. This made them the only unbeaten team in the competition.

The Football Ferns

The New Zealand women's football team is known as the Football Ferns. They played their first game in 1975. Since then, the team has been more successful in the World Cup than the All Whites. They have qualified for the World Cup four times – in 1991, 2007, 2011, and 2015.



New Zealand football stars



Abby Erceg

Erceg was the first person to play a hundred international football matches for New Zealand.



Ali Riley

Riley is the current Football Ferns captain. When not playing for New Zealand, she plays professionally in Sweden.



Amber Hearn

Hearn holds the record for the most goals scored for New Zealand (54). She plays professionally in Germany.



Annalie Longo

Longo played her hundredth game for the Ferns in 2017. She was only fifteen when she played her first game for the team in 2006.



Chris Wood

Wood is a forward for the All Whites. In 2017, English team Burnley paid about \$28 million to Leeds United to get this Auckland-born player to swap teams and join them.



Maureen Jacobson and Michele Cox

In the late 1980s, these two footballers were the first New Zealand women to play professionally in Europe. Since then, many other Kiwi women have followed their example.



Ryan Nelsen

Nelsen was captain of the 2010 All Whites when they played in the World Cup. He had a long and successful career playing for teams in England.



Winston Reid

Reid is the current All Whites captain. He's played over two hundred games for an English team, West Ham United. He's also played in Denmark.



Wynton Rufer

Many people think that Wynton Rufer is New Zealand's greatest ever footballer. In 1999, he was voted Oceania* Footballer of the Century. Rufer played most of his football for German club Werder Bremen. He scored 224 goals in more than five hundred club matches in New Zealand and overseas.

* At that time, Oceania included New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Sāmoa, Tonga, and a number of other Pacific nations.

Football: The Beautiful Game

by Steve Watters

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Published 2018 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 336 8 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: David Chadwick
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 2 AUGUST 2018

Curriculum learning areas

English
Health and Physical Education

Reading year level

Year 4

Keywords

All Whites, association football, Football Ferns, Chatham Cup, football, soccer, sport