

# Former All Black and Waikato rugby great Rex Pickering dies

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MARK TAYLOR/FAIRFAX NZ

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The man who played a pivotal role in the Mooloos' epic win over the Springboks in 1956 was described as the Sonny Bill Williams of his time, such was the lock/loose forward's athletic prowess.

And Pickering also made a big impact off the field since his retirement - he was the patron of the New Zealand Harlequins and Frankton Rugby Sports Club up until his passing on Tuesday.

Allen Grainger - who has been involved with the Frankton Rugby Sports Club for more than 40 years and is a current board member, along with being a Waikato Rugby Union club board member, described Pickering as "a grand gentleman", and said he was particularly helpful in Grainger's time as chairman.

"He was my mentor, he was my go-to guy," Grainger said.

"As a member at Frankton he always turned up every Saturday if he could, he would sit and talk to the players. I got a text from a lady this morning who said the countless hours she'd sat just listening to him."

The Kuiti-born Ernest Arthur Rex Pickering played 21 matches for the All Blacks between 1957 and 1960, including three tests - against Australia in Christchurch in 1958, and against the Lions in Dunedin and Auckland the following year. He was the third Waikato player to rack up a century of games for the province, debuting in 1955 against North Auckland, and playing his final match in 1965 against Auckland.

Pickering was educated at Nelson College and featured in the school's 1st XV in 1953-54, before his speed, long stride, ball handling skills and anticipation made him a standout figure for the Frankton club.

He scored 18 tries for the Mooloos, though his versatility was key to Waikato's win over the Springboks in '56. During the trials, coach Dick Everest had the foresight to take Pickering out of the forward pack and run him on the wing, to give him experience in case one of the backs was injured in the match to be played under the no-replacement rule. As it turned out, the experiment paid huge dividends because Pickering did find himself out on the wing before halftime, with his ability to adapt to his new position seeing him crash over for a try in the corner, and help Waikato to the epic 14-10 victory.

While Grainger wasn't old enough to remember Pickering's playing days, he was well aware of his physically imposing frame, which was paired with his quiet nature off the park.

"Someone described him to me, probably six or eight months ago, that if you looked at Sonny Bill Williams, and you looked at Rex Pickering, Rex was the Sonny Bill Williams of his era. Apparently his physique and his speed and everything."

In 1957, following Pickering's All Blacks debut, he was named by the NZ Rugby Almanack as one of the five players of the year. He was selected for the 1960 tour to South Africa but it remains one of the great mysteries why he only got on the park in 10 of the 26 matches. Sir Terry McLean's book *Beaten by the Boks*, recounted Pickering's excellent work ethic.

"Rex Pickering was a magnificent physical specimen who rivalled the manager, Mr T H Pearce, in his capacity for voluntarily swimming in water a few degrees above zero and he always trained as if he were preparing for the 1500m at an Olympic Games. Pickering performed his tour duties in the efficient good-hearted pleasant way which typified the man in every respect of his life."

- Stuff