

# Great expectations



PHOTO: BEN BURROWES

**Dan Carter talks to BEN BURROWES about life as an All Black, public expectations and how the 2006 season is shaping up.**

For many rugby followers, 2005 will long be remembered as the year Dan Carter stamped his class on the international rugby stage and forever etched his name into All Black rugby folklore.

After winning the IRB International Rugby Player of the Year and being touted as the next great hope of New Zealand rugby, the following 2006 season has placed huge expectations squarely on the modest Cantabrian's shoulders.

"At the start of the season, I sort of thought a little bit about that. I guess a way around it is to just put 2005 behind me, to just forget about it and move on.

There is a lot of expectation to always be performing well but it's not something I read much into. I just like to go out there, back my instincts and do what I can to help the team," Carter says.

So far, so good.

With the Bledisloe Cup already in the bag, a couple of outstanding performances under his belt and an unbeaten run thus far in the season, Carter says the 2006 All Blacks are coming together nicely.

"I think we had a bit of a slow start to the All Black season. It probably didn't help with changing the teams, but in saying that we still came away with a couple of good wins. We're slowly starting to settle as a team now and finding our feet."

There has been plenty of public debate surrounding Graham Henry's rotation policy brought on to create depth for the World Cup, but Carter believes a top team will take their place shortly.

"The line-up will start to settle down soon hopefully, although I think a few of the younger guys will still be given a go to get that experience. I think it has paid off – some of the boys are clocking up a few test matches and it's only going to benefit the team in the long run."

With the long run being the next World Cup, it seems half the country is holding its breath until France 2007.

When the All Blacks run out in their opening game in Marseille, it will mark 20 years since David Kirk lifted the inaugural William Webb Ellis Cup at Eden Park. For a rugby-mad country like New Zealand, 20 years is a very long time.

Carter, who was kicking a ball around as a five-year-old when we were last crowned World Champions, says next year is certainly a big deal.

"It's not something we really talk about. It's more something we're working towards and doing what we can to prepare and get ourselves set for the Cup. Hence the rotation policy and trying to develop a couple of teams in case there are injuries. It's definitely in the back of the guy's minds and we're doing everything we can now to make it easier when we get there."

A noticeable change in Carter's game this season has been the addition of drop goals to his already bulging repertoire. During the second Bledisloe Test in Brisbane, a drop goal in the 55<sup>th</sup> minute gave the All Blacks a 13-6 lead and swung momentum back in their favour.

"It's an aspect of my game I've been working on this season. Leading up to the

World Cup it's pretty important because it's probably been the difference in a few of the finals."

Graham Henry has publicly stated that if he had his wish, 24 of the top All Blacks would be rested for the first seven weeks of next year's Super 14 so they are fresh for the World Cup. The plan has not yet been rubberstamped, but is an idea Carter believes has merit.

"It's quite tough because you always want to be playing rugby. But these days we don't really get much of a pre-season. We go from one campaign to a month's break, then we are back playing."

He compares the situation to the Australian NRL competition where the rugby league players get around three months of pre-season work, preparing their bodies for a long and arduous season.

"If we do go for that little extra break, it will give a few of the players a chance to really get in some good gym and conditioning work so the body, and the mind, is prepared for a pretty intense season, which next year is going to be."

Carter says the pressure to bring home the World Cup and life in the constant media spotlight is all part of the job, one he would not exchange for anything.

"Life as an All Black is pretty awesome. It's something I've always wanted to do and the impact we have around the country is huge.

"We're just a small country and pretty rugby-orientated. The people do get excit-

ed when we're playing well...although it does make it quite tough with the proud history of the All Blacks, with the public always expecting us to win and things like that.

"You can notice it at the moment. We are playing well and we have a great support base. Everyone is backing us which gives the boys some confidence going into games."

Carter also talks about the importance of the All Blacks being accessible to the public.

"With all the support we get, we put a real emphasis on giving back to the public. We go out to schools and speak, do signing sessions and various things like that so people see us outside of the rugby scene and know that we are just normal guys.

"I do a few kicking sessions with kids which I think is pretty valuable to them.

It doesn't take up much of my time but if they learn a thing or two then that's cool."

The intense rugby season leaves Carter little time for anything else but he says he does manage to fit in some other interests.

"I wouldn't mind setting myself up while I'm playing rugby...maybe to own my own business or something like that.

I've got something in the pipeline coming out near the end of the year and that's something I'm really interested in and I'm looking forward to getting my teeth stuck into that."

If Carter's rugby career is anything to go by, the new venture should take the world by storm.