

Knight of the round ball

Soccer star Noah Hickey talks to JOHN EDWARDS and BRENTON VANISSELROY about this season's prospects, playing in the All Whites and being a ladies' man.



PHOTO: JOHN EDWARDS

NEW LIFE: Injured Knights winger Noah Hickey watches his side draw against Newcastle.

New Zealand footballer Noah Hickey is on a high. His future is looking bright at the New Zealand Knights and he is part of a resurgent All Whites squad that recently experienced the dream of taking on Brazil.

Hickey is one of just four Kiwis in the New Zealand-based A-League franchise and is one of the country's most recognisable footballers in an era where most are largely anonymous.

Last year Hickey was a member of the Knights team that experienced one of the most woeful seasons in professional sport. They managed only one win from 21 matches and finished a massive 17 points behind the second-to-last team the Melbourne Victory.

The Knights performed to a poorer level than the now-defunct Football Kingz and became the laughing stock of New Zealand sport.

The 28-year-old doesn't feel comfortable thinking back to last season, when he personally experienced a form crisis amid the Knights' struggle.

Usually a winger with the ability to take on players in the attacking third, manager John Adshead moved Hickey to an uncharacteristic right back position in an attempt to give him confidence.

"Last year was just a write-off in my football career to be honest," Hickey says.

"Last year I was just so worried about my career and thinking sometimes 'how was this happening?'"

But Hickey explains that this season is completely different. He is back in his traditional right wing spot and is excited about playing football once again.

"It is a whole different world this year...you can't compare last year to this

year at all," he says.

"Everybody has seen in my attitude, with the whole 'wow, football is good again', what the difference has been.

"Now I have got a whole new life in it again."

The Knights have a completely new squad. Only six players remain from last season and with new coaching staff, Hickey is confident the Knights can push for a playoff spot.

"As a player, I think if I didn't say that, it would be a stupid thing. I shouldn't be here if I don't want to aim for as high as we can possibly go," he says.

Once the horror of the inaugural A-League finished, the year started to look up for Hickey as he was selected for the All Whites tour of Europe.

Following on from a prolonged period when the All Whites played few international matches, 2006 has seen the national side play eight internationals, including the icing on the cake — five-time world champions Brazil in June.

Hickey believes football in New Zealand will only get stronger if the All Whites continue to play matches.

"It is massive — the game is on a high," he says.

New Zealand Soccer surprised everyone when they managed to arrange an international friendly with 2002 world champions Brazil just a week out from the World Cup.

The Brazilians were labelled one of the best teams ever, with the exciting talents of Ronaldinho, Ronaldo and Kaka — three of the greatest players of their generation.

Despite going down 4-0, it was a dream come true for Hickey, especially the honour of playing against his favourite player

and World Cup goal scoring record holder, Ronaldo.

"The Brazil game was phenomenal, that was my dream. It doesn't get any better."

On top of the Brazil match, the All Whites achieved their first-ever international win in Europe when they defeated Georgia 3-1 and secured a draw against Estonia.

The All Whites also played three matches over the last month against club teams from England and Spain, a tour that Hickey and more than a dozen top internationals were not available for.

The Kiwis earned a respectable draw with London club Charlton Athletic in their first match of the tour, before being soundly beaten by Lancashire's Blackburn Rovers and UEFA Cup champions FC Sevilla.

Despite the results, Hickey emphasises that it was great that the All Whites were playing matches.

"We are playing and it's giving other players experience and exposure to that sort of competition," Hickey says.

These recent matches are all part of the road to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, as the All Whites attempt to qualify for only their second World Cup after their appearance at Spain in 1982.

Their road is a little less rocky on this occasion as they will no longer have to face the resurgent Australian Socceroos, who have moved to the Asian Confederation.

Hickey believes that qualifying for the first ever World Cup in Africa "has got to be a realistic goal" and if the All Whites continue to improve it is achievable.

"If you think about it, you win Oceania (the confederation) and then you're two games away from a World Cup", he says,

referring to a likely play-off against the fifth-placed South American side.

Despite the poor coverage soccer receives in New Zealand, the diminutive Hickey still holds his share of the media spotlight away from football.

The New Zealand Knights' website notes that he is "famed for his good looks".

The statement is not an exaggeration as Hickey certainly fits the mould of a young debonair footballer.

"My mum must have written that," he said, in an attempt to change the subject.

The reason may be that recently Hickey featured on a regular morning sport radio segment that actively seeks out suitable girlfriends.

"We aren't actually doing that anymore", Hickey says.

"It started as a joke and got out of hand really. I need to quash that rumour, we have stopped doing that I'm afraid."

On the subject of being an eligible bachelor in the city, he said: "I am happily single, just cruising."

"I am just having too much fun at the moment. That is good enough a reason as any."

As for life after football, Hickey says he would like to focus on his role as one of the directors of the sporting equipment franchise, Champ Sports.

At present most of his time away from the football pitch is spent mentoring around 900 young children in a "zero to champs" programme run through his business.

All this extra-curricular activity keeps Hickey busy, but he maintains that for now his immediate focus is on football.