2027

PLAYER MEDIA GUIDE

NEW & RETURNING PLAYERS

HIGHLANDERS LOYAL. *EVERY DAY*

HIGHLANDERS | SUPER RUGBY PACIFIC

2027 SQUAD

FORWARDS

Prop	**Angus Ta'avao**
	Benét Kumeroa
	Ethan de Groot
	Jack Sexton
	Jermaine Ainsley*
	Josh Bartlett
	Saula Ma'u
Hooker	**Henry Bell**
	Ioane Moananu
	Jack Taylor
Lock	**Fabian Holland**
	Josh Tengblad
	Mitch Dunshea
	Tomás Lavanini
Loose Forward	**Joseva Tamani**
	Lucas Casey
	Nikora Broughton
	Sean Withy
	Shannon Frizell
	Te Kamaka Howden
	Veveni Lasaqa
	Will Stodart

BACKS

Halfback	**Adam Lennox**
	Dylan Pledger
	Folau Fakatava
First Five	**Josh Jacomb**
	Mika Muliaina
	Patrick Pellegrini
	Reesjan Pasitoa
Midfield	**Josh Whaanga**
	Meihana Grindlay
	Timoci Tavatavanawai
Outside Back	**Caleb Tangitau**
	Finn Hurley
	Jacob Ratumaitavuki-Kneepkens
	Jona Nareki
	Stanley Solomon
	Tuna Tuitama
	Xavier Tito-Harris

*Long term injured

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Benét Kumeroa

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.84m
WEIGHT	119kg
POSITION	Prop
DOB	25/6/2000
PROVINCE	Bay of Plenty
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	8

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Kumeroa is a powerful prop hailing from Auckland Grammar School, where he played First XV rugby while also representing New Zealand in weightlifting competing at Commonwealth and Oceania competitions.

Benét progressed through the Bay of Plenty development pathway, where he captained the under- 19s side before making his Bay of Plenty Steamers debut in 2021.

His development in the NPC earned him time in the Hurricanes environment in 2024 and selection for the Māori All Blacks that same year.

He added All Blacks XV honours in 2025, scoring against Uruguay on their northern tour, before making his Super Rugby Pacific debut for the Chiefs in 2026.

Kumeroa combines front row versatility with experience on both sides of the scrum. He will bring explosive ball carrying and a strong physical presence to the Highlanders front row in 2027.



Ioane Moananu

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.73m
WEIGHT	113kg
POSITION	Hooker
DOB	8/2/2001
PROVINCE	Counties Manukau
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	26

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Ioane Moananu brings power, mobility and a try-scoring threat to the Highlanders' front row.

Born and raised in South Auckland, Moananu attended De La Salle College and played for Manurewa Rugby Club before establishing himself with Counties Manukau in the NPC.

He made his Super Rugby debut for the Crusaders in 2023. Moananu enjoyed a breakthrough campaign in 2025, scoring five tries in 12 appearances as the Crusaders claimed the Super Rugby Pacific title.

He moved to the NSW Waratahs in 2026, where he continued to make an impact with six tries in eight matches.

Joining the Highlanders on a two-year deal for 2027 and 2028, Moananu will look to bring his physical ball-carrying, set-piece strength and energy around the field to the hooking group.



Jack Sexton

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	**1.89m**
WEIGHT	**110kg**
POSITION	**Prop**
DOB	**17/05/2001**
PROVINCE	**Southland**
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	**6**

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Jack Sexton brings determination and growing Super Rugby experience to the Highlanders' front row. Born in Christchurch, Sexton is the son of former Crusaders hooker Matt Sexton.

He progressed through Canterbury's rugby pathway before heading south, where he developed his game with the Southland Stags in the NPC.

Sexton spent time in the Highlanders' wider training squad in 2025 before making his Super Rugby Pacific debut for the Crusaders in 2026.

Those experiences have given him a valuable grounding as he returns to the Highlanders for 2027 as a full squad member.

With experience at both provincial and Super Rugby level, Sexton will look to keep developing his craft and push for opportunities in a competitive Highlanders front row.



Jermaine Ainsley

NEW/RE-SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.81m
WEIGHT	125kg
POSITION	Prop
DOB	8/8/1995
PROVINCE	Canterbury
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	98

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Jermaine Ainsley returns to the Highlanders with powerful scrummaging, international experience and a strong connection to the south.

Born in Clyde, Ainsley attended Otago Boys' High School before beginning his professional career in Australia.

He represented the Western Force and Melbourne Rebels for a combined 60 caps and his performances earned him three Test appearances for the Wallabies in 2018.

Ainsley joined the Highlanders from 2022-24 and made 38 appearances across three seasons, also representing Otago and selection in the Māori All Blacks and the All Blacks XV.

He then took his game to France, gaining further experience with Lyon in the Top 14. Returning after two years away, Ainsley brings technical strength at tighthead and a high work rate around the field.

His familiarity with the Highlanders environment and experience across several competitions will make him a valuable presence in the squad while he recuperates from surgery following an injury sustained during the 2026 NPC.



Joseva Tamani

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.95m
WEIGHT	108kg
POSITION	Loose Forward
DOB	2/4/1997
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	40

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Joseva Tamani brings size, mobility and versatility to the Highlanders' forward pack. Comfortable at lock or in the back row, he combines a physical presence in contact with the handling skills to threaten in open play.

A Fijian international with more than 30 Super Rugby Pacific appearances, Tamani brings experience at both provincial and international level.

He is already a familiar face in the south, having impressed for Otago during the 2025 and 2026 NPC seasons. Those performances earned him a Highlanders contract for 2027 and 2028.

Heading into 2027, Tamani will look to build on his connection with the region and use his power and athleticism to make an impact in the Highlanders pack.



Josh Jacomb

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.79m
WEIGHT	90kg
POSITION	First Five
DOB	25/6/2001
PROVINCE	Taranaki
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	25

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Josh Jacomb brings a sharp attacking instinct and a growing reputation to the Highlanders in 2027.

Equally comfortable taking on the defensive line or creating space for those around him, the Taranaki first five combines an exciting running game with composure and a reliable boot.



Raised on Auckland's North Shore, Jacomb made his provincial debut for Taranaki in 2021 before earning his first Super Rugby appearance for the Chiefs in 2024.

His breakthrough 2025 NPC campaign earned him the Duane Monkley Medal as the competition's best player, with a memorable hattrick and 30-point haul against Auckland among the highlights.

After representing the All Blacks XV in 2024 and 2025, Jacomb took another step in 2026, making his All Blacks debut against the Stormers during their South African tour and earning selection for the northern tour.

Having developed his game alongside Damian McKenzie at the Chiefs, Jacomb heads south ready to make his mark and bring a fresh attacking edge to the Highlanders backline.

Mika Muliaina

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.77m
WEIGHT	88kg
POSITION	First Five
DOB	16/3/2007
PROVINCE	Southland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	-

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Mika Muliaina is an exciting young first five from Southland, combining composure with a balanced kicking and running game.

A product of the Highlanders High Performance Programme, Muliaina was part of the Southland Boys' High School team that won the national title in 2023.

He continued his progression with an NPC debut for the Southland Stags in 2025 before helping New Zealand U20s claim bronze at the World Rugby U20 Championship.

Muliaina has already enjoyed success at school and representative level, building valuable experience as he takes the next step in his rugby career.

In 2026, Mika spent time with the Highlanders through a national development contract (NDC) where he trained with the team, before signing a 3-year deal commencing in 2027.

Heading into 2027, he will look to learn from the experienced players around him and push for his first opportunity in the Highlanders jersey.



Patrick Pellegrini

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.70m
WEIGHT	80kg
POSITION	First Five
DOB	28/9/1998
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	16

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Pellegrini brings composure, creativity and international experience to the Highlanders' first five options.

A calm presence with ball in hand, he combines an attacking instinct with the ability to guide a backline. Born and raised in Sydney, Pellegrini began his rugby career in Australia before moving to England.

His performances earned him selection for Tongan National Team 'Ikale Tahi, whom he represented at the 2023 Rugby World Cup in France.

Pellegrini joins the Highlanders from Moana Pasifika, where he gained valuable Super Rugby Pacific experience. He also strengthened his connection to the South through a season with Otago in the NPC.

Heading into 2027, Pellegrini will look to build on that experience and bring his own attacking influence to a competitive Highlanders backline.



Shannon Frizell

NEW/ RE - SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.95m
WEIGHT	108kg
POSITION	Loose Forward
DOB	11/2/1994
PROVINCE	Tasman
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	68

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Shannon Frizell returns to the Highlanders with powerful ball-carrying, physical defence and a wealth of international experience.

Born in Tonga, Frizell established himself with Tasman before making his Highlanders debut in 2018.He went on to earn 68 appearances for the club and 33 Test caps for the All Blacks, becoming known for his strength in contact and ability to make an impact on both sides of the ball.

Frizell spent three years in Japan with Toshiba Brave Lupus, helping the club secure back-to-back titles before returning to New Zealand.He was impressive enough during his short stint back in New Zealand during the 2026 NPC to earn re-selection in the All Blacks but his season was unfortunately cut short by injury during the Bledisloe Cup match in Sydney.

Frizell is expected to be fully fit by the start of the 2027 season and will bring valuable experience to theHighlanders' loose forward group, using his physicality and work rate to help set the standard in the pack.



Tuna Tuitama

NEW SIGNING



HEIGHT	1.88m
WEIGHT	95kg
POSITION	Outside Back
DOB	25/2/2000
PROVINCE	Counties Manukau
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	9

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Tuna Tuitama brings sharp footwork, explosive pace and clinical finishing to the Highlanders outside backs.

A Samoan international in both Test rugby and sevens, Tuitama scored 30 tries in 56 appearances for Samoa's sevens side. His ability to find space and beat defenders makes him a dangerous attacking option on the wing.

Tuitama joins the Highlanders from Moana Pasifika on a two-year deal, bringing Super Rugby Pacific experience alongside his international background. He also represents Counties Manukau in the NPC.

Heading into 2027, Tuitama will look to make an immediate impact in the south, using his speed and finishing ability to make the most of opportunities out wide.



Adam Lennox

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.78m
WEIGHT	82kg
POSITION	Halfback
DOB	04/11/2002
PROVINCE	Taranaki
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	21

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Adam Lennox brings quick service, sharp instincts and energy around the ruck to the Highlanders' halfback group. His pace and ability to keep an attack moving make him a lively presence behind the forward pack.

A former Whanganui Collegiate School student, Lennox made his Taranaki debut in 2022 and represented New Zealand U20s that same year.

He has since become a consistent provincial performer, with his versatility also allowing him to cover wing and fullback.

Lennox made his Highlanders debut against the Brumbies in 2025 after joining the squad as injury cover. He built on those opportunities in 2026, with his performances earning selection for the Māori All Blacks.

Heading into 2027, Lennox will look to build on his growing Super Rugby experience and push for a greater role in directing the Highlanders' attack.

Angus Ta'avao

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.94m
WEIGHT	125kg
POSITION	Prop
DOB	23/03/1990
PROVINCE	Auckland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	179

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Angus Ta’avao brings a wealth of experience to the Highlanders, with a rugby journey spanning four Super Rugby clubs and the international stage.

An Auckland-born product of Dilworth School, Ta’avao represented New Zealand U20s in 2010 and made his provincial debut for Auckland that same year.

He progressed to the Blues in 2012 before broadening his experience with the Waratahs and Chiefs. His performances for the Chiefs earned him an All Blacks call-up in 2018.

He went on to make 23 Test appearances and represented New Zealand at the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. Equally comfortable at loosehead or tighthead, his versatility has been a valuable asset throughout his career.

Ta’avao returned to the Blues in 2024, featuring in every match of their championship-winning campaign, before joining the Highlanders for 2026. He re-signed later that year to remain in the south for 2027.

Heading into his second Highlanders season, Ta’avao will look to use his scrummaging strength and experience to help drive the pack while supporting the development of the younger forwards around him.

Caleb Tangitau

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.86m
WEIGHT	98kg
POSITION	Outside Back
DOB	19/3/2003
PROVINCE	Auckland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	21

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Caleb Tangitau is a talented young rugby player from the North Shore, making his mark as a dynamic winger in both rugby sevens and rugby union.

Tangitau rose to prominence through the New Zealand Schools programme and later excelled in the New Zealand Condor Sevens team in 2020.

In 2022, he earned a full-time contract with the All Blacks Sevens and quickly became a standout, emerging as New Zealand's top try-scorer that season.

Tangitau represented New Zealand at the 2022 Commonwealth Games, contributing to the team's bronze medal win.

In 2025, Tangitau became a standout for the Highlanders, scoring six tries in seven games before his season was cut short by injury.

His strong form at the beginning of the season and during the NPC season was recognised with selection in the All Blacks XV at the end of the year.

In 2026, Caleb continued his form and lit up the competition again until the end of the season, when he unfortunately ruptured his Achilles.

Heading into 2027, Caleb will be looking to bounce back even stronger after a lengthy rehabilitation.

Dylan Pledger

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.72m
WEIGHT	75kg
POSITION	Halfback
DOB	05/06/2005
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	0

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Dylan Pledger brings quick service, sharp decision-making and an instinct for attacking opportunities to the Highlanders' halfback group.

His pace around the ruck and ability to lift the tempo make him an exciting prospect behind the forward pack. A product of King's High School in Dunedin, Pledger represented New Zealand U20s in 2024 and 2025.

He made his Otago NPC debut in 2024 before establishing himself as the province's starting halfback during their successful 2025 campaign.

Pledger's progress was interrupted by a ruptured ACL during the 2026 pre-season, delaying his potential Super Rugby Pacific debut and requiring a lengthy rehabilitation.

Heading into 2027, he will be eager to return to the field, put his skills into action and take the next step in his career with the team from his home region.

Ethan de Groot

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.90m
WEIGHT	122kg
POSITION	Prop
DOB	22/7/1998
PROVINCE	Southland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	76

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Ethan de Groot has gone from Southland prospect to an established All Blacks prop, bringing powerful scrummaging and international experience to the Highlanders' front row.

Raised in Gore, de Groot progressed through the Southland Rugby Academy and age-grade teams before making his Super Rugby debut against the Chiefs in 2020.

His breakthrough 2021 season earned him an All Blacks debut in July that year, and he has since become a regular in the black jersey.

A proud Southlander who represents the Stags in the NPC, de Groot remains closely connected to his roots. His physical presence, work rate and strength at scrum time make him an influential figure in the Highlanders pack.

Heading into 2027, de Groot will play an important role in setting the standard up front and helping the next generation of Highlanders forwards develop.

Fabian Holland

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	2.04m
WEIGHT	124kg
POSITION	Lock
DOB	9/10/2002
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	34

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Fabian Holland’s journey from the Netherlands to the All Blacks is one of New Zealand rugby’s most remarkable stories.

Inspired by the game from a young age, Holland left his family and friends behind in 2019 to pursue rugby in Christchurch as a 16-year-old.

What began as a six-month stay became a pathway through Christchurch Boys’ High School, New Zealand U20s and Otago before he joined the Highlanders.

Standing at 2.04 metres, Holland combines a commanding lineout presence with a tireless work rate and impressive skills in open play.

His outstanding 2025 Super Rugby Pacific campaign earned him the Highlanders’ Forward of the Year and Defender of the Year awards, followed by an All Blacks debut against France.

A shoulder injury during the 2026 pre-season sidelined him for the Super Rugby Pacific campaign, but he returned with Otago in the NPC and earned selection in the All Blacks squad later that year.

Heading into 2027, Holland will look to re-establish himself in the Highlanders pack, bringing international experience and the determination that has driven his rise from an ambitious teenager to an All Black.

Finn Hurley

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.74m
WEIGHT	80kg
POSITION	Outside Back
DOB	25/6/2003
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	9

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Finn Hurley brings pace, instinct and an eye for space to the Highlanders backline. Dangerous in broken play, he can turn a loose kick or a gap in the defensive line into an attacking opportunity.

Originally from Gore, Hurley attended Otago Boys' High School before progressing through Otago's provincial ranks and representing New Zealand at U19 and U20 level.

His first full-time Super Rugby contract in 2025 gave him the opportunity to showcase his elusive running and counter-attacking ability.

However, injury cut his campaign short, and further setbacks in 2026 limited his chances to build on that promise.

Heading into 2027, Hurley will be eager to put those frustrations behind him, earn consistent game time and make the most of his opportunities in the Highlanders backline.

Folau Fakatava

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.77m
WEIGHT	85kg
POSITION	Halfback
DOB	16/12/1999
PROVINCE	Hawke’s Bay
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	72

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Folau Fakatava brings instinct, physicality and attacking spark to the Highlanders’ halfback role.

Equally capable of delivering quick ball or catching defenders off guard around the ruck, he has the ability to change the tempo of a match.

Born in Tonga, Fakatava rose to prominence with Hawke’s Bay, winning the Duane Monkley Medal as the NPC’s Most Valuable Player in 2021.

His provincial and Super Rugby performances earned him an All Blacks debut against Ireland in 2022.

Fakatava continued to impress in 2025, earning selection for the AUNZ Invitational XV against the British & Irish Lions and the All Blacks XV later that year.

He remained an influential presence for the Highlanders in 2026, combining creativity on attack with a willingness to take on the physical demands of defence.

Heading into 2027, Fakatava will bring experience and energy to the Highlanders backline as he looks to keep creating opportunities for those around him.

Henry Bell

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.82m
WEIGHT	108kg
POSITION	Hooker
DOB	22/8/1999
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	26

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Henry Bell brings strength at the set piece and a strong connection to the region to the Highlanders' front row. An East Otago local and former John McGlashan College student, Bell made his NPC debut for Otago in 2020.

He broadened his experience with the Utah Warriors in Major League Rugby in 2023 before joining the Highlanders for his first Super Rugby Pacific season in 2024.

Bell made his Highlanders debut in the opening round against Moana Pasifika and has continued to build his experience across subsequent campaigns.

His physical approach and commitment to his craft make him a valuable member of the hooking group.

Heading into 2027, Bell will be looking to push for a regular starting role and help set the platform for the team he grew up supporting. Favourite band or singer? Chris Stapleton If I wasn't a rugby player I would be...

A Fencer What does representing the Highlanders mean to you? Awesome to represent my home province which I've grown up watching and supporting.

Jack Taylor

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.80m
WEIGHT	109kg
POSITION	Hooker
DOB	25/6/2003
PROVINCE	Southland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	37

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Jack Taylor has quickly established himself as a promising young hooker, combining strength at the set piece with a physical presence around the field.

Born and raised in Southland, Taylor progressed through the John Jones Steel Highlanders High Performance Programme before making his Southland and Highlanders debuts in 2023.

That year, he also represented New Zealand at the World Rugby U20 Championship in South Africa.

Taylor earned a full Highlanders contract for 2024 and continued to build his experience before an impressive 2025 campaign brought selection for the All Blacks XV.

He carried that momentum into 2026, becoming a regular starter and making valuable contributions on both sides of the ball.

Heading into 2027, Taylor will look to build on his growing experience and help drive the Highlanders forward while proudly representing his home region.

Jacob Ratumaitavuki-Kneepkens

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.87m
WEIGHT	97kg
POSITION	Outside Back
DOB	3/8/2001
PROVINCE	Taranaki
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	47

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Jacob Ratumaitavuki-Kneepkens brings pace, flair and a sharp counter-attacking instinct to the Highlanders backline.

Since arriving in 2024, he has shown an ability to turn space into scoring opportunities and threaten defences from the backfield.

A former Francis Douglas Memorial College student in New Plymouth, Ratumaitavuki-Kneepkens represented New Zealand Schools in 2018 and 2019 before making his Taranaki debut in 2020.

He joined the Blues in 2021, then headed south to the Highlanders, where he featured in every match of the 2024 campaign.

A fractured vertebra in his neck during the 2024 NPC season required emergency surgery and a lengthy rehabilitation.

He returned in 2025 to establish himself as a regular at fullback, with his performances earning selection for the All Blacks XV later that year.

After another consistent season in 2026, Ratumaitavuki-Kneepkens heads into 2027 looking to build on his form and bring an attacking spark to the Highlanders backline.

Jona Nareki

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.76m
WEIGHT	91kg
POSITION	Outside Back
DOB	27/12/1997
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	60

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Jona Nareki combines explosive pace with sharp footwork and a powerful left boot, making him a threat both out wide and in the backfield.

His ability to beat defenders and finish opportunities has helped him score more than 100 points for the Highlanders.

A member of New Zealand's world champion U20 side in 2017, Nareki went on to represent the All Blacks Sevens before establishing himself with Otago and the Highlanders.

He was also part of Otago's Ranfurly Shield-winning teams in 2018 and 2025. Alongside his attacking ability, Nareki brings defensive commitment and experience to the wing.

He reached 50 Highlanders appearances in 2026, marking another milestone in his career in the south.

Heading into 2027, Nareki will look to keep creating opportunities and use his experience to help develop the younger players in the Highlanders backline.

Josh Bartlett

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.85m
WEIGHT	120kg
POSITION	Prop
DOB	28/12/2002
PROVINCE	Bay of Plenty
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	24

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Josh Bartlett brings strength at scrum time and a growing bank of Super Rugby experience to the Highlanders' front row.

Originally from Tauranga, with family ties to Clinton in South Otago, Bartlett represented New Zealand U20s in 2022 and made his Super Rugby debut for the Chiefs that same year.

A season with the Western Force in 2024 gave him further experience before he joined the Highlanders in 2025.

Bartlett made 10 appearances in his first season in the south, contributing through his scrummaging and work rate.

He built on that foundation in 2026, earning regular opportunities and becoming an increasingly familiar presence in the Highlanders pack.

Heading into 2027, Bartlett will look to turn that experience into a push for a regular starting role as he continues to develop his game.

Josh Tengblad

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	2.02m
WEIGHT	115kg
POSITION	Lock
DOB	19/10/2005
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	0

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Josh Tengblad brings height, athleticism and a strong lineout presence to the Highlanders' second row.

A product of Sacred Heart College in Auckland, Tengblad progressed through the John Jones Steel Highlanders High Performance Programme and represented New Zealand U20s, building valuable experience against some of the world's best young players.

Standing at 2.02 metres, Tengblad combines his size with a high work rate and physical approach around the field.

His place in the Highlanders squad in 2026 gave him the opportunity to develop his craft alongside experienced Super Rugby forwards and he was on track to debut before a knee injury curtailed his season.

Heading into 2027, Tengblad will look to earn that Super Rugby Pacific debut and make his mark in the Highlanders pack.

Josh Whaanga

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.93m
WEIGHT	100kg
POSITION	Midfield/Outside Back
DOB	15/3/2004
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	1

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Josh Whaanga is a powerful young back from Balclutha, bringing size, pace and a strong connection to the south to the Highlanders squad.

Whaanga captained the Highlanders U20s at the 2024 Super Rugby U20 tournament in Taupō and earned selection for New Zealand U20s that same year.

His progression through representative rugby paved the way for his Super Rugby Pacific debut off the bench against the Crusaders in 2025.

He also gained valuable experience during Otago's 2025 and 2026 NPC campaigns, playing his part in their Ranfurly Shield-winning season and continuing to develop his game at provincial level.

Heading into 2027, Whaanga will be eager to earn more opportunities in the Highlanders backline and build on the promise he has shown while representing his home region.

Lucas Casey

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.85m
WEIGHT	105kg
POSITION	Loose Forward
DOB	30/4/2003
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	11

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Lucas Casey is a dynamic openside flanker who brings relentless energy, strength at the breakdown and an eye for the try line to the Highlanders pack.

Originally from Kerikeri, Casey moved south to study and found a home at Kaikorai Rugby Club.

He progressed from the colts to the premier side, earning opportunities with North Otago in 2023 before making his Otago NPC debut in 2024.

His breakthrough came in 2025, when he helped Kaikorai claim their first premier title since 2016.

Casey finished as the competition’s leading men’s try-scorer with 13 tries and was named Men’s Player of the Year at the Metropolitan Club Rugby Awards.

He carried that form into the NPC, where his support play, ball-carrying and defensive work made him a standout for Otago.

A place in the Highlanders’ wider training squad followed in 2026, then a Super Rugby Pacific debut in round one.

He seized his opportunity, earning a regular starting role and the club’s Rookie of the Year award.Heading into 2027, Casey will look to build on that momentum, bringing intensity on both sides of the ball while proudly representing the club rugby pathway that helped shape him.

Meihana Grindlay

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.88m
WEIGHT	101kg
POSITION	Midfield
DOB	07/4/2001
PROVINCE	Taranaki
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	1

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Meihana Grindlay brings powerful ball-carrying, physical defence and an ability to free his arms in contact to the Highlanders midfield. His strong running lines and offloading skills make him a threat with ball in hand.

A product of King’s College in Auckland, Grindlay made his NPC debut for Taranaki in 2021. He became a regular in the provincial squad and scored a key try in their 2023 NPC final victory.

Grindlay joined the Blues’ Super Rugby squad in 2024, making his debut against the Highlanders at Eden Park. He later headed south and made his Highlanders debut against the Hurricanes in 2026.

After a dominant NPC season Grindlay will be look to push for more opportunities in the game day 23 and will bring a direct attacking presence to the Highlanders backline.

Mitch Dunshea

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.98m
WEIGHT	117kg
POSITION	Lock
DOB	18/11/1995
PROVINCE	Southland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	67

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Mitch Dunshea brings physicality, a high work rate and valuable experience to the Highlanders' tight five.

A dependable presence at the set piece, he combines his work in the lineout with a willingness to take on the demanding jobs around the field.

Born in Hamilton and raised in Christchurch, Dunshea represented New Zealand U20s and Canterbury before joining the Crusaders' wider training group in 2016.

He went on to make 38 appearances for the Crusaders and earned a call-up to the All Blacks squad as injury cover in 2020, travelling to Australia for the Tri Nations.

Dunshea joined the Highlanders in 2024 and also made the move to Southland for the NPC, becoming an influential figure for the Stags.

Heading into 2027, Dunshea will look to use his experience and consistent performances to strengthen the Highlanders pack and support the development of the younger forwards around him.

Nikora Broughton

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.87m
WEIGHT	104kg
POSITION	Loose Forward
DOB	9/5/2001
PROVINCE	Bay of Plenty
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	31

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Nikora Broughton brings energy, physicality and a high work rate to the Highlanders' loose forward group. His ability to contribute across the back row gives the pack a versatile option on both sides of the ball.

A graduate of Hato Pāora College, Broughton captained the unbeaten New Zealand Barbarians side at the 2022 Super Rugby U20 tournament before joining the Highlanders in 2023.

He made an immediate impression, earning the club's Rookie of the Year award. Broughton built on that foundation in 2024, appearing in all but one match and earning selection for the Māori All Blacks' tour of Japan.

His continued development has brought further opportunities in the Māori All Blacks squad, while he also reached 50 appearances for Bay of Plenty in 2026.

Heading into 2027, Broughton will look to draw on that experience as he pushes for a regular starting role and continues to make his mark in the Highlanders pack.

Reesjan Pasitoa

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.85m
WEIGHT	96kg
POSITION	First Five
DOB	04/12/2001
PROVINCE	Northland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	28

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Reesjan Pasitoa brings composure, accurate kicking and a strong physical presence to the Highlanders backline.

Comfortable at first five or in the midfield, he offers versatility alongside the ability to guide an attack and challenge the defensive line.

Originally from Perth, Pasitoa made his Super Rugby debut for the Brumbies in 2020 before returning west to join the Western Force.

He continued to develop his game management and attacking instincts, with an impressive 2025 campaign earning him a move to the Highlanders.

Pasitoa contributed from the bench during his first season in the south in 2026, gaining valuable experience within the Highlanders environment.

Heading into 2027, he will look to push for a more prominent role, using his balanced running and kicking game to create opportunities for those around him.

Saula Ma'u

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.94m
WEIGHT	134.7kg
POSITION	Prop
DOB	29/04/2000
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	58

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Saula Ma’u brings size, power and a strong scrummaging presence to the Highlanders’ front row.

His rise from the club’s development programme to the All Blacks reflects his persistence through an injury-interrupted start to his career.

Born in Tonga, Ma’u progressed through the John Jones Steel Highlanders High Performance Programme and spent three years training with the senior squad before making his Super Rugby Pacific debut in 2022.

After overcoming the injuries that limited his early opportunities, Ma’u developed into an influential member of the Highlanders pack.

Strong campaigns in 2025 and 2026 saw him reach 50 appearances for the club and earn selection in the All Black squad as injury replacement for the South African and squad member for the Northern Tours in 2026.

Heading into 2027, Ma’u will look to bring that international experience back to the Highlanders and build on his growing influence up front.

Sean Withy

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.88m
WEIGHT	107kg
POSITION	Loose Forward
DOB	01/02/2001
PROVINCE	Southland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	54

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Sean Withy brings a tireless work rate, defensive commitment and growing leadership to the Highlanders' loose forward group.

Born and raised in Southland, Withy moved to Dunedin to study at the University of Otago and progressed through the John Jones Steel Highlanders High Performance Programme.

Named Player of the Tournament at the 2021 Super Rugby U20 tournament, he joined the senior squad in 2022 and made his debut against the Crusaders in Christchurch.

Withy's consistent performances and leadership earned him selection for the All Blacks XV in 2025.

He continued to impress in 2026, reaching 50 appearances for the Highlanders and establishing himself as a dependable presence in the back row.

Heading into 2027, Withy will look to build on that experience, setting high standards through his performances and helping the younger forwards around him develop.

Stanley Solomon

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.74m
WEIGHT	80kg
POSITION	Outside Back
DOB	05/04/2005
PROVINCE	Wellington
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	1

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Stanley Solomon brings pace, elusive footwork and versatility to the Highlanders' outside backs. Comfortable at fullback or on the wing, he combines sharp attacking instincts with the ability to make the most of space.

Originally from Wellington, Solomon represented New Zealand Schools in 2022 before progressing to New Zealand U20s in 2024 and 2025.

He made his NPC debut for the Wellington Lions in 2024, gaining valuable experience and showcasing his speed and support play.

Solomon continued to develop at provincial level before making his Super Rugby Pacific debut for the Highlanders against the Hurricanes in his hometown in 2026.

Heading into 2027, Solomon will look to build on that milestone, push for more opportunities and bring energy and an attacking spark to the Highlanders backline.

Te Kamaka Howden

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.95m
WEIGHT	112kg
POSITION	Loose Forward
DOB	28/1/2001
PROVINCE	Manawatu
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	41

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Te Kamaka (TK) Howden combines physicality, versatility and a relentless work rate, making him an influential presence in the Highlanders' loose forward group.

Originally from Feilding, Howden joined the Highlanders in 2025 and quickly made his mark with his strength in contact and ability to contribute across the park.

His performances earned him further selection for the Māori All Blacks and a call-up to the All Blacks XV later that year.

Howden took another step forward in 2026, starting virtually every match and playing more minutes than any other Highlander.

His consistency and commitment were recognised with the club's Forward of the Year and Defender of the Year awards.

Heading into 2027, Howden will look to build on that outstanding campaign and help drive the Highlanders pack through his actions on both sides of the ball.

Timoci Tavatavanawai

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.75m
WEIGHT	107kg
POSITION	Midfield
DOB	14/2/1998
PROVINCE	Tasman
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	62

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Timoci Tavatavanawai combines powerful ball-carrying with sharp footwork and strength over the ball, making him an influential presence in the Highlanders midfield.

Born and raised in Fiji, Tavatavanawai represented his country at U20 level before moving to New Zealand.

He made his NPC debut for Tasman in 2021 and began his Super Rugby Pacific career with Moana Pasifika in 2022 before heading south to the Highlanders.

His outstanding 2025 campaign earned him the club's MVP, Back of the Year, Fans' Player of the Year, Players' Player of the Year and Highlander Man awards.

His performances also brought international recognition, with an All Blacks debut against France.

Tavatavanawai continued to lead from the front as Highlanders captain in 2026, producing another strong season and earning further All Blacks selection.

Heading into 2027, he will look to turn his individual influence into collective success, setting the standard through his physicality, commitment and leadership.

Tomás Lavanini

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	2.00m
WEIGHT	129kg
POSITION	Lock
DOB	22/01/1993
PROVINCE	-
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	49

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Tomás Lavanini brings physicality, a commanding presence at the set piece and extensive international experience to the Highlanders' second row.

Standing at two metres tall, Lavanini has been a mainstay of Argentina's forward pack since his international debut in 2013.

He has earned more than 80 Test caps and represented Los Pumas at three Rugby World Cups, in 2015, 2019 and 2023.

His club career has also taken him to France's Top 14, where he played for Lyon before joining the Highlanders for the 2026 season.

He made six appearances in his first campaign in the south, bringing his trademark intensity to the pack.

Heading into 2027, Lavanini will look to build on that foundation, using his experience and physical presence to strengthen the Highlanders' tight five and support the players around him.

Veveni Lasaqa

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.83m
WEIGHT	101kg
POSITION	Loose Forward
DOB	4/6/2002
PROVINCE	Bay of Plenty
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	27

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Veveni Lasaqa brings energy, physicality and a relentless work rate to the Highlanders' loose forward group.

Comfortable in a fast-paced game, he combines a strong defensive presence with a willingness to get involved across the park. Originally from Fiji, Lasaqa joined the Highlanders in 2025 after a season with the Hurricanes.

His commitment on the field and positive approach off it quickly made him a valued member of the squad.

Lasaqa built on that foundation in 2026, becoming a regular in the loose forward rotation and delivering consistent performances throughout the campaign.

Heading into 2027, he will look to earn more opportunities in the starting line-up and continue developing his game as part of a competitive Highlanders back row.

Will Stodart

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.96m
WEIGHT	116kg
POSITION	Utility Forward
DOB	3/10/2003
PROVINCE	Otago
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	22

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Will Stodart brings size, physicality and versatility to the Highlanders' loose forward group, combining a strong presence in contact with a willingness to work across the park.

Originally from Southland, Stodart attended Southland Boys' High School before moving to St Andrew's College in Christchurch, where he captained the First XV.

He later moved to Dunedin to study at the University of Otago, progressing through the Highlanders U20s and earning selection for New Zealand U20s in 2023.

Stodart gained valuable experience in his first full Highlanders season in 2025 while continuing to develop with Otago in the NPC.

He became a regular presence in the Super Rugby Pacific side in 2026, often adding impact from the bench.

Heading into 2027, Stodart will look to build on that experience and push for a more prominent role in the Highlanders pack.

Xavier Tito-Harris

RETURNING PLAYER



HEIGHT	1.89m
WEIGHT	95kg
POSITION	Outside Back
DOB	05/01/2005
PROVINCE	Auckland
SUPER RUGBY CAPS	5

PLAYER BIOGRAPHY

Xavier Tito-Harris brings electric pace, sharp footwork and an attacking instinct to the Highlanders' outside backs. A dangerous runner in space, he has the ability to beat defenders and turn opportunities into points.

A product of Kelston Boys' High School in Auckland, Tito-Harris made his NPC debut for Auckland in 2023. His speed and elusive running have since made him a threat on the wing and in the backfield.

Tito-Harris gained valuable Super Rugby Pacific experience with the Highlanders in 2026, making several appearances off the bench and offering an injection of energy against tiring defences.

Heading into 2027, he will look to build on those opportunities, earn more game time and establish himself as a consistent attacking threat in the Highlanders backline.