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Whai professional basketball debut for high school players Carter Hopoi, Xanda Marsters



By Catherine Sylvester

Multimedia Journalist · Bay of Plenty Times · 21 Apr, 2024 10:40 AM · 4 mins to read

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Rotorua Boys' High School's Xanda Marsters took to the court last Thursday for Whai, and scored the first points of his professional career.

In a sport where height matters, Carter Hopoi is the tallest player on the Whai NBL roster. He's also one of the youngest. Hopoi and teammate Xanda Marsters are balancing their final year of schooling with making their NBL debuts and scoring the first points of their professional careers.

Mount Maunganui College student Carter Hopoi and Rotorua Boys' High School's Xanda Marsters made their NBL debuts for the Whai during the season's opening game against the Hawks on March 28 at Mercury Baypark, with both scoring points that contributed to a win for the home team.

Whai head coach Matt Lacey said it was "exciting" as both players took to the court late in the game with Marsters gaining a steal against the Hawks before shooting a 3-pointer with only seconds left on the board. Hopoi converted a transition play for the Whai to earn his first professional points.

Lacey said both athletes were excellent prospects. He described Hopoi's range of ability as "impressive" and that his "clear physical potential" and defensive mobility would hold him in good stead as American college coaches started to look at him.

"He can guard smaller, quicker guys because of his mobility ... and can guard taller, more athletic players" due to his size.

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Carter Hopoi's height and defensive mobility will hold him in good stead when he plays in front of US coaches, according to Whai head coach Matt Lacey.

He described Marsters as an intelligent player who did not make many mistakes, shot the ball "as well as anybody in his age group" and understood the game at a high level.

Both players and Whai teammate and Rotorua Boys' High student Mahnaya Heke were members of last year's Junior Tall Black squad.

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After attending a Steve Adams camp last year, all three were picked for the squad travelling to Los Angeles in late April for the inaugural Team Adams USA Tour. They will play in two tournaments against American teams, based on their age group, with college scouts in attendance.



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Marsters said it felt amazing to "finally take to the court in a professional setting" after all the hard work he had put in, and celebrating the win with his teammates was awesome.

For Hopoi, playing in front of a large crowd was "pretty cool".

'A lot of hard work'

Although both athletes played basketball when they were younger, it wasn't until high school that they became more focused on the sport.

Marsters' father, Sonny, who helps coach at Rotorua Boys' High, said the school had quite a "full-on" junior academy and that Xanda did "a lot of hard work" in his junior years.

"The young fella did a lot of early morning training, starting at four o'clock before the 6am team training", and by Year 11 was playing in the senior team and for Rotorua.

Hopoi's father, David, played for the Waikato Titans and was an original member of the Breakers; his mother, Koren, played netball for Waikato Magic and captained the Capital Shakers and CMTV Comet. Carter started playing basketball "as soon as he started walking", according to David, but began to take it seriously in high school.

When the whānau moved from Auckland to the Coromandel, David coached the school team and had his son play with the older kids to make up numbers.

'It just blew up from there'

Towards the end of 2022, David and long-time acquaintance Alex Stojkovic had a conversation in which the Whai general manager spoke about bringing Hopoi to Tauranga.

He tried out and was selected for the Whai Training Academy and the Junior Tall Blacks in rapid succession.

"We were lucky that we were here when the trials were on. Matt was there coaching and selecting and I guess it just blew up from there," said David.

"I think if we didn't move from Coromandel to Tauranga we wouldn't have had that experience."

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Learning to balance sport and school has taken a moment for both athletes.

Hopoi, who also competes in volleyball, said he had missed three weeks of school this term due to tournaments and Whai commitments, but that he was catching up and that his teachers had been "cool" and helping him.

Marsters said it was "pretty tough" juggling school and Whai at first but he had got into the "flow of things" and had a schedule to work to.

Both students said they were keen to pursue scholarship options in the US and were looking forward to playing in front of scouts and coaches later this month.

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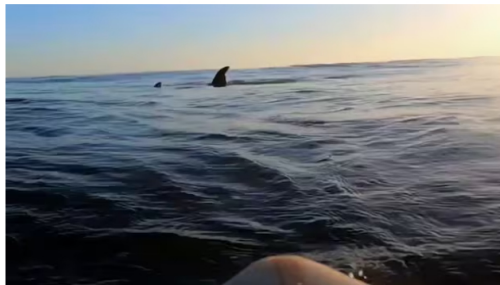


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