

NEVER TAKE YOUR EYES OFF HIM

*Born in Samoa, former New Zealand rugby player **Eroni Clarke** earned himself the distinction of being the fifth-most capped player in the Auckland Rugby Union's history with 154 appearances. In addition to competing nationally for Auckland, he made his international debut with New Zealand in 1992, and he also played professionally in Auckland. Later, Clarke worked as a sports presenter for Maori TV.*

I've been surrounded by rugby for most of my life. My father played internationally for the Manu Samoa (Samoan national team), which won the gold medal in the 1970 South Pacific Games. Though I was born in Samoa, my father wanted us to be raised in New Zealand, where there were more opportunities available to us.

I remember when I was 7 years old, there was a buzz in the house as my dad sat us all down to watch a rugby game — the All Blacks (New Zealand) vs. Scotland at Eden Park in Auckland. This being the first rugby game I had ever seen, I was so excited. The All Blacks were unstoppable!

In my excitement, I asked my dad, "How do you become an All Black?" To which he replied, "You have to be brainy!" Every All Black I saw after that I considered a scholar. Suddenly, I wanted to graduate too. It wasn't long after that I was registered to go to the All Blacks' rugby school. My rugby journey had begun.

Fast forward a few years to a Saturday

ERONI CLARKE

while I was playing U-21 club rugby. I was tackled and found myself laid up with a possible career-ending injury. The damage resulted in the loss of three of the four ligaments in my left knee. The doctor said the percentage of athletes successfully playing at an elite level, or any level for that matter, with what I had was 1 percent. I was devastated.

Through a family member, I received the truth of God's Word found in Habbakuk 3:17-19, which talks about rejoicing in God who is my strength. It was as if God was literally saying, "Praise and worship Me. It's not over until I (God) say it's over!" The door to my dream wasn't closed!

Psalms 37:4 says, "Seek your happiness in the Lord, and He will give you your heart's desires." It wasn't long after when I was included amongst other young hopefuls into the Auckland Rugby training program — a first of its kind as a top training facility. From that moment on, God continued to open doors for me.

When the next season came around, my knee was miraculously stronger than it was before the accident. I never had surgery, so the ligaments never returned to their pre-accident state. But it was God who held my knee together, and I did my part in training and trusting Him.

There have been no moments more defining in my life and faith than the injuries I've

faced. It was in these moments when I learned so much about myself, my faith and just how gracious and faithful our God is!

Sport, like all things in my life, revolves around my faith and walk with God. I have had the privilege of playing in front of crowds of thousands — in stadiums that felt like they closed around you. The noise is absolutely deafening! But I have always had the view of Jesus standing amongst the crowd. It is for Him that we play. Yes, we represent our families, our region and our country, but it's all about Him. It's ultimately all for the audience of One.

One of the greatest challenges for any athlete who follows Christ in a professional environment is to always trust God and never take your eyes off Him, even when things aren't going the way you expect. In Matthew 14, Peter took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the waves and the storm and became overwhelmed. He began to sink. The challenge for us as athletes is the same — we need to keep our eyes on the Lord at all times. When we don't, we may sink and lose our focus, our perspective and our trust.

The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6). This is how I try to live. 🏉

Eroni's favorite verse:

***"But thanks be to God,
who always leads us
as captives in Christ's
triumphal procession
and uses us to spread the
aroma of the knowledge
of Him everywhere."***

— 2 Corinthians 2:14

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