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The Proving Ground

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The Proving Ground:

THE ULTIMATE TEST FOR THE ALL BLACKS BRAND?

When the All Blacks take the field in France this year, it will be more than the trophy and coveted title of 'World Champions' at stake. It has been suggested the All Blacks brand might suffer if the team is not victorious this time round. It could be argued that winning at big sports events is becoming more important than consistency – and it is 20 years since the All Blacks won the only true international rugby tournament.

So how important is a win at the 2007 World Cup to the future of the All Blacks brand internationally? Would the world hold the Brazilian Football team brand in such high esteem if it had not won the World Football Cup more times than any other nation - 1958, 1962, 1970, 1994 and 2002?

Does the result at this year's World Rugby Cup really matter? Is it enough to have the tradition of winning tests, the haka and the fern?

Some would argue results are secondary to marketing in sports branding. David Beckham, a brand in his own right, has never been in a World Football Cup winning team and is unlikely to ever be in one. Beckham certainly has his critics. When questioned about David Beckham's playing ability George Best once said: "He can't kick with his left foot, he can't head a ball, he can't tackle and he doesn't score many goals. Apart from that he's all right." And there is some truth in Best's statement.

There is no doubt the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) have been the most successful marketers of the national team brand while, to our dismay, Australia have been the most successful World Rugby Cup team – lifting the trophy in 1991 and 1999.

There will certainly be some national brand fall-out if the All Blacks fail to bring home the Webb Ellis trophy this year. However, hosting the tournament in New Zealand in 2011 should give the All Blacks brand the international boost it needs if we are unsuccessful in France later this year. With Adidas and other partners looking to renegotiate their lucrative sponsorship contracts with the All Blacks in between times, the NZRU will be looking for the best possible result in France.

The All Blacks brand is about tradition, power, a degree of mystique – and results. To rugby-playing nations like England, Australia and Wales, irrespective of the result in France, the All Blacks brand will continue to be strong. These nations understand the history of our rugby country – the culture, values and honour associated with playing in the All Blacks jersey.

In their build-up to the Semi-Final game against the All Blacks in 2003, Australia refused to call the team the 'All Blacks', using 'New Zealand' instead. **There is significant fear and mana in the All Blacks brand and this is, in part, tied to winning.** Amongst rugby-playing nations, our 72 per cent winning record is significant.

Like the Brazilian football team, the future of the international All Black brand, beyond the sport itself, lies with victory on the biggest stage. For one of our strongest national brands to break new international territory, we need to have better results at the Rugby World Cup.