

JOHN TOKARUA – AUSTRALIAN LACROSSE CHAMPION

John (“JT”) Tokarua started playing lacrosse in 1992 at the age of 16 with the Caulfield Under 17 team. He attended Caulfield High School with David Humphries, Che Johnston and Rob Stark, and it was David who initially invited him to come to Caulfield.



He was selected in his first state league team circa 1994 and played with Caulfield for most of his career. In 2000 he was pursuing a degree in sports coaching at Deakin University, and as a result effectively took a year off and played Division 2 at Moreland under his mentor/coach Clive Sheppard and Ben Hitchins, returning to Caulfield in 2001. JT left Caulfield at completion of 2001 following a suggestion that it would do his career some good if he played with a stronger or more recognized club, so he went to Malvern for one year. He was initially not selected for the Australian team, which he admits was his own doing, he was subsequently included in the Australian team for the 2002 World Championship. “Not being selected for 2002 was entirely my responsibility. I’d not done the off field strength and conditioning program Ben Hitchins had laid out for the players prior to attending the selection camp in Adelaide. With a fair bit of arrogance I’d wrongly assumed that I’d be able to let my on field play speak for itself. Wow!! did I have an earth shattering reality check”!

Following the turmoil of 2002 where JT was part of Malvern’s state league premiership winning team and won the Malvern fairest and best, and was Vince Healy winner all in the same year, he went to MCC, as did Rob Stark, for a change and stayed there for 2 years before returning to Caulfield, as did Rob Stark, where he remained until he retired in 2014. Surprisingly over the journey he only won one club best and fairest award, and that was in 2002 at Malvern. Not surprisingly if he was playing with Rob Stark for most of his career at Caulfield it would have been tough competition for votes!

JT was selected in the Under 19 state team in 1995 and his first Victorian senior team in 1997 and from that time he rarely missed selection in the Victorian team, other than due to national selection, apart from 2000.

JT was selected in the Australian senior men's team for the World Championships in 2002, 2006, 2010 (Co-Captain) and 2014 (Co-Captain), and was named in the All World team in 2006. As part of the preparation for the world championships in 2014 we was a squad member of the selection squad which played several matches in Tokyo, Japan.

JT retired after the 2014 World Championship at the grand old age of 38 but did make a comeback at nearby Williamstown in 2022 to play with the Division 1 team and won a flag!

MENTORS/GREATEST INFLUENCES

Clive Sheppard was an amazing mentor/coach. He gave as much as he possibly could of himself to me, and Rob Stark, to ensure we both had every opportunity to become the best players we could be.

Rob Stark at that time was, even as a fifteen year old, an inspiration to me both on and off the field. Every week he led our undermanned, out-gunned and out-classed Caulfield team with nothing but true grit! He's been a phenomenal inspiration to me throughout my lacrosse career.

As far as influences, I modelled my game in no particular order on Terry Sparks (Eltham), Steve Mounsey (W.A), Brad Skepper (Malvern), Dave Pietramala (John Hopkins) and Ric Beardsley (Syracuse).

AWARDS

2001 Caulfield Team of the Century

2002 Vince Healy Memorial Trophy (Victorian best & fairest)

2002 Malvern fairest and best (Centenary Year)

2006 All World team

2007 & 2008 All Australian team

2008 Don Hobbs Trophy (Best player at the national carnival)

TOUGHEST OPPONENTS

In Australia it was Darren Gibson. Just a dogged, highly aggressive, ultimate competitor who never gave an inch, ever! If you didn't know exactly where "Gibbo" was on the field at any given time, ESPECIALLY on loose balls around the ground, then you were about to be "Smashed" in half by the biggest calves in Australia!

Chris Brown in attack (Caulfield, Surrey Park, MVP World Games '94) was an attack man that no-one in the world could get anywhere near controlling. An unorthodox cradle/ playing style that not even Dave Pietramala in the 1994 World's could shut down. I've watched the '94 Aussie team at the Manchester World Games thousands of times on video. In my time watching lacrosse, and in my opinion, I rate that team as the best senior men's Australian team ever.

On the international stage it was the Powell brothers - Casey, Ryan and Mike Powell. Mickey Powell was the fastest attack man I'd ever played on. Ryan Powell wasn't the fastest or the strongest but he knew positional offensive play in terms of efficient

movement better than anyone with the exception of perhaps Chris Brown. Casey was a brilliant mix of both of his brothers, he had size, speed and strength.

BEST DEFENCE PLAYERS HE HAS SEEN?

With respect to other defenders Terry Sparks playing man-to-man D in the 2002 World Championships in Perth was amazing to watch. Terry had a huge gas tank, brilliant array of takeaway stick checks and the ultimate competitor.

Paul Rabil (USA) - As a defenceman myself, I'd usually be able to craft a rough plan on how to play on most short sticks, not Paul Rabil! Rabil was an exceptional athlete similar to Doug Shanahan (USA).

In terms of all time great players I have seen and played with, I have to include and comment on Rob Stark – Rob won every individual accolade within Australia multiple times over. Dominated the face off, aggressive defensive middie and could crank the ball past any goalie he played against. Further to my point earlier, Rob led a rag-tag group of players at Caulfield his entire career. If Rob had played at one of the more successful clubs in Victoria, along with his personal accolades Rob would've also added multiple grand finals.



TESTIMONIALS

GLENN MEREDITH (Former Australian player and current coach)

John Tokarua (“JT”) at his peak was one of, if not the most athletic defenders Australia has ever produced. John intimidated and dismantled attack players around Australia, and the world, for over a decade, then took off “Down town” turning defence into offence transition at full speed.

John has been one of the best and most professional players I have ever coached, he had such a presence on the field from the defence end that was the complete package, and second to none.

John was also the most natural captain I’ve ever seen, and a man of few words, but whenever John did speak the change rooms always went very quiet, It has been my honour to coach John in a few Victorian state teams, and also in the 2014 World Championship team in Denver.

ROB STARK (Former Australian player)

I had the pleasure of playing with John Tokarua at club, state & national levels & captaining in all levels with him.

He was by far the toughest defender I’ve ever played with or against, his sheer size, speed & strength made him one of the most dominant defenders in the world during my time. His groundball prowess in the midfield & turning defence into offence, pushing the ball into transition, changed the way defenders were looked at here in Australia.

For a period of 10 years or more no attacker wanted to take him on, they just passed the ball off rather than try & dodge through John as they would either get stripped of the ball or pushed over. I think that’s about the highest praise I could give him when his peers think he’s just too good!!

PETER INGE (Former Australian player)

JT is without question one of the greatest defenders Australia has produced and certainly the toughest I played against.

JT and I came through the junior ranks playing against each other and we first got to play together on the Australian U19 team in Japan where we lost narrowly to the U.S. in the final. JT had size, passion and an abundance of raw talent at that time.

Through the years JT was part of group of players including Rob Stark, Darren Nicholas, James Inge and few others who committed themselves totally to physical conditioning and performing at the highest level. JT’s game developed immensely through the early 2000’s and by 2006 had developed into a truly world class defender. In 2006 JT and I were set to both play for the same MLL team in the pro league. Unfortunately JT wasn’t able to make it to the U.S. for the MLL but I am sure that he would have excelled & thrived at the pro level and would have developed a far bigger profile as one of the world’s premier defenders. He was rewarded with all-world selection in 2006 and that was a reward for his hard work & dedication over

many years and validation of his development as one of the best defenders in the world.

JT was both tough and intimidating - he was a world class athlete and had a great skill level.

I rate JT as the best Australian defender I played with. I have tremendous respect for JT as an athlete, sportsman and person.

CONCLUSION

When you assess any player for greatness you consider their athleticism, stick skills, courage, endurance and team ethic. When you look at defence players you consider these skills along with their physicality, their ability to bodycheck, their interception skills, their ability to shut a player down, their ability to clear and turn defence into attack.

Many great defence players have several of these characteristics but not all of them. Some are great interceptors and clearers but don't bodycheck, and the greats also require that essential element that all good defence players have, that bit of "Mongrel" (That's the nice word for it!), the ability to wipe an opponent out when vulnerable, to hurt them physically with a big bodycheck, to put seeds of doubt in their mind for the next encounter.

In summing up John Tokarua he was outstanding in all of these facets of defence and may go down as one of our greatest defence players of all time, certainly in the new millennium. Well played JT, you are an Australian lacrosse champion!