

Pijnaker signs contract in Zurich

From Ngongotahā to Switzerland – well done, Grasshopper

FOOTBALL



David Beck

Nando Pijnaker has chased his football dreams with ruthless enthusiasm and now his hard work is paying off.

The 20-year-old former Western Heights High School student and Ngongotahā AFC player has signed a professional contract with Grasshopper Club Zurich in Switzerland.

"As a kid you always want to be a professional footballer but probably around 11 or 12 is when I started to seriously think this is definitely what I want to do. When I got to 14 or 15, I realised this is possible and did everything I could to make it happen," Pijnaker said.

He will start in the club's under-21 side but has already spent some time training with the top side.

"I'm still getting used to the players, the style of play – obviously the way they play in Europe is a bit different to how we play in New Zealand. It's been good for me to get in among it and get used to everything but I'm enjoying it so far."

Born in the Netherlands, he migrated to New Zealand with his family at the age of 3, settling in Rotorua. In 2015, he moved to Wellington to join the Olé Football Academy and his career has gone from strength to strength since.

In 2018, through the Olé Academy partnership, Pijnaker signed for Auckland's Eastern Suburbs, with whom he won the ISPS Handa Premiership, New Zealand's highest level of domestic football.

Pijnaker's efforts for that side saw him selected in the New Zealand squad for 2019 Under-20 Fifa World Cup in Poland where they reached the round of 16 only to be knocked out in a shootout by Colombia.

At the conclusion of the world cup campaign, he joined his former coach, Declan Edge, at Division 2 Norra Götaland side Torslanda IK in Sweden, a club run in partnership with the Olé Academy.

The idea was to get more exposure and it paid off when, after a couple of trial periods last year, Grasshopper Club Zurich offered him a fulltime contract.

"The under-20 world cup campaign went okay, we could've done better and we were

a little bit unlucky but it was a really good experience for me personally and the rest of the team as well I think.

"I really enjoyed my time in Sweden. That was a place for us to play some games and get some training in while being close to all the European clubs.

"At the end of July last year I came out to Grasshopper for a 10-day trial which went okay.

"I played the rest of the season in Sweden before a second trial with Grasshopper. Obviously things went well and here we are."

The Grasshopper Club Zurich selectors were not the only ones impressed by Pijnaker.

He also made his senior international debut in November, selected in the All Whites squad for international friendlies against Ireland and Lithuania.

He had watched the likes of All Whites stars Chris Wood and Winston Reid in action in the English Premier League and all of a sudden he was sitting across from them at the dinner table.

"One of the things I really enjoyed about it was there was a basically a core group of young players from the academy that went to the under-20 world cup and got the full All Whites call-up last year.

"It's basically a bunch of my friends that I've known for three or four years so it's really cool that we were on the same journey.

"Growing up as a kid in Rotorua, you always want to play for New Zealand one day, that's one of the dreams you have. To actually make it happen was a dream come true. I loved it."

Pijnaker said, in the long term, he would love to play professional football in his country of birth, the Netherlands. However, for now he was 100 per cent focused on enjoying his current opportunity and making the most of it.

"Firstly, I want to improve as much as I can as a football player. I'd love to break into the first team here so we'll see what happens with that. I want to become as good as I can as a footballer here, I don't want to look too far into the future.

"You never know with football, there are so many variables and different circumstances, so I'm focusing on where I am now and enjoying it as much as I can."

Former Western Heights High School student Nando Pijnaker in action for New Zealand at the 2019 Fifa Under-20 World Cup round of 16 match against Colombia.

Photo: Getty Images

