



## **New Zealand Under 19's Women Softball Team**

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# **Countdown to Capetown**

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The countdown is on for the NZ Under 19s Women's Softball Team (Junior White Sox) heading to Capetown, South Africa for the International Softball Federation's IX Junior Women's World Series. Coach Venita Hokai has named a World Series Team of 17 players and 4 non-travelling reserves.

Players include a strong pitching contingent in USA based Hayley Davis and Taylor-Paige Stewart together with current NZ Senior Women's (White Sox) pitchers Jordan-Leigh Koni, Rita Hokianga and Beth Stavert. Completing the pitching battery is Krysta Hoani who last month pitched her Epsom High School team to victory in the National Division One Secondary School Championships.

Integral to the battery is the catcher. Coach Hokai has selected an all star NZ catching line-up in current White Sox catcher Rebecca Hicks together with Auckland stalwart Santana Harris backed up by Hutt Valley's Arahia Fowell.

Covering the infield is the exciting youngster Kuraroa Ratu-James who was named MVP at the National Club Championships after her Hutt Valley club side Te Aroha proved too strong for all comers. Joining Ratu-James is USA based Ellie Cooper, who is expected to provide strength and experience at short stop; Danica Ferriso whose surprise selection came when the young Hutt Valley player showed strong form at the recent National Fastpitch Championships; and Aucklander Keeley Wells who recent play at premier and national competitions also proved too strong to leave at home.

The outfield will be anchored by centre fielder and recent White Sox call up Kingsley Avery together will fellow Auckland Ramblers clubmate Katarina Hiku; Brisbane based Alex Forsyth and the talented Te Reo Powhiri Matautia who is expected to make a full recovery from injury.

The batting line-up has depth with the USA players expected to show versatility and strength together with Ratu-James, Hiku, Avery, Hicks, Fowell and Forsyth who have all recently proven that they have the talent to hit the ball hard. Baserunning is a particular focus of Coach Hokai and she has selected some real speedsters in Hiku, Avery, Ratu-James, Forsyth and Stewart.

Sixteen team's have qualified to compete at the Junior Women's World Series including: China, Japan, Chinese Taipei, USA , Canada, Puerto Rico, Brasil, Argentina, Italy, Germany, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and two others to be named from the African continent.

The task of winning at World Series level is daunting. The national junior programme attracts no funding and is forced to rely on players to find funds in order to participate. The current World Series team members are expected to contribute up to \$6000 each. Preparing for a World Series is therefore necessarily financially constrained with decisions on key activities, such as international tournaments and training camps, being made based on affordability. Nevertheless there is hope and aspirations for the team to perform as equals against much better resourced teams. However, New Zealand will be considered an underdog. This is however not an unfamiliar position for many New Zealand national sports teams, and many underdog teams achieve results far surpassing pre-competition expectation. For this NZ Under 19's team that underdog status fuels thier fighting spirit. Also there is evidence of tremendous support from individuals, families, clubs, associations and communities for this team with big dreams from Aotearoa.

Preparing for the World Series is now the priority for the coaching staff. Although enjoying a month off after a very busy season, the NZ based players will be part of a national training and conditioning programme which begins in May and will continue until the World Series. A key training camp where physical testing will occur and programmes fine tuned will be held in July. The build up will formally begin with a domestic premier club women's tournament in October before assembly in late November for a final training camp. Arriving in Capetown a week before the World Series begins will enable the team to shed any effects of jetlag and to acclimatise to the hotter temperature and environment. Warm up games agaisnt other competing counties will be arranged.