

## **Moko set to make his mark on Abu Dhabi**

Ruaumoko (Moko) Pukepuke is the 'social butterfly' of the New Zealand basketball team heading to the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Abu Dhabi in March.

Head Coach Helen Brookes says the 23-year-old from Rotorua has a constant smile on his face and makes himself known wherever he goes.

"At the recent Māori Basketball Nationals, where we first competed together as a team, Moko was a bit like a movie star," Helen says. "Everybody loves him!"

The World Summer Games event is his first international competition, and it might be a bit of an eye-opener for Moko, who hasn't travelled further than Australia.

The Abu Dhabi competition will be the biggest sports and humanitarian event staged in 2019, and the largest single event ever staged in the UAE. It will see 7000 athletes from 170 countries compete in a series of sports. The New Zealand team includes 38 athletes with intellectual disabilities, five 'Unified Partners' (athletes without an intellectual disability), and 21 coaches, managers and support staff.

"It will be exciting to meet athletes from all over the world," Moko says. "I like being together with my team mates and being around lots of people – but I know it's going to be very hot."

To make sure he's on top of his game, Moko is training twice a week and spending time getting to know his team mates, with the support of his whānau and his local club Special Olympics Rotorua, which he's been training with since 2009. Club mate Maureen McLeod is also heading to the Games, competing in the football team.

Moko has some ambitious goals for Abu Dhabi. "I want to win the trophy," he says. "I want to bring it home."

Helen, who was assistant coach of the basketball team at the 2015 World Summer Games in Los Angeles, says while winning a medal would be amazing, her goal is for the athletes to perform well as a team and to do their best.

"In LA the team won the Deloitte Trophy for sportsmanship and I've got my eye on that again," she says. "The team has gelled really well – it's the first time we've had a mixed team and I think the two girls really change the dynamic. They have a calming effect on the boys!"

She says as one of the younger athletes Moko has a lot to learn about competing at an international level, but he's sure to embrace the experience.

"He's got real presence on the court, and as one of our big boys he's sure to make his mark."