

Road to Nationals

Guided by Mana Māori Motuhake

Keihana Kingi-Takoko, kaiako of Te Kapa Haka o Te Wharekura o Te Kaokaoroa o Pātetere, shares their journey to Ngā Kapa Haka Kura Tuarua o Aotearoa 2026.

If you know our kura, you'll know we're rarely sitting still. We're always out supporting kaupapa in our rohe, standing with our iwi, welcoming manuwhiri or preparing for whatever comes next. Kapa haka isn't separate from those things. It's part of who we are.

When people ask where the inspiration for our bracket came from, they're usually looking for one defining moment. The truth is, it's always different. Every year we begin with ideas, but we don't always know what the bracket will become until we're well into the campaign. Somehow, the wairua always takes us where we're meant to go. This year, it brought us back to one question: *"What does Mana Māori Motuhake mean to us here at Te Wharekura o Te Kaokaoroa o Pātetere in little old Putāruru?"* Every waiata, every movement and every transition had to answer that question. If it didn't, then we knew we hadn't found the heart of our bracket yet.

I knew early on that I wanted to acknowledge the kōrero of Ō-Rākau. We just had to find the right way to tell that story. That's why we opened with Tēnei Ka Noho Ka Rau Maharatanga. It was important for us to tautoko our local kapa, Mōtai Tangata Rau, while also acknowledging the return of Ō-Rākau. It felt like the right place to begin.

As the bracket began to take shape, each item naturally led into the next. The mōteatea carried the words of Kīngi Tāwhiao, expressing his deep love for the whenua while mourning everything that had been taken. In his composition, he likens the whenua to a wahine, celebrating her beauty, the curves of her body and the way she sways.

From there, we moved into our waiata-ā-ringā. With Te Matatini just around the corner, we knew people would soon be making their way from every corner of Aotearoa. Our haka pōwhiri became our way of

welcoming all those waka into our rohe as they journey through Hauraki, Maniapoto, Raukawa and Waikato before reaching Hopuhopu.

For me, that's another expression of Mana Māori Motuhake.

That's where our poi, Kahurangiariki, found its place. The story naturally led us to our wāhine. It kept bringing me back to one question: *"How do we create queens amongst ourselves in our hapori?"*

That question stayed with me throughout the campaign. Every practice became a chance to have those conversations. I wanted our kōtiro to see strength, humility and grace in Kahurangiariki, but more importantly, to see those same qualities in themselves. If they leave our kura knowing who they are and the mana they carry, then we've done something right.

The haka carried another lesson.

A lot of people see the haka and think it's about aggression. For us, it was about resilience. It was about healing, overcoming hardship and standing united.

"I believe the haka helps us shape what we don't want in our tāne and our tama."

I wanted our tama to become protectors and role models. That's what I hoped they'd take away from the haka. I wanted them to know that one day they'll be the ones standing on their marae. They'll be the fathers, the uncles, the brothers and the leaders our people look to. If this kaupapa can help prepare them for that, then that's what Mana Māori Motuhake looks like in our kura.

People also asked a lot about our kākahu. Some recognised the Hawaiian influence straight away. For me, that inspiration came from a place of genuine admiration and respect.

Te Wharekura o Te Kaokaoroa o Pātetere performing at Ngā Kapa Haka Kura Tuarua o Aotearoa in Mount Maunganui

I was fortunate enough to perform at Merrie Monarch and learn about the Hawaiian concept of mōhai—the willingness to sacrifice yourself in service of something greater. Not sacrifice in a literal sense, but giving your time, your energy and everything you have so your culture continues to flourish.

Listening to that whakaaro, I realised we'd been living it all along. That's exactly what kapa haka asks of us.

As kaiako, we sacrifice weekends with our whānau. We give up time, energy and sleep because that's what this kaupapa asks of us.

Our taura do the same. You practise until your knees buckle. You sweat until there's a puddle on the floor. That's mōhai. It's the sacrifice you make for your people, your kaupapa and the generations coming through behind you.

That whakaaro found its way into our kākahu. We wanted them to move like Waikato herself—flowing, graceful, powerful and welcoming.

"Every single step, every single action, every single thing had a purpose."

We weren't trying to be different for the sake of standing out. We trusted our kaupapa and stayed true to it.

None of this happens because of one person.

I'm fortunate to work within a kura that moves together. Our board, senior leadership, kaiako, whānau and wider community stand behind our kapa every step of the way. When we need help, people show up. During competition week, our principals are backstage doing whatever needs doing. Whether it's adjusting kākahu, calming nerves or helping wherever they're needed, they're there. That's not something I take for granted.

Of course, there are challenges. Time always disappears faster than we'd like. Funding is a constant pressure, and campaigns like this require an enormous

commitment from everyone involved. But those challenges never belong to one person. We carry them together.

When our students eventually leave us, I don't expect them to remember every lyric, every action or every note.

I hope they remember how kapa haka made them feel.

I hope they can stand with confidence to lead a karakia, support their whānau through tangihanga, perform a haka for someone they love, or simply carry themselves with pride wherever life takes them.

For me, seeing little old Putāruru stand on that national stage was enough. That's something our taura, our whānau and our hapori will carry with them for years to come.

"Winning is not the measure of success for us. Them coming out of that campaign as better people, better students, better sons and daughters—that is the measure for us."

Now, that is the true essence of Mana Māori Motuhake.

