



**FREEZE FRAME**

# Softball gets a shot of Maori passion

Some of these men are quite competitive...

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No 21 was later  
fined for freestyling

They may have a generous welfare state, Scandinavian cheekbones and the finest bacon in Western Europe, but this is one of the few moments when you wouldn't want to be a Dane. The All Blacks made the haka famous the world over, but they're not the only New Zealanders who perform the notoriously intimidating dance before every sporting encounter – the country's international softball team, the Black Sox, also psyche themselves up with one.

Facing off against the Danish side in last month's World Men's Softball Championship in Saskatoon, Canada, the ceremonial dance seemed to do the trick. Coming off a four-strong winning streak, the world champions three years running gave Denmark a 16-0 mauling.

After scoring 11 runs in their first turn at bat, the tone of the match was clear – Travis Wilson and Thomas Makea clocked home runs, and Donny Hale hit a rare grand-slam home run, with a player at every base completing their circuit. Denmark couldn't manage a single point, thanks to ruthless pitching from Jeremy Manley, who had been guilty of (literal) underhand tactics in an earlier 14-0 drubbing of Great Britain. The match was finally finished under the aptly named 'mercy rule' – with no finite game clock, softball matches can theoretically last forever, so when a game is clearly out of the reach of one side, the umpire puts the team out of its misery and calls the match to a close.

As Denmark retreated to lick their wounds, the Kiwi side eventually marched on to the 27 July final against Australia. This time, however, their haka did little to disquiet their opponents – New Zealand's fellow Antipodeans dealt with them 5-0, scoring their maiden championship and ending their bitter rivals' three-year reign.

## FUSION FACTS

- Despite being used to intimidate opponents, haka are not exclusively war dances – they can be used to welcome guests or praise great achievements.
- Irish writer James Joyce saw a haka performed at a Paris rugby match in 1925. He went on to include the words, untranslated, in his famously impenetrable work *Finnegans Wake*.
- A haka is also performed before each match by the New Zealand basketball team – known, hilariously, as the Tall Blacks.

**Gillette**