

A LONG WAY IN TWO SEASONS

North Harbour Rugby has emerged from being only an idea to within 90 seconds of first division status in just two seasons, at the same time that its teenage sides have established an unequalled standing with a string of successes at regional level.

Two All Blacks, Wayne (Buck) Shelford and Fran Botica have won their jerseys in those two seasons, while other players have established themselves at almost every level of rugby, proving two facts beyond dispute:

- Forming another Union to establish North Harbour was good for rugby.
- Players are what the game is about.

North Harbour has achieved success by the most pleasing method – enjoyable rugby that gives players satisfaction and attracts public support.

The 1986 season was not always easy at playing level. North Harbour had tried to slip through 1985 as an underdog, the new boy. It worked for a time, to the extent that other teams set out to play their game rather than to counter North Harbour.

With a wealth of talent – albeit relatively inexperienced – coach, Peter Thorburn encouraged his players to chance their arm and not to be discouraged if it sometimes did not bring results.

Because North Harbour was demonstratively stronger in talent than any other third division side, there was time and opportunity to recover from mistakes and still win.

That was not true of 1986. Part of North Harbour's game plan was to drive hard in ragged play and suck in the seagulls, plus force opposing backs into retreat. The theory fell down when oppositions were allowed to stand up and get a head start on defense, allowing a talented backline no space to set up its moves.

This frustration will be a fact of life again in 1987, for there is no doubt that on 1986 performances, North Harbour is the front runner for promotion to first division.

There is considerable truth in the theory that holding a place in first division will probably be easier than winning it, for every good team will play its own game and North Harbour will be allowed latitude to do the same. Spectators and players will both find more to enthuse over in such circumstances.

Nowhere is enthusiasm more aptly demonstrated than through the Supporter's Club, a virile and vocal group of rugby stalwarts who have made promotions of the game their hallmark.

If the enthusiasts supporting New Zealand's plastic fantastic K27 had wanted any advice in the build-up to the challengers' elimination of the Americas Cup they could have done worse than turn to North Harbour skipper, Buck Shelford.

With knowledge born of experience he could have told them that the game is not won until the match is over.

North Harbour had looked good in its Ranfurly Shield challenge at Eden Park in 1986 and at the end of the season it seemed to have first division status in its pocket with a lead over Waikato and time almost up. Both slipped away. KZ7 skipper Chris Dickson doubtless now understand how it feels. But if Americas Cup syndicate boss, Michael Fay needs to practice his arts on orchestrating a willing team of enthusiasts to get maximum response and keep the spirit alive, he could study the form of Trevor Hyland as chairman of the North Harbour Supporters Club. The jobs have much in common. North Harbour's shield challenge was a milestone in rugby before the game started. The disparate suburban population of North Shore and the rural communities of country clubs had been whipped into a combined and united cheer squad, long before the teams took the field.

In an ambitious attempt effort, the previous Saturday the Supporters Club had run a Shield parade from Takapuna to Browns Bay and on the day stacked the stands of Eden Park with visual and vocal support.

It is history now that the challenge failed. How it was played and how close it came to snatching the Log of Wood are marvellous memories.

But the magic was not only among supporters and players. A stroke of genius the North Harbour Rugby Union's management committee provided playing jersey's especially embroidered for the Shield Challenge. They were to become the player's possession immediately after the games.

It speaks volumes for the foresight and imagination behind the move that every man in the squad got a jersey, not just those who took the field, nor just the ones who were the official reserves.

Every man who was fit and willing to strip for North Harbour on the day, took home a souvenir to treasure.

Such is the strength of rugby in the North Harbour Rugby Union.

There is a similar spirit abroad at Club level. The policy of home and away games has created a goodwill between clubs that is reminiscent of rugby in its grandest traditions, of friendships on and off the field, among players, administrators and supporters.

Under the North Harbour Union, rugby returned to the community. Several clubs found new strength and success in revivals of local enthusiasm. Western United coaxed its locals Riverhead by demonstrating ability on the field. Glenfield showed signs of maturity and consistency as youngsters from its earlier junior teams came through in strong numbers at adult level.

Helensville stalwarts smile wryly when city clubs talk of trouble with injuries. Desperately short on depth of talent in the top grade this rural club took pride in better performances and honest efforts in 1986. One weekend it meant defaulting the Under 19's to field Senior A and B teams.

One Club demonstrated the virtues and of success of fostering local talent in the boldest possible way. East Coast Bays had an almost village atmosphere with the local backing given to men who had played their way through the grades and stayed with the club over a long number of seasons.

In 1985 the theory was that a star-studded North Shore team would take the honours and become the first holders of the New Zealand Couriers Cup. It did not turn out that way and again in 1986 it was the “home town” team that proved too good.

The lesson to be remembered is that rugby is a players game, that time and effort put into coaching and encouraging young players from barefoot kids to talented teenagers is the greatest investment in the games and that incentives worth providing include good player facilities, team trips and – perhaps least tangible but most effective – status and standing within club and Union for the players.

By all these standards, North Harbour is well down the right track with a ton more fun to be had in rugby yet. Roll on the 1987 season.