

## **Club Rugby - The Heart of the Union**

In the professional era, which has been increasingly dominant in the game since the mid 1990's, one of rugby's basic tenets has been inevitably undermined. That is the concept that Clubs, both on the field and off as community forces, are the foundation of the game and that their interests should be paramount. A provincial union after all, is essentially a collection of Clubs who are the game's true owners.

To its credit, since its formation in 1985, North Harbour has always striven to give Club rugby, from premier down to the Saturday morning junior grades, the recognition it deserves. And even in recent years, when All Blacks, Super 12/14 players and occasionally provincial representatives, no longer appear regularly for Clubs and for those few at elite level, never at all, that mantra has still applied.

A special promotion has always been made of Club finals day. As well as the premier final, plate and pool playoffs have also been held and either as curtain-raisers or on adjacent grounds, the finals have generally held for reserves, under 21 and under 19 grades. With most of the union's Clubs involved, crowds, firstly at Onewa Domain and since 1997 at Albany, have occasionally approached five to six thousand. There was a slight variation to the programmes in 2009, with the premier grade championship and plate-finals being the only two games played because of the need to fit in with the start of the Air New Zealand Cup. There was still a bumper attendance at Albany and the union, again to its credit and that of the new representative coaches, Craig Dowd and Jeff Wilson, allowed the Clubs full use of their top players.

But the last of the Club's glory years when anyone could wander down to the nearest suburban ground and see champion All Black, Buck Shelford at Devonport for example, in action, overlapped the Harbour's first union decade.

With 247 matches to his credit for the North Shore Club and then having a leading role as player-coach with East Coast Bays, Harbour's foundation coach, Peter Thorburn, was always as staunch believer in club rugby's value. "One of the reasons we were slow starters at the higher level in 1987 and 1988 was because I didn't deem it fair to take players out of the Club competition to warm our reserves benches" he says. "It sounds like an excuse, but it wasn't. I am a firm believer that without your base, club football, the representative team couldn't function. You need to have players fit and fresh and match fit from club football, but also you needed to have a good relationship with the Clubs themselves and the coaches so that when you needed players they were happy to oblige. It was the same with the representative second XV. Each week they played as a curtain-raiser for us. We would go into some games with a reserve hooker or halfback who had already played for the second XV, as we didn't have enough depth and I believed the chances of a key player being injured early were negligible. Occasionally a player would play nearly two games in one day but it was a rare event. I would pick my playing XV then everyone would be offered to the second XV. They used the same calls as we did, so the players knew the systems we had in place".

Another equipped to offer a special appreciation of Club Rugby, as it was in the 1980's and into the early 1990's is the representative coach between 1992 and 1996, Brad Meurant, who soon after ending his senior playing days, in which as a prop he amassed more than 140 games for East Coast Bays, turned to coaching, firstly with Bays and then with Northcote.

"Club rugby today definitely has lost something and obviously the playing standard is nowhere near as high as it used to be and nor is the support" he says "There was a time when spectators used to be lined four or five rows deep but now rather than hundreds they can be counted in their dozens. It's nobody's fault. It's just a reality. I guess now with All Blacks not going to be involved with their provincial sides the NPC occupies the sort of place and the kudos used to belong to Club rugby in the 1980's".

Harbour's premier competition started in 1985 with the 10 foundation Clubs, North Shore, Takapuna, Northcote, East Coast Bays, Glenfield, Navy, Silverdale, Massey, western United (or Kumeu as it became later) and Helensville. Of these only Shore and Takapuna and to a lesser extent Northcote, had been first division regulars in the old Auckland competition. Meurant's Bays Club as he points out, bounced around between first and second division, along with the likes of Eden and Mount Roskill. There were early apprehensions that this would mean a poor standard with huge gaps between the top and bottom sides but this didn't really eventuate.

Mahurangi, based at Warkworth joined soon after the union's foundation when the Clubs which had been part of the Rodney sub-union and part of the North land union merged and in 1988 Marist was introduced. One theory is that Marist started at the behest of some union officials, to ensure the development at Albany would be used for rugby. But it appears the main thrust for this idea came from Shore residents who had been involved with Auckland Marist club, Trevor Prendergast, Doug Hirst and Phil Cooper.

"Club rugby in the 1970's and into the 80's was fantastic" Meurant says. "As an ordinary club player most weekends you were pitted against All Blacks or at least rep players. Beegee Williams, Lin Colling, Pole Whiting and Andy Haden, for instance, were regularly playing for Ponsonby".

That continued into Harbour's early seasons and Meurant says that for the first half dozen years or so, when he was actively involved as a coach, the standard was surprisingly high, with four Clubs in particular, North Shore, Takapuna, Bays and Northcote, immensely strong. "On any given day any one of those sides could beat each other" he says.

Shore often had the charismatic Shelford and the young Frano Botica spearheading a side that still has the 1979-80 All Black three-quarter Gary Cunningham, the national sevens player Scott Pierce and stalwart Club forwards like Wayne Underhay and Doug Hopkins. Takapuna had Graham Dowd, Matt Nicholls, Gary Brunson, Mike Mills and later Kevin Boroevich, Eric Rush and Blair Larsen. Northcote had an All Black in Ron Williams and Bays also had a core of representative players.

As a coach, Meurant was a dominant figure in Harbour's pioneering years. He coached Bays to the title in 1985-86, took two seasons off to be Harbour's second XV coach in 1987-88, returning to the Club scene to take charge of Northcote in 1989-91. His coaching touch remained with Northcote who were champions in 1989-91. His only miss came in 1991, when Northcote lost its semi-final to Takapuna.

Meurant says that Bay's successes in 1985-1986 were based in a side which was not flashy or even fashionable, but which under his coaching and that of his assistant Geoff Coley and the captaincy of Mark Anscombe had determination and a good work ethic. "We had blokes like Wayne Hill who'd played for Auckland and Ian Coley, a loose forward who before Harbour started had been loved by blokes like Craisey (Bryan Craies) and Tank Herring and been a regular of the Auckland B teams. We had a couple of five-eighths in Victor Malbon and Jason Speedy who could kick goals and a couple of forwards who were absolutely massive figures in Club rugby. One was Nigel Blake and the other Mike Te Paa, who you had to work like a cattle dog but he had tremendous physique and presence. Our prop Dave Thomas was in the first Harbour teams. Then we lured Billy Panapa from Massey for our second season to play halfback. No one was as keen as Billy and even in recent years he was still playing in the Under 85kg grade. And also in our second year Allan Pollock arrived from Wellington. We were not a bad side".

Bays won the 1985 title from North Shore 9-3 in a game which became a shootout between the rival kickers, Speedy and Botica, with Speedy prevailing three to one. Speedy was a potent kicker who amassed 372 points in the 1988 Club season which must be one of the highest figures anywhere in New Zealand. Speedy, however never gained a Harbour representative spot, with Botica and then Walter Little supreme in the first five position.

The 1986 final held on a Sunday saw Bays beat Takapuna 16-6. "It absolutely pelted down that day and coming down the motorway on the way to the Onewa Domain we went past the municipal golf course which was covered in pools of water" Meurant recalls. "Our big forwards like Mike Te Paa, Dave Thomas and Nigel Blake were delighted when they saw that. A heavy ground suited us fine. Takapuna had some brilliant backs then, guys like Paul Feeney, Mike Mills and Gary Brunson and the weather largely negated them".

With Botica and Shelford at their playing peaks it was inevitable that Shore would soon win a title and this the Club achieved in the 1987-88 seasons. For both these players the 1987 success would be a notable treble, with the win the second leg between being part of the All Black's World Cup winning squad and then to climax the season winning the NPC second division to earn promotion for the 1988 provincial season. The 1987 title also broke a long drought for the illustrious Shore Club. Having been founded in 1873, Shore was the Auckland region's oldest Club but in all its years in the Auckland competition it never won the Gallaher Shield. Its only previous championship had been in 1899, before the Gallaher Shield had been presented and in 1970-71 it had been the winner of the Alan McEvoy Memorial Trophy held over the first round.

In 1987 Shore won 24-12 to deny Bays, now without Meurant, a hat-trick of titles and in 1988 Shore again prevailed over Bays in the final, 14-9.

Meurant had been nursing a hope that for the 1989 season he might succeed Peter Thorburn as the representative coach. But when Thorburn decided to continue into the fifth season, Meurant found himself at a loose end, he was persuaded to switch his coaching talents to Northcote for whom his brother Ross played at senior level. Ironically, the first to encourage him to Northcote had been Wayne Pivac, but instead of switching himself Pivac had stayed with Takapuna. Others urging him to take the Northcote reins had been some of those he had coached in the representative XV, like halfback Craig Burgess and loose forward Tony Brown.

"We ended up with a pretty good side at Northcote" Meurant recalls "Richard Turner arrived that time from Hawke's Bay, David Mayhew returned from Dunedin and we got Paul Terekiia to switch from Massey. We had some pretty useful Club players like Nigel Ward and Ross Lienert and two who had given Northcote great service for many years like Kim Libby and Neil Bower, we had a couple of very good wings in Richard Kapa and Paul Carlton. Like the side I had at Bays it didn't have too many weaknesses".

And helping Meurant with the coaching was a man with a splendid Club championship pedigree in former Wellingtonian, Don Cederwall. As a first-five in 1975, he had led the Ponoka to one of Wellington Club rugby's biggest upsets when in the Jubilee Cup Final, against all expectations, might Petone had been upset, 11-9.

In 1989, in a final where public interest was a little diluted because it was played on a Wednesday to fit in with the representative side's NPC campaign. Northcote beat Bays 16-6 and in 1990, Northcote beat North Shore 22-12.

But it was not the final of 1990 which remains uppermost in Meurant's memory, but rather the match earlier in the season against Shore at the Northcote Club's Harvey Wright field. Meurant calculated there were two to three thousand spectators cramping the tiny suburban ground, including one of the then All Black selection panel, John Hart. Botica was the big attraction playing at full back for Shore at a time when an intense national hunt was on to find a test full back in the wake of the shock departures to rugby league of John Gallagher and Matthew Ridge. Few appreciated that Botica, too was about to join the exodus to the 13 aside code. Botica's performance, as it happened, was irrelevant, though he did show ability in the number 15 role. Not enough, however to prevent a Northcote victory.

Meurant has one other special memory of the 1990 season. Three of the Club coaches that year were master plumbers, himself with Northcote, Mark Anson with Bays and Peter Roberts with Takapuna.

Northcote missed the chance of a three peat in 1991 when eliminated in the semi-final by Takapuna which went on to lose the final to Bays 27-12. It was a vintage period in Harbour Club rugby for Bays as the 1991 final was the sixth it had contested in just seven seasons the union had been in existence. Against Bays in 1991 was a powerful Takapuna pack containing a trio who were or were to become All Blacks in Eric Rush, still playing then as a flanker, Blair Larsen and Graham Dowd, a New Zealand Maori representative in Paul Leonard and players of representative quality in Gavin Walsh, Marty Ruth and Milan Yelavich. In the Takapuna backs were the likes of Paul Feeney and Richard Cole.

But it was a powerful Bays side too, with a near representative backline in Nick Moen, Speedy, Cliff Mytton, Pollock, Hill, Mark Free and Dryod Lowe. In the pack were Harbour reps such as Bill Wigglesworth, Teina Clarke, Michael Anscombe, Blake Thomas, Rob Grindlay and the young Slade McFarland. Such was Bays strength at the time that in the reserves final, also against Takapuna, were wing Tony Dawson who had been a Harbour Representative and Liam Barry who in two years' time would be an All Black.

Takapuna also missed out in the 1992 finals, capitulating somewhat meekly to a rampant Shore 40-6. If Takapuna ever had an excuse it was pitted against a powerful Shore side. Four of the backline were representative players, Murray Kendrick, Warren Burton, Scott Pierce, Robert Todd and Russell Jones led a strong pack containing a former All Black Michael Speight, the young Gordon Simpson and representative players in Bryce Dick and John Bodie.

Bays made yet another final in 1993 but this was to be Massey's season and its 25-19 win emphasised the added fibre the West Auckland Club had provided the union. It was also a reminder that Massey had been seen as one of the Auckland union's main development areas in the 1980's and why some in Auckland, notably Massey's near neighbour Waitemata, had opposed Harbour's formation. Lock Mark Weedon, later to play for the Crusaders in the Super 12 and an experienced first five-eighth in Ian Calder were mainstays of the Massey side.

When Harbour had started many assumed that Takapuna would monopolise championships as it had been by far the most successful of any Shore Club in Auckland competition. It had been the only one to win the Gallaher Shield, as it did in 1940 when it was only six years old and with an essentially outstanding backline in 1980. No-one, however anticipated it would take Takapuna almost a decade before it became Harbour's champion Club.

But when it finally made the break-through in 1994, it more than made up for lost time. Coached by Wayne Pivac and captained by Paul Feeney, it won the final 19-14 against a Bays side in its eighth final in 10 years, fielding a side stacked with All Blacks (Rush, Dowd, Larsen and Glen Osborne and representative players, Peter Woods, Walsh, Scott Palmer, Darren George and Chad Eagle). It also won the reserves final that year, plus the Under 19's and in 1997 and again in 1999 achieved a treble in the premiers, reserves and under 21's.

The 1994 success too was the first of a remarkable sequence in which Takapuna would win the Harbour premiership for the next six years. In 1995 it over ran Northcote 46-6, Helensville 29-8 in 1996, Shore 31-10 in 1997, Shore again 22-17 in 1998, Silverdale 41-6 in 1999 and Glenfield in 2000.

But even as Takapuna was dominating the premiership there were some reassurances to be found in the spread and development of the union. Massey's success in 1993 plus the growth of Helensville, Silverdale and Glenfield in qualifying for the finals showed that the union was not dependent on a handful of Clubs. Indeed, Silverdale would go on to win the championship in 2003 and Glenfield made another final in 2006. Marist, which started only in 1988 to provide a Club to use the outer grounds at the new Albany complex, made the 2007 final so that meant that the only Clubs which had not finished in the competition's top two had been Navy, Kumeu (or as it used to be Western United) and Mahurangi. But those Clubs with the exception of Mahurangi won lower grade championship titles and the remarkable success of Takapuna at premier level

does have lower grade parallels. East Coast Bays, as one example, won the senior first, or reserves title in four consecutive seasons between 1990 and 1993 and in 2003-05 Massey had three consecutive successes in this grade and when a women's competition was introduced in 198 Glenfield won it in each of the three seasons. And East Coast Bays actually preceded the 1997 and 1999 Takapuna sides in winning each of the premier, reserves and under 21 grades. Bays did the treble in 1990.

In winning the 2000 premiership, Takapuna went through the entire season unbeaten. Some argued this simply reflected a fall in club standards because most top players were now no longer involved. Some Takapuna members even suggested that the 1994 side would be much too strong for that of 2000 and in that year a superior team could be found from the former Takapuna players still playing overseas. To win the 2000 final Takapuna had to overcome a feisty effort from Glenfield, for whom the great Walter Little played one of his last games before departing overseas. Even though he was affected by a chronic knee injury, Little kept Glenfield in the game and was the classiest back on the field.

Though beaten in the finals of 2001 by North Shore and missing out completely in 2003 when Silverdale pipped Shore 25-23, then in 2004-05 against a superb Massey backline, Takapuna has continued as the main club force in the past decade. It has been champions in 2002 and achieved a sequence of four between 2006 and 2009. The latest win took its success to 12 championships in the past 16 seasons, a remarkable achievement.

Shore's 2001 win provided Harbour with one of its most memorable days. In the winning Shore side were representative players Willie Walker, Anthony Tahana, Ray MacDonald, Brad Miller, Josh Hargreaves, All Black Loose forward Craig Newby, Phil Weedon, John Buchanan and Jamie Hinch. Playing for Takapuna were Jerome Smith, Blair Urlich, Matt Lord and Adrian Donald, while in the reserves, recovering from injury, was a certain Glen Osborne. On adjacent fields were other celebrities of the game, Liam Barry another recovering from injury was a reserve for Bays in the reserves finals against Shore and Rico Gear, Rua Tipoki, and Matua Parkinson, a trio who played for New Zealand Maori earlier in the season, lined up for Helensville in the plate final against Kumeu. Takapuna was again champion in 2002, in emotional circumstances. Takapuna's captain Gavin George, younger brother of an earlier Takapuna player and Harbour representative lock Darren, dedicated the 21-0 win to the memory of their dad, Gareth who a few days previously had been killed in an industrial accident. Shore's disappointment in losing that final was deepened by the fact it was the farewell match for a grand servant, prop Paul Vegar who had amassed a record 262 premier games for the Club.

Silverdale's 2003 win was highlighted by the prodigious talent of the young Luke McAlister, while another All Black to be, Greg Rawlinson was in the pack. In an earlier match against Shore played at Devonport Domain McAlister had racked up 30 points, all before half time. By then star players were been seen only briefly at club level but another gifted first five eighths Nick Evans had appeared in the same season inspiring East Coast Bays to upset wins with searing bursts from deep in the field.

Spectacular back play was also a trademark of Massey's win over Takapuna in each of the 2004-05 seasons. It's doubtful whether a better club backline anywhere has been fielded than that which comprised Samoan international Junior Polueuigaga, The Pisi brothers, Tusi and George and the later All Blacks, Anthony Tuitavake and Hosea Gear. Against this scintillating set Takapuna relied on a solid pack containing Donald, Matty Veale, Brent Wilson and Rodney Coullaire. But Massey's coach Graham Lowe had some muscle of his own in veteran Steve Jackson, Viliame Ma'afu, Francis Stowers and a lively hooker Roger Dustow.

The 2006 championship was memorable for the fact that former All Blacks team-mates, Blair Larsen and Walter Little coached the respective finalists, Takapuna and Glenfield. The format, though, was not to everyone's taste and nor was there universal acceptance of the fact that with the 14-team Air New Zealand competition, of necessity, starting earlier representative squad members were removed for the club season's final stages. Glenfield finished as only the eighth qualifier for the playoffs but with Marist and Massey

deprived of leading players and helped by poor weather, it bought off two upsets to make the final against Takapuna. But in a heavy downpour and with the match transferred to one of the outer grounds at Albany, Takapuna was much too strong.

A former Auckland representative cricket captain, Alex O'Dowd, took over from Larsen as the Takapuna coach for the 2007-08 season and ended his short stint in charge with a perfect result. In 2007 Takapuna was pushed hard by a lively Marist side and when loose forward Frank Afeaki scored a try to make it 23-21 it looked as if Marist would have its first championship. But inside backs Jon Volckman and David Strachan took control of the last 10 minutes and centre Chad Campbell crashed over for the winning try near full-time.

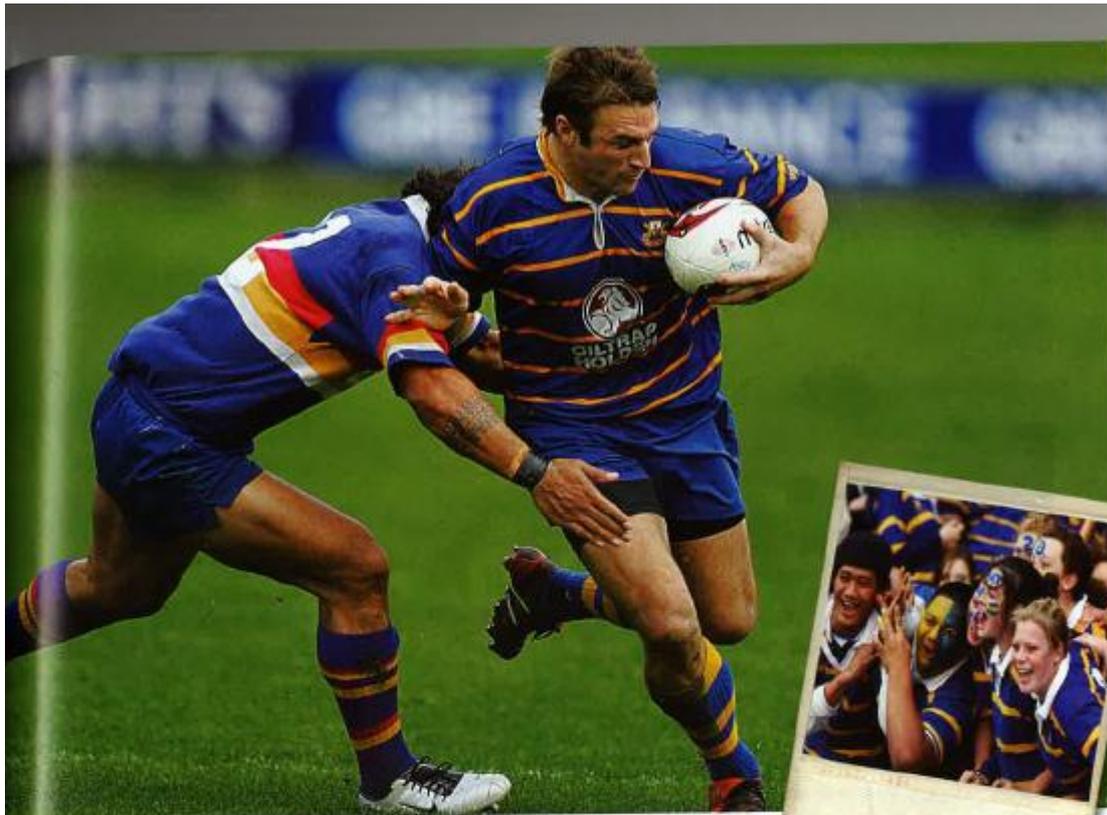
In 2008 Takapuna had often battled and twice had suffered losses to the other finalist North Shore. But with a crafty game plan, which put an emphasis on playing at pace and moving the big Shore pack around the field. Takapuna surprised by romping away to a 24-0 halftime lead and to have the title won even at that stage. Takapuna's Jon Elrick with six goals from as many attempts, also won the kicking duel with young Ben Botica and Hayden Abercrombie landing only one of five attempts.

It was another occasion which demonstrated the spread of Harbour's resources and its luck in being able to gain benefit from legendary old players living within the union. A Shore side which had Buck Shelford and Frano Botica as coaches, won the senior first, or as it used to be known, reserves finals narrowly from Northcote, which had as one of its coaches another former All Black captain in Gary Whetton.

Whetton's son William, also a lock was in a Northcote side which made the 2009 finals and the family connection was furthered with William's first cousins, Richard, Michael and Nick Mayhew, sons of John, in a pack which was coached by Gary Whetton. Northcote gave a spirited display in the finals and with a 13-9 lead entering the last quarter looked poised to break Takapuna's grip on the championship.

But then Takapuna's player-coach Blair Urlich came from the reserves bench and belied his 34 years by changing the course of the game. Takapuna's forwards took charge of the final 20 minutes of the second spell and with Urlich crashing over from an attacking scrum for a try, took a lead which by full time had been extended to 20-13. It was to be a day for the oldies. Takapuna's other player-coach Jerome Smith, 33, was at fullback and in the curtain-raiser Slade McFarland, 37, also came from the bench and inspired East Coast Bays to a 25-6 win in the plate final against Silverdale.

See Pictures below.



CLUB RUGBY. ABOVE: TAKAPUNA'S MARC CAMBURN, A SOLID CLUB MAN WHO WON NATIONAL SEVENS HONOURS. BELOW LEFT: MAHISI ABOUT TO SCORE A GREAT TRY IN AN UNDER 19S MATCH AGAINST EAST COAST BAYS. BOTTOM LEFT: EAST COAST BAYS AND NORTHCOTE PACK DOWN FOR A SCRUM. BELOW RIGHT: ACTION FROM THE 2006 PREMIER FINAL AS GLENFIELD'S MALAKO FELEMA-REDDENA CONFRONTS TAKAPUNA'S STEVE SKINNIN. INSET: TAKAPUNA FANS GET BEHIND THEIR TEAM.





CLUB RUGBY. ABOVE: MAHIHANGI AND GLINFIELD CONTESTING LINEOUT BALL IN A 2010 PREMIER MATCH IN THE TOP PICTURE. IMMEDIATELY BELOW, ANOTHER FINE BACK FOR MASSEY - GEORGE PISE; AND AT RIGHT: A HULENSVILLE ATTACK IN A 2010 PREMIER MATCH. BELOW: NORTH SHORE JUBILANT AFTER WINNING THE 2008 UNDER 19S FINAL AND A LINEOUT SUCCESS IN THE SAME GAME.

