

HARBOUR BURY WELLINGTON IN ONEWA MUD

North Harbour rocked the National Rugby Championship for division with a historic win over Wellington, 20-15 at Onewa Domain yesterday.

Harbour are in only their fourth year as a fully-fledged provincial union but yesterday the side were cock-a-hoop at the way Wellington were beaten.

It was the Union's first win over a top-shelf provincial side and harbour were cheered on by the biggest crowd (about 11,000) to attend a match at Onewa Domain.

Skipper Wayne Shelford looked determined to commit suicide when after, winning the toss, he gave Wellington first use of the half-gale angling across the field.

Harbour were slow starters in their first three National Championship outings and Shelford's gesture looked a sure invitation for Wellington to rattle up a winning first half score.

But it did not turn out that way. Wellington may be used to playing in a half gale but they are not used to paddling around in the mud at Onewa Domain.

Wellington simply got bogged down in their own forward drills, were forced into error behind the advantage line and Harbour thrived on the mistakes.

Harbour pinned in their own territory for the majority of the first half showed no signs of a slow start.

The forwards were primed to their work early, the backs made the tackles that counted and Wellington attacks were nipped in the mud.

Harbour took their chances with the scores tied at 9-all at halftime, were tidy enough in the second half to keep the win secure.

Wellington were superior in rolling the maul down field many metres at a time, but when the ball was freed up the backs were ineffectual, running play back into the pack and ignoring individual skills to test the Harbour defence.

Harbour held the edge at the lineouts with Michael Speight and Darryl Williams proving the masters of Murray Pierce and Marc Vernhoeven.

When the ball was freed to the backs there was punch in the and enterprise in the midfield running of Ian Wood and Scott Pierce and with Mark Finlay joining the attack from fullback the Harbour chain were dangerous on attack.

But Harbour had one big bonus and that was All Black fullback John Gallagher's having one of those days best forgotten.

Gallagher cracked his head on a Waiwera pool on Friday and the consequences may have been more serious than first thought as Gallagher's usual ball skills were sadly lacking.

With the wind at their backs Wellington set up the initial attacks but Harbour has the first say, in the fourth minute when the ball was chipped through behind Gallagher and flanker Paul Leonard thankfully accepted a poor clearing kick to score a shock try.

Franco Botica added insult to Wellington's injury bouncing the conversion in off the upright as the wind carried the ball away.

Wellington had chances to score but Harbour defence had to be admired. The tight five stuck to their job and with Shelford and flankers Mark Ancombe and Leonard tidying up the loose ends, Wellington were shut out.

The Harbour pack were at their best in denying Wellington a try from five consecutive loosehead scrums, five metres from the line.

But at the fifth scrum an error was forced and Gallagher kicked a penalty. Wellington's first try was a gift when Botica usually so safe of hand put a good delivery from halfback Paul McGahan to ground.

The Wellington forwards arrived en-masse and first five eight David Hansen was put in for a very good try.

Gallagher added the conversion and Wellington led for the only time in the match, 9-6.

It was a shirt-lived lead as Harbour charged back, won a penalty and Botica levelled the scores with halftime showing.

Harbour were back in front four minutes into the second half when Kapa won the race for a McGahan chip-kick to the corner.

Botica increased the lead to 16-9 with a penalty in the 18th minute but Wellington replied with a surprise try as the Harbour pack, looking to be in control drove play out from their own goal line.

Sadly the ball was not in the maul and the over-alert Hika Reid pounced to score. Gallagher converted and with one point separating the two sides it was still anyone's game.

That was an incentive for the Harbour pack to raise a second head of steam. Play was driven to the Wellington line, Shelford made the charges and was halted. Prop Dave Thomas made a second charge and he too was pulled down, short of the line.

McGahan took the third chance to dive for a try and Harbour were assured of victory.

Selector-coach Peter Thorburn was delighted with the win.

“We had the Otago game won and let it drift away” he said “I am delighted that the boys did not let this one drift away”.

“I wouldn’t say this was our best performance because Wellington didn’t play particularly well. Their scrum was not as effective as I thought it would be and we won the crucial lineouts”

“I had my heart in my mouth when they started to roll the maul – it is very hard to combat. It showed we need a better platform to get the backline on the way because it is starting to show through. Our backs are as good as any in the competition”.