

Ron Don would be a poor weather forecaster. If the outspoken rugby supremo said look out for rain the next 24 hours it would be reasonable to expect sunshine and 20 degrees Celsius.

As Auckland Rugby Chairman in 1984, March 6 to be exact, Don offered these comments on the prospect of a North Harbour Rugby Union.

“The effect of the new Union will be to strangle the Auckland Union. By bringing in boundaries in the suburbs, the ARU just can’t expand”

The eve of that same March 6, the ARU annual meeting voted by 68-43 to allow the North Harbour enthusiasts to seek approval – finally received from a special meeting of the New Zealand Rugby Union later in the year – to establish the 27th Union in the country.

Don predicted that after that historic vote that chaos would greet Shore administrators and claimed “the biggest reality they overlooked is where all the money will come from”

He saw heavy showers for rugby across the bridge. But only months after its birth, the North Harbour Rugby Union is bathing in the rays of a very benevolent sun.

It has negotiated sponsorships unprecedented in provincial rugby and expects to make a profit in the first financial year. So much for the biggest reality overlooked.

North Harbour reached the final of the National Sevens championship recently, landing two players in the New Zealand team which went to Hong Kong.

Most importantly the Union is organised, functioning with 150 teams, including 8 more Secondary School sides than last year, 110 referees and more than 100 Supporters Club members. No sign of any chaos anywhere.

The black, maroon and white stripes are coming strong, bound for the third division final and promotion to the second division or bust!

Chris Kennings brings to the Chairmanship of North Harbour the same qualities that made him a formidable lock for Auckland from 1971 – 1976.

His infectious enthusiasm and eye for detail make him a natural leader. The business acumen this 39 year old has developed as General Manager of an engineering supply firm and four companies of Ceramco carries over into his sports administration.

He is, he claims “a good businessman. And that is important in rugby today, I also happen to love the game so that helps”.

But for other reasons Kennings is the right guy to take North Harbour confidently into the future.

“I believe in the concept of a separate Union on the North Shore. I didn’t originally think splitting Auckland would be right and this probably makes me a little more determined to ensure what we have now does work”.

“I’m a born and bred Shore-ite, aware of the feelings that people from the Shore have for their area, and you better believe we have a good thing going here”.

Kennings initial doubts about the new Union came in 1982 when he attended a preliminary organising committee meeting on behalf of his Takapuna Club for which he was Auckland Union Delegate from 1981-1984.

“The first time I went there they were discussing how many games a player would need to get a blazer and what colours the Union would adopt” says Kennings.

“They weren’t worried what was to happen in the Schools or the finer details so I said Takapuna would not offer any support until their act improved”.

“At the same time I suggested to my Club to get directly involved and it was then Bob Bell-Booth became instrumental in setting up the original society that did the groundwork in Schools, with headmasters, kids and parents”.

Bell-Booth’s commitment convinced Kennings the Union would be a viable concept. “If we made certain the administration was in place and we performed well as a hard working team that could satisfy a sponsor”.

Money became the immediate hurdle. “The first step we took was to order all the gear for the Representative teams – and we didn’t have a single cent” Kennings says with a chuckle.

“That was an act of pure faith really. That was a \$30,000 bill and a big worry. I was always confident though, we’d eventually get support. We had a couple of knockbacks from big organisations that had virtually said yes. But on the basis of this interest we knew we would soon get financial help without risk”.

North Harbour enlisted the professional help of a sponsorship consultancy, drew up packages with it, and now retains representatives of Paul Gleeson’s Sports Consultants outlet of the Union’s publicity and promotions committee.

The results of this combine rugby-business expertise are three year sponsorships of \$150,000 from New Zealand Couriers, \$60,000 from Dominion Breweries and \$45,000 from Auckland Savings Bank. Plus \$25,000 given in \$50 - \$500 amounts from private sponsorships which is likely to rise to more than \$100,000 and a yet-to-be disclosed amount for referees.

“We’re talking well over \$100,000 in sponsorships for our first season” says Kennings. “There isn’t a Union in the Country that has raised that amount. So, Ron (Don) was a fair way out with that, “chaos and bigger reality” stuff”.

Kennings argue, that North Harbour’s evolution has done the Auckland Union “a hell of a lot of good” rather than strangle its growth”.

“For one thing, our enterprise and enthusiasm has made Auckland sit up and take notice. That has not always been the case with rugby’s big brother”.

“I know Auckland administrators are saying “Hey, we’re not going to sit back and let you guys next door hog all the publicity and be seen to be bright and alive without Auckland being bright and alive as well.

“As you can see Auckland wants to improve its image also and already is spending more money than ever on coaching”.

“The other thing that has been good for rugby is we have managed to raise substantial sponsorship money as has Auckland”.

In the past sponsors have only had to grant Auckland so much. Now you’ve got another \$100,000 plus a year that wasn’t going into the sport. It now goes into rugby for greater Auckland and that must be good for us, for Auckland, for rugby”.

Kennings’ brings a refreshing philosophy to his position one that recognises a need for commercialism with the constraints of playing the sport for fun.

“I think sporting bodies throughout the country have been lax in providing value for money to sponsors. We’re determined to do that”.

“We are also determined to make rugby fun again. It now has a sour image. The important thing to remember is that it is just a game and must be enjoyed as that. The winning is nowhere near as important as playing well. I know that sounds trite but one of the aspects that has turned people off rugby is the intensity and style that has developed for the sake of winning”.

“Somewhere we have lost the fun and rugby has lost support. Much of it has gone because the fun has been replaced by this compulsion to win at all cost”.

North Harbour, in its bid to be “progressive and harmonious” will eliminate competitive matches for primary school teams, offering instead matches that focus on fun and passing, not championship points.

Other advancements and innovations are many. Between \$15,000 and \$20,000 will be spent on coaching this season. Gate-takings from club matches will go into the club coffers, not that of the Union. Club teams encompassing all grades will play home and away for “Total family involvement”. And parental pressure on young players will not be tolerated.

“We are issuing kids with Parent Kits to take home” says Kennings. “They outline behavioural standards for parents on the sideline. Screaming parents turn people off and kids away”.

The businessman in Kennings tells him rugby is a marketable product and he insists North Harbour will help the sport by recognising the value of public relations and rectifying the geriatric club image often portrayed by the New Zealand Union”.

National Councillor, Tom Johnson once presented a tremendous paper to the NZRFU on marketing rugby which so impressed Kennings he became somewhat incensed when the parent body failed to follow up any suggestions.

“Even now the NZRFU accepts peanuts for sponsorship for the provincial nation championship” says Kennings “That’s crazy”.

His appreciation of the financial requirements of a new Union has helped him place North Harbour in a position where it will make money in its first year.

“We’re budgeting for a profit. I’d rather not say how much. But one of the things we sold to the Clubs was that we didn’t want them to have to bail us out. That is important”

A rumour circulated that all Clubs were asked for a \$10,000 guarantee to help us. In fact we could have called for that, but only to act as security for any loan, if required. That was a thought at one stage when we had no sponsors, but we never bothered Clubs in the end. We won’t need to either”.

“We really haven’t had any hiccups at all”.

A suitable stadium seems to be a big problem but the Union has a three year lease deal on Onewa Domain from Takapuna City Council, plans to build a 500 seat stand there at \$80,000 – “all within the budget” before the first home rep game in August and recently secured Kumeu A and P showgrounds as “our Avondale Racecourse” when other grounds are too wet for use”.

The failure that so many city-siders have waited for has turned up only as success.

“Certain individuals in the Auckland Union said our Union would be a shambles, it would fail, we’re a bunch of people looking out only for ourselves in administration”.

“They failed to account for the fact that immediately we have become the eighth largest Union in the damn country and Auckland still remains the biggest. Obviously rugby depth and population exist to support us both”.

“We used to have guys wishing we’d fall flat on our faces. Guys would phone me asking why we’re doing the insane. We put it all to be by believing in the concept and ourselves”.

That North Harbour now has an unquestionable identity is indisputable.

“The signs are everywhere” says Kennings “Little things like the emerging players school at Lincoln College. Traditionally major Unions get five youngsters invited. Auckland got its five this year and we got three. That’s eight from an area that previously only sent five”.

“Someone tell me that’s not good for the game here!”.

“Ron Don was critical of our intentions last year. To be fair to him he said he opposed it, thought we were wrong, but now he too, wants us to succeed for rugby’s sake – I think we are doing that”.

“There’s now a grudging respect that we’ve got off our asses and made it work”