

STRONG SIXTIES

The 1960's were the heyday of power rugby in New Zealand. If you didn't have a pack of forward worth of the name, you didn't have a chance. Ten-man 55-yard rugby, elimination of mistakes, playing the percentages and winning above all – were the most important things.

The scores tended to reflect this. It was not unusual to post double figures, and as for 20 – that sort of thing only happened in Barbarians matches, when players did strange things like run, pass and enjoy themselves.

Nowhere was this trend towards overwhelming power more noticeable than in Auckland Senior play. The Gallaher Shield was as close as one could wish for, few log points separating the winner from eighth or ninth. A bizarre illustration of the closeness of the competition was given in 1961. Waitemata, one of the better teams, scored most points during McEvoy Trophy played, conceded the fewest and finished sixth, just squeaking into the Gallaher Shield round. In 1962 there was an average of one drawn match per week: on April 28, four of the seven matches finished deadlocked.

Takapuna had been fortunate to be able to build on the base laid down by Johnny Simpson and others in the 1950s. As the new decade unfolded there were a number of strong experienced packmen who could carry the team in the most important battle of all, up front. Geoff Perry's vast experience was worth its weight in gold and his helpers included many of Auckland's better forwards, even if rep jerseys didn't always reward their efforts. The young players of the late 1950s were developing into leading performers of the early 1960s Club scene.

Only Otahuhu, Marist and Suburbs, three powerhouses, toppled Takapuna in the McEvoy trophy round in 1960 and only Suburbs and Otahuhu topped them in the table. Fifth in the Gallaher Shield was a little disappointing, but Takapuna were still one of the higher-scoring teams of the year.

As already illustrated, placings in 1961 depended on a team's ability to win tight games. Takapuna couldn't do this often enough to be competitive, yet their 11th place in the McEvoy Trophy masked the fact they had a for and against differential of +2. What it didn't hide was that nine losses more than offset four good wins, including an 11-3 job over Grammar, the champions in the 12th round – their first defeat of the season. Indeed, it took a late surge, including this win to kick the side clear of the promotion-relegation series. Seven of Takapuna's nine losses were by six points or less.

In 1962 Takapuna rebounded to finish third in the McEvoy again, this time winning six matches by single figure margins and drawing another. Although the highest-scoring team in the Gallaher Shield round (44 points in five matches mightn't sound much now, but in 1962 it was good going) but the defence was a bit too leaky against the strongest teams – losses by five, one, three points suggested the year could have been even better.

A timely boost for the backline was the arrival in 1962 of North Auckland fullback Gordon Foster. Foster had played for the Cambridge blues between 1959 and 1961, and would represent Auckland as well before returning north for a few more rep matches but accidents of time and place told against his having a lengthy rep career. Fullback, during the early 1960s, was a position exceptionally well served with talented players.

Top Dog, of course was the great Don Clarke. The first name read out in any All Blacks side, he was also the only fullback selected for most tours. Remember, players as good as Mick Williment and Fergie McCormack had to wait seven, eight years respectively for their chance. First rate-custodian served most provinces, although many are little more than in the Rugby Almanack to today's fans.

That's unfair to several outstanding performers. Up north the top man was Muru Walters, a fine player who would probably have worn the All Black jersey in another era. In Auckland Foster was competing with another of the best lines in the country. Mike Cormack. Even to rate second to two such outstanding players gives some impression of Foster's skill, which Takapuna were more than grateful to have. In addition, he was a quality goal-kicker, winning the Geroqe Whyte Trophy as leading scorer in the senior A in 1963.

Geroge Pivac moved down from the North at the same time as Foster and put even more grunt into the forward effort. Pivac soon learned Club rugby in Auckland was every bit as hard as it was up North – he got belted in his first match and suffered a couple of busted ribs – but his effort was always valuable. Tony Dick was another of the valuable, steady week-in, week out players every team needed.

Aided by the steady stream of points off Fosters boot, Takapuna had a good year in 1963. Second place, one point behind Waitemata, rewarded a consistent McEvoy season. Although the old bugbear, narrow losses, returned to haunt them in the Gallaher Shield. The 179 points scored by the team led all the others in the first round.

Significant law changes in 1964 offered encouragement to teams to run the ball and scoring averages jumped 10-20%. One Club that couldn't manage to do this was Takapuna. For the first time since 1958 they gave up more points than they scored, condemning the side to the Jubilee Trophy round after a season of moderate achievement.

Better things happened in the second part of the year, although a first up loss to Waitemata meant they were only playing for second place, something that was duly achieved.

The wet season of 1965 suited Takapuna more than most teams, and they worked hard at adding some starch to the defence. Nearly halving the points conceded is a good way to set up a winning season, which Takapuna had without burning up the scoreboards. A solid start – wins over Marist and Waitemata, a 3-6 loss to Grammar, a win over Manukau and a 19-20 loss to Ponsonby – ushered in a sweeping run of eight unbeaten matches as the side powered to the McEvoy trophy with a clear win in hand over Grammar.

Most satisfactory was the win over Waitemata, a club that had the wood on Takapuna since the last time the Springboks toured, 1956. Another of the more satisfying wins was a tight 3-0 victory over Otahuhu; partial repayment for a 9-43 thumping the year before and several other important losses to the red and blacks over the previous few years.

Takapuna came within a whisker of completing the rare (at the time) double in 1965; the Gallaher Shield round was a desperately close thing. First, Suburbs were comfortably dismissed of, 13-0. Other first round winners were Ponsonby and Otahuhu, two of the traditional there or thereabouts teams of the day and already the competition looked likely to be settled between the three.

The second weekend saw Takapuna draw Ponsonby in what was a must win for both sides. In the end it was mixed feelings in both camps after a 25-25 draw; both were still in the running but half a game behind Otahuhu, 22-5 winners over Suburbs, Grammar and Waitemata, the two remaining sides, also split the points left on the table.

Week three really sealed it for Otahuhu. They took their third win, comfortably over Waitemata, while Takapuna were upset by Grammar (3-12) and Ponsonby went down to Suburbs. Otahuhu led with 6 points, with Takapuna, Ponsonby and Grammar three points behind. There were a maximum of four points left on the table.

By beating Ponsonby 8-0 in week four, Oats wrapped up the title. Takapuna recovered enough to eke out a win (narrowly) 8-6 over Waitemata while Grammar lost to Suburbs. The results of the final weekend were academic, but Takapuna's 3-3 draw with Otahuhu gave cause for a degree of satisfaction and outright second place, three points behind.

Like many table topping club sides of the time, Takapuna included few stars and weren't unduly upset by the demands of rep selectors. Few of the team were known nationally and only a handful ever played first class rugby. Dave Fenton had been an Auckland and New Zealand Maori rep nearly a decade earlier, while Paul Curran's best days were still ahead of him. Don Dormer, Barney Jessup and Hilton Wallace had played a few times for Auckland, mainly in the B side.

As an aside, a glance through the celebration booklet commemorating the deeds of the 1980 seniors shows that a decade later quite a number of these blokes were still going round in Takapuna colours – but now in Senior B, their days at top level well and truly behind them. Ten years on, what they made up in cunning they definitely lacked in hair!

The team gradually slid away from the peak of 1965 as Father time started to nip at the joints of aging players. They failed to make another Gallaher Shield section in 1966, although the Jubilee trophy was of some consolation, and in 1967 dropped another couple of places down the list.

In 1968 a likely lad who steadily progressed up the grades made the top team. Chris Kennings was to have a profound influence on Takapuna and North Harbour rugby for the next 30 years, but at the time was very much the greenhorn.

“I came into an old experienced side” he recalls. “There were guys like Don Dormer, Paul Curran, Brian Avery, Barney Jessup – he was exceptionally hard on the forwards if he got sloppy ball – Phil Byrant, Kevin Smith, Peter Stuart and captain Rick Trevithick. They’d been around for years. It was a good team but reaching the end of its run and not too much coming through.”

“they were a hard bunch. I remember a game against North Shore, which was always competitive anyway. A lineout was forming in our 25, when John Old (Shore’s halfback) made a comment about Dormer being injured. We all turned around to have a look, while Shore took a quick throw and Old took off. Don nailed him in the corner. Barney went right off about that one”

“That was one of the wettest seasons in memory. The weather had been so bad we had to play catch-up games mid-week. Ours was against College Rifles, at Avondale one Wednesday. We needed to win to make the Gallaher Shield round and were trailing by a couple of points with time nearly up. We got a penalty 10-15 yards outside the 25, right at the limit of Don’s range in the mud. A Rifles player went down, and while that was happening there was an argument about the penalty mark. John Brown, the ref, moved it back, making a tough kick near impossible. Don was so mad he stepped up and belted a drop kick over from way out – we won the match 12-11.”

“That was a hard time for me to come up. The system operating in Auckland at the time was brutal – two down, two up. You couldn’t afford a shaky season, or even a poor second half. Shortly after I got there, we finished 11th, the format was changed and down we went.”

That squeak into the top six was an accurate reflection of the side’s ability, as the Gallaher Shield round wasn’t a raging success. The highlight of the season was the emergence from nowhere of Manukau, previously only nuisance value. They were the only team to beat McEvoy champions, Ponsonby in the first round and swept to the big prize with an undefeated run.

In 1969, the side Kennings spoke of continued. Takapuna missed out on the top six and eventually ended in 11th place, which was still good enough for a Senior A place in the next season. Just around the corner, however, were seasons when the competition was so tight you couldn’t slip a cigarette paper between the teams. If ever winning stopped being everything and became the only thing, it was in those early years of the 1970s.

Further down Takapuna wasn’t as dominant as they had been through the 1950s. Grade titles still kept coming, but they were more of a reason to celebrate than had been the case since the war. In 1960 and 1961 it was business as usual, with seven titles being claimed, although there were no repeat successes in any one grade. Then the well ran a bit dry – the 1963 sixth grade title, back-to-back wins for the fifths in 1966-1967, the fourth grade and a share of the 14th in 1969 were the lot. For such a big club, it represented a lean time.

Off the field things were starting to be moved along as well. The old home of the Club (dare one call it ancestral, given the long family connections) was no longer suitable. It was small, nearly 40 years old – history

had shown, this was about the maximum life of a traditional rugby club building in Auckland – and Taharoto Road was now a bustling thoroughfare which made getting to the park on time more hazardous than it had ever been.

About this time, people were becoming more mobile and with increased freedom of movement came more leisure time options. To compete for bodies, especially against the rapidly increasing popularity of soccer, rugby had to be seen to offer ever-improving facilities and more value for money, although Subs were still held at a low figure.

The dilemma facing Takapuna was one that had stared down upon many clubs all over New Zealand – did they go all out to build a winning side in hopes that it would attract more members, or did they look after the existing members and hope that there flash new facilities would attract more?

Probably swayed by the degree of loyalty to the huge junior club and the very real need to look after the kids, improving the facilities came first. Getting away from the potential hazard of Taharoto Road would have made a few parents sleep more easily and a new site was being placed at the Club's disposal, just on the other side of the motorway. All that was needed was a huge amount of hard work.