



Our 29th Championship (14th Gallaher Shield)

1978

By 1978 Ponsonby had settled back into its familiar role as one of Auckland's heavyweights. The Seniors tended to move seamlessly from one season to the next, with only a couple of positions being filled by new faces in any given year, although talent was carefully turned over year by year. In 1978, after an agonisingly near miss the year before, Ponsonby reclaimed the Gallaher Shield with what was, clearly, the best team in town.

Bryan Williams was recovering from his horrendous hip injury suffered in France and Lin Colling had retired from first-class play a couple of seasons earlier but the core of the side was intact and many were now entering their playing prime. The forward pack was big, skilled and almost impossible for any club side to master while the backs had speed, strength and an almost impregnable defensive system in place. Club rugby tended to be low scoring in those days (muddy fields were the norm rather than an exception, especially at Eden Park) and this combination was perfect.

Even in a team with a couple of current All Blacks and others who had or would wear the black jersey, many found the most inspirational player to be a bloke who had one match for Auckland A during a superb career at the club. Guy Smith, a lightweight flanker, was a manic trainer and utterly devoted to the cause, week in and week out. Andy Haden, an All Black certainty by now, regarded Smith very highly and a lot of people around town wondered just what he had to do to get a rep spot. Short of adding a couple of stone, the answer was there was nothing more he could do. Once again, the club reaped the rewards.

While Ponsonby missed out on the Alan McEvoy Trophy this season – it had been won in each of the previous two – the Gallaher Shield was the sought-after prize. It was collected after a clinical second half of the season which was dominated by the Ponies forwards on an almost weekly basis, while the very good backline took its chances and denied the opposition any.

After the 1976 double and 1977 Champion of Champions win, this success really signified that Ponsonby was firmly back atop the Auckland heap and, with the talent coming through, was likely to stay there for a while yet.