



## Bob Whiteside

Bob Whiteside was the first great player in club history, and he should have been our first All Black. For much of the 1880s he was in the top three when it came to any discussion about the best players in the Colony and, for a good portion of that time, the other two filled the minor placings. These days he would be a star, but back then he was a maverick.

Whiteside came to Ponsonby as a young man in 1879 – as far as is known, he was born around 1860 – and it wasn't long before his football skill marked him out as being far beyond the average. In 1881 he was already in the Auckland team, and was on the cusp of a career that would see him become a try-a-game man in an era when one or two a match by the teams combined was normal.

His first year at the head of Ponsonby's scorers, a position that would become his of right, was 1883. That season, in a four-match programme, he bagged five tries. The next four seasons saw him score 15, 6, 11 and 16, twice setting a new Auckland record along the way. His 'slump' year, 1885, was a season where all teams were very even and he was closely watched by everyone. Ponsonby won the championship, but only scored 20 tries in 12 matches – still clearly the most by any team.

As 'the most dangerous scoring back in the Colony' Whiteside was one of the first picked for the 1884 New Zealand team, which is now recognised as the first All Black side. He eventually dropped out as he and the promoters couldn't agree on terms, and Ponsonby had to wait for Dave Gallaher, 19 years later, to salute its first national representative.

Whiteside was a man who reckoned his worth could be measured in hard cash. He argued, rightly, that a large portion of the crowd came to see him, they paid good money at the gate, and he seldom disappointed his growing fan base. He considered himself just as worthy of reward as a highly skilled craftsman – which is how he saw his standing in the game. He didn't feel his skill should be lining a promoter's pockets when he got nothing, and wasn't scared to say so.

In those days, too, 'amateur' cricket teams from Australia toured England regularly, with the players sharing the profits while not being considered professionals. Given that some amateurs made more out of their sport than any of the pros did, one finds it hard to understand the thinking of the time, that professionalism 'corrupted' the game. In most cases, it was unpaid players who did that.

He remained the hero of Auckland crowds, and continued to star until in the first match against the 1888 British team, when he captained Auckland. In that game he received an early kick which broke

an ankle but played on although in obvious pain (surprising, that) as no replacements were allowed, until he received another blow on the same ankle and left the field. It proved to be his last game in New Zealand.

He moved to Australia that winter and played for Victoria against the British team, before heading up to Sydney. While there he played for New South Wales in 1889 and, when a veteran, in 1895.

A bootmaker by trade, he stayed in Australia for some time but eventually returned to New Zealand, where he gradually fell on hard times. When his circumstances became known the Auckland Union organised a Testimonial Match for the old star in 1923, and it raised the sum of £285, a substantial amount and well above a year's wages for a tradesman. Considering the beneficiary had last played 35 years before, it was a huge return. It made his last few years comfortable; Bob Whiteside died at Auckland on 30 April 1927.

He was a player and a man ahead of his time. His scoring records at Ponsonby lasted a century. He scored 63 tries in 73 matches, good going in any era but spectacular in the time he played. Next on the try list when he retired was Hooky Davy, who had 19 – and that was considered a large number. He was also the leading points scorer until his mark was beaten by Bolla Francis, and Whiteside scored tries that were worth one or two points each. Under modern scoring values, he would have posted 331 points instead of the 148 he was credited with.

He scored six tries in one match, against Auckland in 1888, which was a mark equalled by City's star Opai Asher in 1903 but, as far as can be determined, not yet beaten in an Auckland Senior club match. He scored seven hat-tricks, including five against Auckland. He did a whole lot of things beyond the reach of any other player of his time, and most since.

He was also one of the first Ponsonby players to swim against the tide, which has become something of a club tradition down the years. One could describe Andy Haden as his spiritual descendant, since the pair had very similar views about a fair reward for work done. Haden, however, lived at a time when he could effect changes that were beyond Whiteside.

However you view him, and history tends to be a lot kinder than the Victorian ethos of his lifetime, Whiteside was a player of outstanding merit and a personality who captured the imagination of the fans of his day.