

JONA Nareki thought he had won the Ranfurly Shield for Otago.

“ Well, yeah, I did. I got ahead of myself, eh?” he grinned.

He was not the only one who got carried away.

The electric winger had just scampered 60m on an angled run to the try line to score.

That gave Otago a 24-20 lead with 10 minutes to play.

Canterbury scored late in the game and added a penalty to complete a 30-24 win.

They had snuffed out another promising challenge from Otago. It was 2017 and Nareki had just emerged.

He made his debut against North Harbour a week earlier but got only about 30 seconds off the bench at the end of the game. The Shield challenge was his first proper hit-out for the province .

He was rapid, nimble and evasive . It was immediately obvious Otago had uncovered a star.

That try was followed by a flurry of text messages, including one from an unnamed seasoned sports reporter – my boss Hay-den Meikle – saying “ It’s coming home” .

“ Yeah, nah. It's crazy. That's what Canterbury's like, eh?,” Nareki said.

“ They're an 80-minute team.” They needed more than 80 minutes to hold on to the Shield last weekend.

Otago-born hooker George Bell crashed over in injury time to help seal a 31-25 win against Tasman.

That result set up an opportunity for Otago.

They took the bus to Christchurch yesterday and will make another attempt to heist the Log o'Wood off their arch rival this afternoon.

Nareki is the only Otago survivor from the 2017 challenge, although Otago assistant coach Mitch Scott also played in that game. He was on the other wing. Nareki will need all of that experience.



Canterbury kick the ball a lot and look to build pressure with towering punts and by pinning their opponents in their own territory.

“ We’ll need to defuse their high balls but also put it back on them, I guess. If we could play their game against them, hopefully we’ll get some good opportunities .

“ We want to play in their half. We don't want to burn out our forwards playing on our side of the half. So, it is just about playing smart footy.”

Nareki has a powerful left boot which Otago lean on to clear their line. But he is also adept at spotting space and making line breaks, so he will not be kicking it all the time.

“ Oh, 100% I'll be having a lick. If it's on . . . I mean, I'll tell you now, I'll have about two [runs at the defence] at the start and I'll see how it goes.

“ And then if it doesn't go well, then I'll get the left foot out. ”

With regular captain Sam Gilbert out last week, Nareki took on more of a leadership role in the team.

Gilbert has been named on the bench this week and he will share the captaincy duties with Will Stodart, who is having a breakout campaign at blindside.

However, Stodart has shifted to No 8 in the absence of All Black Christian Lio-Willie , who is missing the game to attend a funeral.

“ Oh, it’s massive loss for us. But then it’s another opportunity for Will Stodart to slot in and also Oliver Haig.

“ That's the best thing about Otago, is when one guy goes down, the next guy's ready to perform and we've got a great bench as well.”

Former All Black hooker Liam Coltman and All Black prop George Bower lead the “ bomb squad’ ’ which includes veteran loose forward Charles Elton.

Utility back Josh Whaanga (ankle) has been ruled fit and will start from the bench, while Thomas Umaga-Jensen returns to a starting spot at second five.

He will link up with Josh Timu, who has led the defensive effort out wide for Otago. The Bell family has a son in each camp. George was the hero for Canterbury last weekend and is a strong ball carrier. But his older brother Henry has clocked nearly 100 tackles so far. It will be fascinating to watch the brothers pack down against each other at hooker.