



Joe O'Leary

## Elected in 1915

Joe O'Leary was not only a significant figure in Ponsonby rugby in the immediate pre-World War I years, but he was also a significant figure in New Zealand rugby. He captained the 1913 All Blacks at home against Australia and was, for almost 100 years, the only man to lead an All Black test team from fullback; Mils Muliaina was the next player to achieve the honour. He was one of the leading players of his day, but everything about rugby in that decade is overwhelmed by World War I, which broke out the year O'Leary retired.

A very safe fullback, O'Leary had started his rep career as a 16-year-old in Wairarapa in 1900 and was prominent for a number of years before moving to Auckland in 1909; the better standard he met quickly drew his best football out of him and in 1910 he was an All Black in Australia. He wasn't available for the American tour in 1913, which is why he led the team at home in its last two tests.

He was a member of two champion Ponsonby teams, including one (1909) which is regarded among the finest the club has ever fielded. That team went to Sydney after slaughtering all opposition in Auckland and O'Leary achieved a notoriety of sorts by being the only player to front up for every meal on a rough crossing.

O'Leary was elected to Life Membership when he announced his retirement from playing, as Bill Cunningham and George Nicholson had been. But two weeks later New Zealand was reeling under the news from Gallipoli, so rugby tended to get forgotten. It also scuppered his plans to coach the club and, by the time the War was over, he had returned to the Wairarapa.

As the club hardly saw him for the rest of his life, and the Honours Board was commissioned in the mid-1960s with no old records available, O'Leary was one of six early Life Members whose name was missed. Easier access to old newspapers led to this oversight being uncovered in 2017, and his name was put up as it should have been.

Joe O'Leary died at Masterton in 1963, aged 80.

**Link for playing career information:**

<http://stats.allblacks.com/asp/profile.asp?ABID=671>