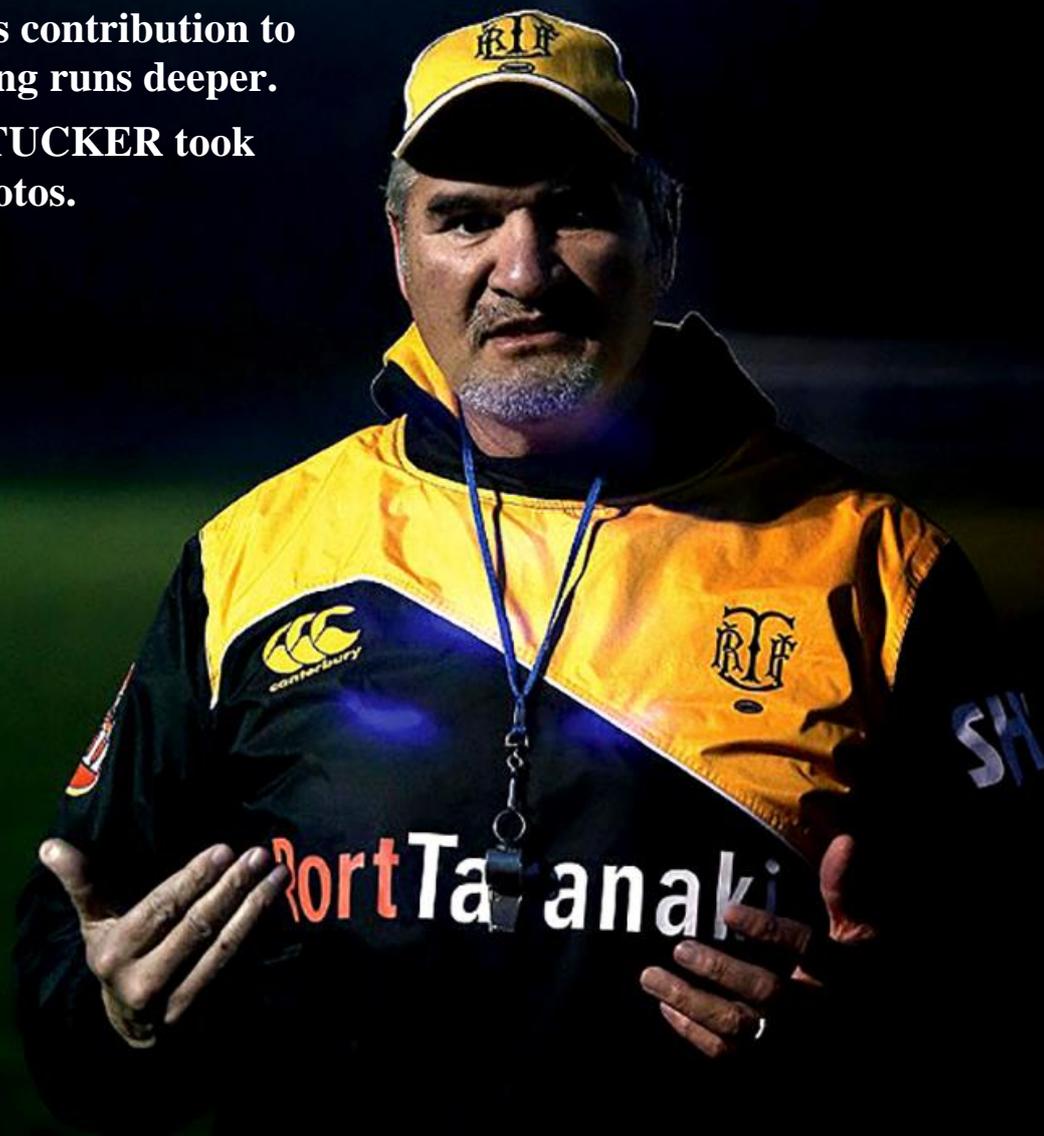


Coach Colin

Rugby fans know Colin Cooper as head coach for the Port Taranaki Bulls and the Māori All Blacks, and probably remember he trained the Hurricanes for seven years.

But as JIM TUCKER found out, his contribution to coaching runs deeper.

ROB TUCKER took the photos.



It's one of those rare things, a fine winter Wednesday night.

Rare because the weekly weather cycle seems to have favoured clear weekends and rainy midweeks, which hasn't been great for outdoor rugby training, especially if you want to photograph it.

But tonight is great. No rain, not too cold, the back ground at Yarrow Stadium in New Plymouth only slightly greasy with dew, but aglow under big lights and atmosphere.

Ideal for what we've come to look at – a coaching session with Coops. It begins at the back door of the stand. Big men are getting out of cars and gathering. Big units, former Taranaki prop Bull Allen once dubbed them in a rugby commentary. We're talking 100 kaygees minimum, more in most cases.

Colin Cooper emerges, resplendent in Taranaki gear. Someone's warned him, perhaps, that the media is here tonight; probably best to put on official kit for the photographer.

What's more noticeable is his friendly round of welcoming handshakes with the gathering host. He knows them all. They know him, of course.

It's front-row night, with Coops and Hoops. Props and hookers from most of the province's clubs are here for a specialist session with Southern club coach **Jason Hooper (above)**, under the eye of Cooper and his associate trainers, assistant coach **Willie Rickards**, and forwards coach **Paul "Fish" Tito**.

It starts with something that looks decidedly odd to the untrained eye. The players pair off, and one lies on the ground while the other crouches above on hands and feet. The one of the ground clasps his hands behind the neck of the other.

Hooper whistles a start and the croucher edges forward, dragging the weight of the player beneath. "Looking over the sunglasses, boys," shouts the coach, meaning "keep your head up". It's nearly impossible, but some manage it.

Now it's scrum practice, but with just two in each front row, and a loosie pushing at the back. It's done again and again and again and again and again.

Hooper runs it, with Cooper, Tito, Rickards and union CEO Mike Collins (himself a former front rower) watching intensely. "Good pressure, boys," says Hooper. "Get that shoulder in. Put the power on him. Put the power in. Work it, work it.

"Good pressure. Good pressure. I want you to lock it down, because he's going to give it everything. Good scrum, Reubs."

The ground is slippery. Scrums are collapsing. Hooper watches the way one of the props uses his legs. "Asa, you got just a bit too long in the leg there." Again. Shorter steps. Asa nails it. "Did he move that leg, Fish?" "No." "That feel better, Asa?"

As the players rotate, Cooper steps across to give one of them some encouragement. A quiet word. That's his style.

When the session is finally over, they're steaming, literally. There's a round of applause for Hooper. "Pretty good, boys," he says. "The technique is way up there. A lot better than when I was running around in a jersey."

Cooper steps over to have a word with us. He's full of admiration for the players who've turned up tonight. "What you've got to remember is these guys aren't on contract. They've all had a day's work already today at their jobs."

Which takes us straight to the heart of one of the challenges he and his colleagues face – top player availability. It’s no secret that success generates a major stumbling block for teams like Taranaki. The demands of Super Rugby and the national team can decimate the ranks, especially in weeks leading up to the start of the provincial championship.

Grant Coward, who’s into his fourth year as official reviewer of Taranaki’s seasons, puts it succinctly: “Theoretically, we’ve got the best backline in the world, haven’t we. But we won’t be seeing it play here.”

He’s talking about the likes of All Blacks Beauden Barrett, Charlie Ngatai, Seta Tamanivalu and Waisake Naholo, the last three partly the product of Cooper wisdom and encouragement. And then there’s a dozen or so more players who made it into every Super side bar Auckland this season.

Cooper’s approach to the conundrum seems straight forward, though: in early July he names a squad of almost 50 players, nearly two thirds of them club men. If he can’t have all his top players in for the pre-season warmup games, at least he’ll be sure anyone playing the game with promise around the province will have a chance to impress, and be taken in hand.

Which brings us to a main theme of this story – Colin Cooper’s extraordinary record as a talent spotter and nurturer of coaches. While his public profile rests mainly with his various successes as coach of a range of provincial, regional and national teams, the rugby fraternity knows an even greater value lies in what he does to coach coaches.

In some cases, the enduring relationships he forms began when they were players. They progress to part-time roles with him as skills trainers, then assistant coaches. Then they fly the coop(s), some of them, to roles overseas.

There’s former assistant coach Leo Crowley, who progressed into the Canadian Rugby World Cup coaching team and then moved into an assistant coaching role with the Melbourne Rebels for this year’s Super season. Former skills coach Clark Laidlaw got a skills role with the New Zealand sevens team and the Hurricanes, before taking on an assistant coaching job with London Irish in the English Premiership.

Willie Rickards (**pictured right**) is back here as Cooper’s second-in-command after working as assistant coach to Scott Robertson in this year’s New Zealand Under-20 programme.

Rickards: “It’s brilliant having the chance to learn from Colin. Just sharing an office with a guy like that, you learn. I’ve known him a long time. I played for him. He’s just a good human being.”

Cooper’s coaching team is almost numerous enough to populate a fifteen. As well as himself, Rickards and forwards coach Tito, there’s skills coach Darryl Lilley, who looks after goal kicking.

The development team (Taranaki B) has Ngatai Walker as head coach, Jason Hooper as assistant and Ray MacDonald for skills. The Under-19s are in the charge of Tim Stuck, with Laurence Corlett as assistant coach and Josh Hamilton the skills man. The men’s sevens team has co-coaches Ben Souness and Johnny Weston.

As Mike Collins says, the business of coaching has moved a long way from his own playing days in the 1990s, especially with the availability of video analysis. “The skills training you saw tonight, we just didn’t have that in my time.”

The job of coach has also moved commensurably into more demanding territory. The season’s structure makes it harder than ever, especially when it comes to getting the provincial campaign under way.

Coward's last analysis for the organisation picked up a problem with the first few games - in the last three seasons, the team has struggled to get any wins early on. Everyone agrees it's largely due to the disruption of top players' commitments elsewhere.

Cooper readily acknowledges slow starts are a problem, often having an impact later in the competition when it comes to getting crucial home games. At the same time, he recalls how much spirit the team has shown after those sluggish beginnings, fighting back later in the season to finish strongly.

The side was lined up to meet Counties-Manukau, Hawkes Bay and Waikato in pre-season matches this year. "You can be sure we're working on it," he told us at the early July training session described above.

One solution for Cooper, of course, is simply to get another coaching job. There's plenty'd have him. He could probably name his salary and go where he liked. In fact, a journalist asked him recently why he bothered with Taranaki.

But it's not going to happen in the foreseeable: he's signed on until at least the end of next year. Aside from family commitments, he loves the place, and he likes the setup. "I couldn't ask for a better CEO, a better chairman, a better board. We're all on the same page. It's all very well aligned. You don't always get that."

Cooper hasn't said much during tonight's practice. A quiet comment here, a nod there, some hushed conversation with Collins. When the session's over, he promises everyone he'll let them know what's happening as soon as he can.

He wishes players the best of luck in the final stages of the club competition, which he has been careful not to disrupt with his coaching demands. He urges them to enjoy a week off that's coming up, because there aren't going to be too many breaks after August 20 (Taranaki's first Mitre 10 Cup match against Bay of Plenty).

Any questions? No. Someone says a respectful "cheers".

Port Taranaki Bulls – Mitre 10 Cup draw for 2016

Saturday 20th August	2.35pm	Bay of Plenty	TBA
Saturday 27th August	4.35pm	Hawke's Bay	New Plymouth
Saturday 3rd September	2.35pm	Tasman	Nelson
Thursday 8th September	7.35pm	Southland	New Plymouth
Wednesday 14th September	7.35pm	Counties Manukau	Pukekohe
Sunday 18th September	4.35pm	Waikato (RS)	Hamilton
Saturday 24th September	5.35pm	Manawatu	New Plymouth
Sunday 2nd October	2.35pm	Canterbury	New Plymouth
Sunday 9th October	2.35pm	Wellington	Wellington
Thursday 13th October	7.35pm	Auckland	New Plymouth