

MOOLOO

reviewed

With Super Rugby about to kick off, Jim Tucker re-examines the deal that put Ferdinand and Mooloo in the same paddock:



When the Hurricanes and the chiefs met in a Super Rugby match in New Plymouth last year, there were those at Yarrow Stadium who kept as close an eye on the crowd of 17,000 as on the game.

Or a close ear, perhaps. Who was barracking for whom? They were curious to know whether the crowd was mainly for the Wellington Hurricanes, the team Taranaki parted company with in 2013, or the Waikato Chiefs, the franchise that reached out with a better deal.

Mike Collins, CEO of the Taranaki Rugby Football Union, was among those interested, but like everyone else he concluded the balance was even. While the Hurricanes won the match, the honours were shared on the terraces. As many people seemed to support the new boys as favoured the “old”.

Did it matter? Probably not, given the Taranaki union is now locked into a seven-year deal with the Chiefs franchise, an arrangement that cost about \$380,000, and was done mainly because rugby bosses here felt the 17-year-old Hurricanes association had run its course. Hurricanes games in New Plymouth were as rare as test cricket on Pukekura Park.

The Taranaki union put in the same financial stake as the Waikato, Bay of Plenty and Counties-Manukau unions, but landed a far better result than BOP and CM; Taranaki got two Chiefs games over the past two seasons while the others got none, mainly because their home grounds aren't a patch on Yarrow Stadium. Waikato as the franchise home is guaranteed five a year in Hamilton.

When news of the deal was splashed across the front page of the *Taranaki Daily News* in December, 2013, public reaction was, well, muted. While one Twitter fan noted gleefully Ferdie would be getting his leg over that elusive cow at last, not a single letter-to-the-editor either way appeared in the weeks that followed.

Some Hamilton locals muttered about Waikato losing home games (untrue), and someone in Wellington wrote a nasty appraisal of Taranaki's disloyalty in a club rugby newsletter. But overall, most people seemed happy.

So far, so good. But then in November last year, in a story placed at the bottom of the back page, the *Daily News* reported without comment that Taranaki would be getting only one Super match in 2016, a Chiefs game against the South African (Natal) Sharks.

Again, nobody seemed surprised. No letters-to-the-editor. Those who'd read the fine print in the original Chiefs deal knew that two games a year was never promised beyond 2015. The Chiefs did have a spare home game in 2016, against the Crusaders, but it's going to Suva in a financial deal apparently too good to ignore.

There's no guarantee Taranaki will return to two matches a season any year soon, so the obvious question is how does Mike Collins and his organisation feel about this? Well, relaxed, actually. Sanguine.

"I'm not so sure we were ever going to get two (games this season)," he says. "We were always going to get one, and to be honest (for 2016) we're really comfortable with one.

"The message we have been speaking openly with the Chiefs about is we think our community really wants the Hurricanes versus Chiefs played in New Plymouth, and if we were to miss out on that game we'd be disappointed.

"But to my knowledge it's a sort of quirk of the draw that the Chiefs are only playing the Hurricanes once (in 2016) and I don't believe it's a Chiefs home game. So we'll find out where we sit with that the following year.

"If we got the Chiefs/Hurricanes game here every second or third year, I'd be really happy. I think it's a game our community wants, and I think it will be really well-supported.

"You can see from recent events – the Phoenix, and All Whites, the cricket, the events that haven't been really well supported - but you saw last year that the Chiefs played the Hurricanes and we had 16,000-17,000 people turn up to support it. That's the public and that's the community speaking."

What does the community think about the move to the Chiefs?

"On one level, we're finding that we get really split reactions. We've got people my age, older - and a lot don't actually live in Taranaki, might have moved away 15, 20 years ago - they're still die-hard Hurricanes supporters. And that's fine. That's the team they associate themselves with.

"But then we've got a lot of the younger generation coming through who as Chiefs supporters wear the Chiefs shorts and have the Chiefs flags. So we think it's reasonably mixed.

"I actually thought during the Chiefs/Hurricanes game the crowd was reasonably even. Everyone's going to take what they want out of that, but I thought the Chiefs had as many supporters here as the Hurricanes had, and it made for a great atmosphere.

"In terms of adverse reactions and stuff like that, we get the odd comment but we don't get a whole lot. The thing we liked most about the Hurricanes/Chiefs game in New Plymouth was that rugby was front and centre, and everyone was talking about rugby for a whole week. We thought it was fantastic, we rallied the community."

He says the Chiefs are their own entity, and from what he can see the Waikato union does not pull any strings around the Chiefs. "The Chiefs are their own ball game. Waikato Stadium is host stadium, and they obviously have a contract to play a certain number of games there. That is their home base."

In terms of home games, "one year it's seven games and one year it's eight games, so in the years when it's eight games, potentially we'll get two games. If we want two games. The question we have sat down internally here and asked ourselves is can our market sustain two games, plus the other things we want to do as an organisation?"

He says Taranaki has many events competing for support over the next year, including Americana, WOMAD, the Warriors playing an NRL game here, plus Taranaki's five ITM Cup home games, and the Welsh playing three tests in NZ.

“And in 2017 we’ve got the All Blacks and Argentina test here in 2017. We’re totally open about this – is two games and an All Black test, is that too much? Would the public prefer one Chiefs game and one test? We’ll only know if we go out and ask them. If we just go and put it all on, and people don’t turn up, then we’ll know the answer. But we’ll be the poorer for it.”

The union had to be careful about putting too much into the mix around WOMAD. “The district council is bringing the Warriors here. Is WOMAD, two Chiefs games and the Warriors, and Americana, all in the space of three or four months...what does that look like for the calendar?”

Given all those factors, he says the union is happy with the single Chiefs game, against the South African franchise, the Sharks.

“If you go through the Chiefs draw and look at some of the teams playing in Waikato, the Sharks is actually a really good game. I think they’ll draw a good crowd. They’ve got some good Springboks playing for them. The Sharks play a good brand of rugby and they’re always pretty entertaining games.”

He says the reason why Taranaki is in the Chiefs franchise is to bring quality rugby here, and the union wants to be responsible as members of the community not to saturate the market. “I agree the economy is a factor, but then we might be buoyant again in 2017 and our stakeholders might say to us, ‘we’d really love two Chiefs games, and obviously we’d love having the All Blacks here’.

How will he know?

“We actively talk to our clubs, our chair people at the clubs. We’ve also got a fan council, and we’ve met with that group three or four times in the past two years. They provide us with valuable feedback.

“I’m very receptive to a phone call if someone is unhappy and they want to discuss it in person. I’d rather do that than fire off letters to the editor.”

Taranaki has a bigger stake in 2016 Super Rugby than the number of matches it might get at

Yarrow Stadium. In fact, 18 stakes – the province’s players who have landed contracts with the Chiefs (6), the Hurricanes (7), the Crusaders (2), the Highlanders (1), the Melbourne Rebels (1), and the New South Wales Waratahs (1).

It’s probably the highest number ever, notes Collins, including two in Australia for the first time. “We’re still claiming Angus Ta’avo, and Daryl Gibson (make that 19) in the Waratahs. And Ryan Cocker, former Waitara High School, is with the Melbourne Rebels, with Leo Crowley (assistant coach). We’re pretty excited that Leo’s got a chance to coach Super, and Ryan’s got an opportunity to play.”

Selection success tells the union two things, he says. “For a start, I think our recruitment’s been on the money. Coops (Taranaki coach Colin Cooper) and his team have done a really good job around that.”

The other thing is Adam Hay and Willie Rickards have done a great job on that academy space. “It’s really pleasing to see young guys come through the system and get an opportunity at the next level.” Halfback Te Toiroa Tahuriorangi (Hurricanes), Sean Wainui (Crusaders), and Latu Vaeno (Chiefs) spent about a year and a half in the academy, made a good fist of the ITM Cup, and have been given Super Rugby chances.

“For three guys to come straight out of the academy into Super Rugby is a sign that the players have got the talent and the work ethic. Both Adam and Willie have identified those players, and that’s fantastic from an organisational point of view.”

Taranaki will benefit from having a lot of players spread across a variety of regions, exposing them to different coaching styles, says Collins.

“And obviously, all our players are a year older. Iopu-Aso’s been in the Hurricanes a year longer, Mitch Graham’s had a year in the Chiefs, Rhys Marshall’s had a year in the Chiefs. A lot of these guys are coming into their second year, so I think we can expect a bit more out of them re game time and re impact on the games.

Tahuriorangi will be sitting behind All Black half T.J. Perenara, so will have a steep learning curve. “He’s going to battle it out with Jamison Gibson-Park - Jamo’s fit again - down there at the Hurricanes. It would be great to have them both playing, They’ll probably establish a pecking order for themselves by the time they get back here if they’re both fit and well. He’s (Tahuriorangi) still under 20, so he’s got time on his side.”

After an indifferent 2015 season with the Chiefs, but a strong showing for Taranaki, how will centre Seta Tamanivalu go this year?

“Seta will go well. He’s a great athlete, and he’s had two really good ITM Cups. He didn’t get much of an opportunity at the Chiefs, but he was behind some quality in Sonny Bill Williams, Charlie Ngatai and Andrew Horrells, a player with a lot of experience. So Seta has to work hard, he has to put in the hours, and he has to impress the coaches in training. Same for any player. But he’s definitely capable.”

He thinks the New Zealand conference is far and away the hardest. “The Argentinian side is going to be on one point of the spectrum and I think the Japanese and the Southern Kings are going to be on the other end. The Argentine team is in the New Zealand conference, so it’s going to be tough.

“But I think the harder the rugby these guys can play the better they get developed. I think you can draw positives from that for the national programmes, for the Maori All Blacks and the All Blacks. There’s going to be real tension and real rigour in all the games.”

Who’s playing where

Chiefs: Centres Charlie Ngatai and Seta Tamanivalu, wing Latu Vaeno, prop Mitchell Graham, and hookers Hika Elliot and Rhys Marshall.

Hurricanes: All Black utility back Beauden Barrett, All Black lock James Broadhurst, loose forwards Blade Thomson and Iopu Iopu-Aso, utility back James Marshall, and halfbacks Te Toiroa Tahuriorangi and Jamison Gibson-Park.

Crusaders: First five-eighth Marty McKenzie and outside back Sean Wainui.

Highlanders: All Black wing Waisake Naholo.

NSW Waratahs: Prop Angus Tavao.

Melbourne Rebels: Prop Ryan Cocker.