



Forward momentum

JIM TUCKER finds out what Taranaki rugby is doing to make more history:

“It was the BBC - Brown, Briscoe and Carroll.”

So began the front page story in the *Taranaki Herald Sports Edition* one Saturday in 1959. It was one of an endless string of puns the paper’s rugby writer used to chronicle extraordinary feats by Taranaki’s late-50s Ranfurly Shield holders.

The monikers so playfully employed above – it could easily have been Burke, Boon and Cameron - are a distant memory for most of today’s generation. But they’re far from forgotten at Taranaki Football Rugby Union HQ in Yarrow Stadium.

As the photograph of TRFU chief executive Mike Collins shows, that great team dominates one whole wall of the meeting room, and as the union gears up to repeat last year’s win in the ITM inter-provincial rugby competition, the names of Peter Burke, Ross Brown, Kevin Briscoe, Ralph Carroll and company resonate as never before.

One reason is the current team already rivals the ‘59ers on at least one measure – the number of All Blacks in its ranks

While Taranaki had six at various stages between 1957 and 1960, today’s team has five, with more in the offing. It also has eight Maori All Blacks, (including captain Charlie Ngatai, also an All Black), and two in the Junior All Blacks.

Not that any of this is particularly at the forefront of Mike Collins' mind as he and his team prepare for the ITM Cup season, which began with a match against Wellington in New Plymouth on Saturday, August 15.

When interviewed for this story to preview the upcoming competition, he acknowledged the elephant-in-the-room challenge is obviously whether the Port Taranaki Bulls can do it all again.

"The team worked so hard, they had such high standards last year," he said. "But I think they're going to put pressure on themselves, so the challenge for the coaching group and the players is to just come in and work hard and keep doing what they've been doing.

"I don't think they need to re-invent the wheel. They play an entertaining brand of rugby. They definitely don't need to put any pressure on themselves.

"Taranaki over the generations has been built on hard work. We don't need to complicate things, just continue to work hard."

They have a big advantage – all but one of last year's team is back. Only halfback Chris Smylie has moved out of the frame, at 32 deciding it was time to play some rugby in Italy.

Collins is excited about some newcomers, as well, especially those advancing through from the union's academy programme.

There's halfback Te Toiroa Tahuriorangi, who excelled at the recent the junior world cup. This is his second year in Taranaki, after leaving Rotorua Boys High School at the end of 2013 and playing for the Taranaki under-19 team last year.

"He's a real talent. He had an absolutely superb junior world cup in New Zealand's under-20 team."

There's Latu Vaeno, in his first year with the academy. "He's an outstanding outside back. He's a pretty exciting addition – fast, powerful. He's come from Rotorua Boys High School, as well."

What's the connection with Rotorua?

"There's no connection. Te Toiroa was banging on our door – he was really wanting to move to Taranaki for an opportunity. So he came to us."

He says the academy managers, Willy Rickards and Adam Haye, spotted Vaeno during some high school first fifteen games.

"The Warriors were approaching Latu and so we thought instead of him going to rugby league we would have a go at trying to recruit himself ourselves."

Both players were in the team when it was announced on July 17, as was another, front rower Reuben O'Neill (20), who Collins was hoping would shake off a niggling back injury in time.

"Coops is looking at another New Plymouth Old Boys player, Caleb Mawson, who's been out of Francis Douglas a few years ago, a guy who's been playing outstanding club rugby, but we just aren't sure at this stage."

As it turned out, Mawson wasn't among the four "new" players added to the 30-man squad, staying for now in the development squad. The fourth newcomer is outside back Avon Lewis.

As *Taranaki Daily News* rugby writer Glenn McLean noted after the team announcement, most positions seemed well covered for the potential absence of those chosen for the All Blacks (only Beauden Barrett seems a certainty).

The exception is lock, where Jame Broadhurst's dominance could be missed if he makes national honours. It could fall to Blade Thomson and Mitchell Brown to fill the gap, mused McLean, which could be a waste of Thomson's exceptional skills at number eight.

Coops is Colin Cooper, of course, the Port Taranaki Bulls coach, the man who guided the province through to last year's acutely tense ITM Cup final against Tasman, won by Taranaki 36 to 32.

This was not only Taranaki's first major win in inter-provincial rugby, but it was a remarkable turnaround from the season before.

Of that 2013 downer year, a so-called "Reader Report" on the news website *Stuff.co.nz* labelled Taranaki's attack "pitiful. Just 12 tries were scored this year in 10 games. Taranaki need to build depth from the ground up."

Cooper didn't need any telling. Looking back to

that time, he recalls: “We’d won the Ranfurly Shield in 2012, but after that season about 14 players left and we were left with 13 young players.

“We were able to recruit (backs) Charlie Ngatai and James McKenzie. We shored up the front row with Mitchell Graham and Angus Ta’avao, and we brought in (loose forward) Mitchell Crosswell. It’s a balance between who you bring in and who you develop from club rugby.”

Cooper is a strikingly polite and patient man when you interview him. He needed to be in my case: there was no time for a face-to-face before he left to coach the Maori All Blacks for their match against Fiji, so it was a phoner, with him ringing me before I had a chance to prepare.

His forbearance is a reminder how much rugby has changed from those so-called good ole days at the start of the ‘70s, when I reported rugby for the *Taranaki Herald*.

Some coaches – like J J Stewart and Leo Walsh – were already professional in performance (not in the moneyed sense), others less so.

I recall players from another province emerging from a match-day team-talk and debating numbers, which I assumed related to lineout calls or some such.

“It was 43,” said one. “Nah, 44,” said another. “Tactics, fellahs?” “No – we had a bet running on how many times the coach said ‘bloody’.”

Such inattention would be hard to imagine in a Cooper team-talk (as would public cursing). He’s been coaching for a long time, and he’s bloody good at it.

His Wikipedia profile lists a string of appointments dating back to assistant coach of Taranaki in 1995, head coach from 1999 to 2002, assistant at the Crusaders, coaching at the Hurricanes from 2003 to 2010 (two Super Rugby semi-finals in the three years he was in charge), coach of various New Zealand sides, including colts, juniors and trial teams, and since 2013 coach of the Maori All Blacks.

He took over at Taranaki in 2010 and had them winning the Shield within a couple of years.

James Marshall, the Port Taranaki Bulls skipper, confirms that Cooper is not the ranting type when it comes to halftime debriefs.

“He’s very cool, calm and collected. You know when he’s mad or disappointed – you can see it in his eyes, a look no-one really likes to see.

“Not many words need to be spoken by him. You can tell as soon as you walk in the changing sheds whether you’ve done your bit or whether you’ve disappointed him.

“Even at halftime, if things aren’t going to plan he’s still very relaxed and problem-solving, rather than talking about what we’ve stuffed up. It’s all looking ahead, and it’s always very positive.

“We’re comfortable with him. A lot of the boys are comfortable approaching him and knowing they’re going to get honest feedback from him.”

Cooper says the job is not hard: “It’s much harder when you’re losing. The public expectation is huge after last year, but we just have to deal with that. It’s also huge among the group themselves. We got a lot of things right, but we have to keep challenging ourselves.”

It helps that Taranaki is not losing players like it used to: “A big chunk of last year’s players will be back – about 85%.”

One of the downsides of success is the elevation of some to the All Blacks, but Cooper is sanguine even about that, and certainly pleased for his new stars.

“It’s possible others will make the Rugby World Cup, and they’ll be hard to replace. But the depth is there. We have good backup from the club competition.”

He said midfield back Seta Tamanivalu - named 2014 ITM Cup Player of the Year in the Steinlager Rugby Awards - is excited to get back.

What happened to him at the Chiefs?

Cooper declined to be drawn on why his outstanding centre got so few games in his first season with the Waikato-based Super Rugby franchise: “We’re all different as coaches, and it was a different environment.”

Mike Collins is no more forthcoming, but equally enthusiastic about Tamanivalu’s return: “We’re ecstatic to have him back.

“He’s come through our academy, he’s come through our sevens programme, he’s been here in Taranaki ever since he left school. He has spent the bulk of his time in New Zealand in Taranaki, so he really associates himself as a Taranaki man.”

Tamanivalu's chances of elevation don't seem to have been harmed by his time in Chiefs limbo. He made the All Black backup squad for the Samoa trip and excelled for the Barbarians when they beat Cooper's Maori All Blacks in Auckland on July 18, scoring a dazzling solo try.

And Cooper's own future? "It's year by year for me – I don't have to look over my shoulder. I'm not the oldest coach around yet."

William E Alexander, better known as Wit, was in his final year as headmaster of New Plymouth Boys High School in the winter of 1971 when he had special cause for celebration – one of his first fifteen boys had made it into the Taranaki team.

Not just any team: this one would play against the British Lions. The boy was 17-year-old Murray Kidd, who had the unnerving job of marking David Duckham, one of the best wingers in the world.

Alexander was excited for a couple of reasons. Kidd was one of the youngest players ever selected for the province, and he was following in Wit's own footsteps. At the same age, he was similarly chosen for a single Taranaki game back in 1924.

Taranaki did well that day, going down 9-14 to the most successful Lions team to tour New Zealand.

Kidd more or less held his own. He went on to play many games for Taranaki and King Country, although his prodigious sidestep never quite convinced the All Black selectors he warranted selection. He later became the coach of Ireland for a season.

The point to be made now is that drawing talent from the local high schools is still an integral part of the TRFU's aim to find, develop and keep the best local players available.

There are still natural impediments to overcome. Mike Collins: "One of the main issues we have is that our rugby players are so bloody clever they all want to take off to university. So we lose about 70% of our first fifteen players to universities.

"Mums and dads want their kids to go off and have life experiences, so we tend to recruit a fair bit from rural areas – Gisborne has been a happy hunting ground lately."

Much like in the past, the union keeps a close eye on the school first fifteens. "Obviously you can't watch it all, so we're really lucky we have Daryl Lilley at NPBHS. They play a lot of teams. And we've got Tim Stuck at Francis Douglas Memorial College.

"I'm really proud of both of those schools. They're competing against schools that chuck a massive amount of resource into their rugby programmes. They recruit players from other areas in New Zealand and overseas to strengthen their first fifteens. Our guys do a really good job coaching the talent that they've got."

He also has a wider scouting network around the country. "Our guys will go out and say what positions we're looking for that we can't fill internally, and we'll get names chucked at us and we might be able to watch them two or three times, see how they go."

What's changed from the past is the pathway offered to promising youngsters once they've been "found". They're asked to join the academy.

"The academy sits under everything and underpins everything that Coops does, and also underpins our club rugby competitions."

Taranaki has 70 players involved, a modest number compared with 10 times that in large franchises like Auckland.

Haye, the academy manager, and Rickards do succession planning based on the ITM Cup team – who has been signed up, where the holes are in the positions, and who might move up to the All Blacks or go offshore.

Those invited to join the academy need a high work ethic, said Collins. "It's probably the hardest job in provincial rugby - working 40 hours a week at a job somewhere, training with a club, as well as doing all their other stuff, the gym, skills training, nutritional and mental skills seminars, tactical seminars, video analysis.

"One of the non-negotiables Coops set down when he first came back into the provinces was that all our academy guys, all our ITM Cup players, have to be at every club training and they have to play club rugby. That's an essential part of their development."

The academy programme, developed over the last five or six years, lasts 45 weeks. As soon as the club competition is finished, academy players enter the Taranaki under-19 programme, the

Taranaki development team, or the Port Taranaki Bulls.

The representative programmes go for 10 to 12 weeks (until the end of October), then many players are involved in sevens, which will take them through to January.

“We think sevens is a great vehicle to develop fitness and all the micro-skills you use in fifteens. There’s so much pressure on those skills – your breakdown skills, your tackle skills, your catch and pass. We think it’s ideal for the academy guys to really accelerate their development.”

He points to Te Toiroa Tahuriorangi. “He came to Taranaki in February last year and went straight into the academy programme, and played for New Plymouth Old Boys.

“At the end of the club competition he was part of the Taranaki under-19 team. They were the leading non-franchise (Super Rugby) team in the national competition. At the end of that, he went into the sevens, then the New Zealand under-20 camps.”

He credits Hays and Rickards with developing the programme into one of the leading models in the country. “It’s one of those thankless tasks. Adam and Willy will push these players up into Coops’ team, and then they’ve got to start again from scratch the next year.”

Not everyone succeeds. “The guys who stick to it, do the work, definitely see the results. What we’re finding is it’s not the most talented kids that will come through and jump out the other end. It’s the kids with the biggest work ethic, or the kids that want it the most. It might be the hard-working kid that not many people see.

“So recruitment is a really big part of making sure we get the right kids with the right motivation.”

Collins fully supports Cooper’s insistence that his players take part in club rugby. “Some provinces don’t have their guys play club rugby. They will try and set up provincial games instead of club rugby.

“But we believe the level of our club competition has got better and better in the last five to six years. There are so many volunteers out there in the clubs that do a massive amount of work to make that such a good competition.”

He also admires Cooper’s long-term approach to Taranaki’s coaching needs at the top level.

“Future-proofing is one of the things that Coops does really well. Through all his coaching gigs he’s brought young coaches through.

“With (former assistant coach) Leo Crowley moving on, he’s bringing in Willy Rickards as the assistant coach, and (former lock) Paul Tito is coming into a forward assistant role.”

Rickards, the skills coach last season, has a long pedigree. “He played for Taranaki, he won the club competition with Southern Sharks, he’s been the Taranaki sevens coach and won the national title, he’s worked with the academy, and now he’s sort of come full circle.”

Last season, Tito helped with the forwards, and now he has a formal role.

“Coops’ll be coaching those guys as much as he’s coaching the team.”

James Marshall looks recovered from the depredations of Super Rugby when we meet for an interview in mid-July. He’s unbruised (on the surface, anyway), friendly, unaffected, disarming.

And slightly relieved, I suspect, at the thought he can finally go on honeymoon the next day.

He and wife Briony were married in January, and the honeymoon was supposed to be straight after the wedding. “But it never quite happened, what with commitments and…” Footy? Yeah, footy.

A skilled veteran already at the age of 26, he’s looking forward to the coming ITM Cup campaign, notwithstanding the pressure of expectations after such a mega year.

“Obviously, it’s been huge. But I’ve seen the TAB odds again and we’re not favourites. We’re paying \$8.50 to win, fourth favourite. I was quite surprised.

“I thought considering the year we had last year, considering we’ve retained most of the players, it seems the expectations within the group are higher than the perceived pressure outside. But I’m sure the community has greater expectations than the TAB.”

He says the team can’t stay still if it wants to succeed again, and will need to be better than last year. “All the other teams will be, so we just have to grow and become a better side.”

He and the coaches believe there are lots of little tweaks that can be made to their game. “Once teams understood how we were playing, it was

quite easy to shut down. So we need options for when teams come at us in different ways.”

They played a similar broad game to the All Blacks?

A laugh: “We played a different shape to the All Blacks. All our runners were off nine (the halfback). We didn’t play anything off 10 (the first five eight) – the All Blacks play quite a bit off 10.”

It’s all about getting the team’s ball carriers breaking through the opposing side’s defences and setting up chances to score.

He explains: “You have your forward runners in the game. So where you stand them is, you can either have them off the nine or you can have them outside the 10.

“If you’re having them outside the 10, you’ve all got to be deeper. What teams like to do when you do that is bring a lot of line speed and shut you down behind the game line (as Samoa did to the All Blacks in the recent test in Apia).

“We would have ours off the nine, so it gives the opposition less time to line speed them, because they’re a lot flatter and we were grouping them over the game line a little bit quicker.

“We’ll have the same shape again, but with variations on the options around it.

“We’re aiming to get a lot of one-on-one and mismatches, so if we get the ball to guys like Waisake and Seta with one defender in front of them, they’re going to beat them nine times out of 10.”

How does he find being captain from fullback? Bearing in mind there was a time when leaders tended to be in the engine room; think Whineray, Fitzpatrick, Lochore, Mourie, Shelford, McCaw, et al.

“Well, it’s not easy talking to the ref back there, but I think nowadays there’s just so many leaders within the group that you don’t need the captain to call all the shots as much.

“You’ve got on-the-field leaders and off-field leaders, and as a group you’re working together, instead of just having one leader and the ‘follow me’ sort of approach.

“The game drivers are the bigs – the nine and the 10 and the guys who are calling the shots on the game. Charlie Ngatai (second five eight) was doing a lot of those sorts of calls, as well, along with myself. There were four of us there.

“And then we’ve got leaders in the pack, like Blade Thomson, James Broadhurst and Mitchell Crosswell, who were leaders up front who would say what needs to be said in the forward pack.

“It’s an approach that’s slowly evolved. One thing we tried to drive last year was not having the big hierarchy that a lot of teams have that can intimidate the new guys so they feel they can’t say what they think.

“We tried to make it as open as possible. Thirty brains are smarter than one, so we have that approach to make everyone feel as comfortable as possible.”

How about personal pressure? How does he relax? “I find coming up to the ‘Naki a bit of a fresh starter after a long campaign down in Wellington (for the Hurricanes). That’s a reason why I like coming up here. It’s only a three-month period and I enjoy getting away.

“I don’t have any one specific thing I like to do to relax – I like to try different things. If someone sends me a text and asks if I’m keen to do something I’ll generally say ‘yes’, and give it a go, and enjoy new experiences. Games of golf are a common one, walks, bikes, tennis, any kind of sports, the mountain, anything.

“We’ve just moved out to Oakura, so I might try a bit of surfing when it gets warmer.”

There are Marshalls near Oakura, at Ahu Ahu Rd - is he related? “No, I’m from Nelson, and I don’t have any Marshalls relations up here that I know of.”

So, imagine this if you can. It’s 1968 and Yarrow Stadium - known simply as Rugby Park then - is an ocean of mud, made worse by horizontal rain and a churning group of club players.

They look tiny, like a bunch of kids in a playground, because they seem to revolve around a giant, a player with very long legs and a tireless penchant for the guts of the game, the rucks and the mauls and the lineouts and scrums.

One of us in the press box - a long wooden shack roosting on top of the western terraces – asks: “Why doesn’t Legs play for one of the bigger clubs? He’ll never make the All Blacks from Kaponga.”

“He won’t change. It’s called loyalty,” says *Taranaki Daily News* scribe and former All Black halfback Roger Urbahn.

Ian “Legs” Eliason stayed with Kaponga, and he did make the All Blacks, playing 19 matches and touring Britain in 1972-73. He was later named by legendary photographer Peter Bush as his all-time favourite AB.

Eliason played for Taranaki 222 times between 1964 and 1981, a record he holds jointly with Fergie McCormick (Canterbury).

He broke his leg in a Taranaki match against Southland in 1969, and wouldn’t leave the field, urged to stay on by fellow players saying “you can do it, Legs”. He did, scored a try, then was found by team doctor David Ludbrooke to have fractured one of those long pins.

He’s renowned for his loyalty - to club, to province, to team-mates. I asked Collins if this is the sort of “heart” that makes Taranaki rugby special.

“I remember being a boy, living in Frankleigh Rd, and I’d come down (to Rugby Park) for almost every game and watch it on the terraces, and watch the Bunn brothers up front. John Plumtree always stood out to me, Chris Sutton, Kieran Crowley.

“I remember Chris Sutton being a tremendous defender. He wasn’t the biggest bloke, and he probably wasn’t the most skilful bloke either, but I remember him racing up and just cutting guys in half.

“Those guys stick out. I guess for their heart, and their work ethic and stuff like that. Taranaki rugby *is* unique, and we need to keep that pioneering spirit.”

He did some of the pioneering himself in 1992, when he captained the New Plymouth Boys High first fifteen to a win in the inaugural world secondary school championships.

It was the start of a distinguished playing career as a prop, and took him away from Taranaki from the age of 18 until he was 35.

“I went to Waikato Uni in 1993, got a Bachelor of Social Science (majoring in geography) and was

brainwashed into playing for Waikato from 1995 to 2005, and the Chiefs from 1997 to 2005.”

After that, he went to play for London Irish from 2005 to 2008, then moved back here. “Mum and Dad still lived here, and my sister and her family, and numerous cousins and second cousins, as you have in Taranaki.”

Now aged 41, in a job that he may have been unconsciously preparing for all his life, Collins has a well-grounded passion for Taranaki rugby.

And he has many travelling companions, most of whom have definite views about the province’s chances of a repeat in the ITM Cup.

Taranaki Rugby chairman **Lindsay Thomson** is one. “We think we have a team capable of performing very well in this year’s ITM Cup, but it’s an extremely tough competition to win.

“To go back-to-back would be special, but we can be quietly confident, given the bulk of last year’s team are back, and we have a highly experienced coaching and management group led by Colin Cooper.

“There are some factors which will be outside our control, such as players being selected in the All Blacks for Rugby World Cup. Players like James Broadhurst and Waisake Naholo (until he broke his leg in the test against Argentina on July 17) are obviously in the All Black frame and they were very important to our success in 2014.

“Having said that, our success will come from having a squad capable of competing irrespective of who is selected. Having depth across the squad, a great team culture and a deep desire amongst the team to make Taranaki proud will be really important.

“One of the advantages Colin has is there are not many new players who need to be integrated into the team systems and patterns that Colin will want to establish. The squad will know each other well and what they are capable of achieving, based on last year’s success.

“We have great support from our fan base, sponsors and community funders. Without that support we couldn’t have the development programmes in our clubs and schools, which allows us to bring players through and to assemble a team capable of competing at this level.”

Rugby commentator **Ian Snook**, who writes a thoughtful sports column for the *Taranaki Daily News*, says the team obviously enjoys a good

environment under Colin Cooper: “It’s meant players have matured and gained confidence.

“Probably the biggest challenge is being without their All Blacks – Broadhurst and Barrett, and perhaps others. Charlie Ngatai, Blade Thomson and Seta Tamanivalu are in the national picture, as well.

“There are other challenges, mainly with the changes in the coaching structure and with Cooper not being around for part of the pre-season, with him coaching the Maori All Blacks.

“Losing Leo Crowley is a big factor. Colin brings wide experience from having been around at the top level for a long time, while Leo complemented that with his passion for Taranaki and coaching.

“He got on well with the players. He added an extra dimension. That puts a fair bit of pressure on his replacement, Willy Rickards, to step up into the role.”

On Tamanivalu’s quiet time with the Chiefs, he says from what he heard there were some communication problems. “It’s all about taking opportunities, and as a young man in a new environment he may not have spoken up.

“Naholo took his opportunities with Otago and he now looks a super-confident player, very comfortable in the environment down there. He certainly stepped up. This time last year, when Clifton played Spotswood Old Boys, our guys (Clifton, where Snook is facilities manager) had no trouble stopping him.

Ian Eliason (who still farms at Kaponga) reckons the chances of the team winning again are about 50-50. In his view, while the crucial players are halfback, first five eight and the front five, the overall key to doing well is a good team spirit.

“The team has the support of the province and that gives them the ability to lift their game against the bigger unions.

“The challenge for Colin Cooper is to win the title again to further his coaching career. The advantage he has is a pretty settled team who have had a lot of super 15 experience.”

According to Rule 17.6 of the Laws of the Game of Rugby Union, a maul is unsuccessful if it remains stationary or has stopped moving forward for longer than five seconds.

There is no mention of the words “forward momentum”, but the expression has become standard for TV commentators, who say it must be maintained or the referee will blow his whistle.

The Taranaki Rugby Football Union has rarely had such forward momentum entering a fresh season of provincial competition.

To coin a pun as equally iffy as the one that began this story, it’s the MCC.

Not the cricket one, the famous initials taken from the Marylebone Cricket Club at Lord’s Cricket Ground in London, once English cricket’s governing body.

In our neck of the woods, MCC stands for Marshall, Cooper and Collins.