

Time to assess worth of Chiefs deal

It looked promising when the Taranaki Rugby Union decided to cut ties with Wellington and go north to Hamilton, to abandon the Hurricanes and align with the Chiefs for Super Rugby.

The Waikatos offered us two games a season for the first two years, a helluva lot better than the none we were getting from the Capital.

Okay, history was against the move. After all, the Waikatos plundered Taranaki so badly in the 1800s the locals were driven south and to this day maintain a significant presence in Wellington. The Waikato was (is) that dreary place you drive through to get to the bright lights of Auckland. And getting there is a motoring challenge to this day because the road north of Mokau has been neglected by bureaucrats distracted with building motorways from Waikato to Mt Maunganui.

So, it was an unnatural act to look north for our rugby future, a big leap of faith that some people are still cogitating over as we progress into the fourth year of the arrangement. Has it been worth it?

One obvious measure is the number of Chiefs matches being played at Yarrow Stadium. We seem to have dropped from two to one, with the second hiving off to Fiji because of what is apparently an irresistible deal for the Chiefs franchise. It certainly looked that way when more than 17,000 packed the stadium in Suva for this season's Chiefs versus Crusaders clash.

Our single Chiefs game against the struggling Reds got less than a third of that crowd. To be fair, all the Australian sides are doing poorly, so it's hard to be too judgemental. A local derby would have been good though, and the obvious one would be an annual repeat of the Chiefs versus Hurricanes match played in 2015. Those present reckoned it was hard to tell which side got most support.

If that match was being played again this season – and no matter how many obstacles there are, it should have been a non-negotiable demand by Taranaki – it would have been interesting to see which team gets most crowd backing these days.

I'm tempted to say the Hurricanes, partly because the Wellington franchise has about twice the number of Taranaki players in its squad. And - unfortunately for the people who brokered the Taranaki-Chiefs deal - the Hurricanes have the Barretts. Put your hand on your heart and tell me you're not swayed by the sight of Beauden and Jordie running out on the paddock, especially if it was against a Chiefs side containing as a few as a single Taranaki player as is sometimes the case.

Injuries complicate such computations. Now that Taranaki's Charlie Ngatai has a concussion recurrence, Mitchell Brown was the only Taranaki man in the Chiefs lineup against the Crusaders. For its game against the same opponents the week before, the Hurricanes had half a dozen players with Taranaki connections.

There are other factors to bear in mind in this debate. Rugby union boss Mike Collins (a former Chiefs player) reckons there have been significant benefits for our up-and-coming junior players in the Chiefs alignment. There's also the fact Taranaki coach Colin Cooper will become the new Chiefs coach next season. It seemed to work in our favour when he coached the Hurricanes, so it's possible Taranaki players will be more in the Chiefs' coaching mindset in 2018. There's also the prospect of a better road north when Mt Messenger and the Awakino are sorted.

The fundamental problem is the same one affecting a lot of Taranaki things – our geographic isolation, our betwixt-and-between equidistance from the two most important centres. While it's built a strong sense of independence, self-reliance and aspirational drive, it means big city blinkers sometimes exclude us from the main action. Taranaki punches well above its weight in inter-provincial rugby, but that doesn't seem to help when it comes to our footprint in the Super scheme of things.

It's a shame the Super competition is about to shrink, with Australia and South Africa due to lose franchises. The way New Zealand sides are performing at present you could probably add a sixth team in this country, one comprising unions not centred on the big cities. It's not a practical idea, I suppose, but a tempting one.

JT column for June 3 2017 – super rugby

C'mon the Chiefs...or Hurricanes. Ah, there's a thought. At least we have two options. Be fickle like me and go for whoever's doing best - although even that's not clear at the moment.