

We could stage the sevens here

Warning: this column contains wild ideas. Well, one wild idea - we could have the international rugby sevens tournament here.

I'll tell you why it's worth considering in a minute. First - why does it need to be staged somewhere other than Wellington's Cake Tin?

You'll know if you've been following news stories documenting that once-great sporting carnival's slow demise. Death was confirmed last weekend. You could have counted the crowd on the fingers of only a few hands in some TV shots of the 18th tournament.

Although Wellington supposedly has a contract to hold the event until 2019, those in charge will meet in March to decide whether that happens, or even if New Zealand will continue to host a leg of the international sevens series.

Surely New Zealand will continue. We might have bombed at Rio and crashed to sixth in Wellington on Sunday, but the governing body would be brave to rule out the world's leading rugby nation.

Supposing common sense prevails, the big question would be where in the country next year's tournament should be held. Auckland? Biggest city, entry airport for the country, home to TV organisations, blah blah.

But it's not necessarily the best choice. Big populations are diverse populations with diverse interests. They already have the league nines in summer, a rival attraction that may have affected attendance at Wellington.

WOMAD began in Auckland, but moved here after a couple of so-so years. Look at how that turned out. It's one of the reasons I'm saying Taranaki ought to take a serious look at bidding for the sevens. It shows we can do the big stuff as well as anyone.

The first thing we'd need to do is examine the reasons why Wellington expired. There are a lot of them.

Entry price is a biggie. In the event's heyday in 2011, entry for two days cost \$125 and tickets sold out within minutes of going on sale. Total attendance was the highest ever the following year at 62,805, when a two-day pass cost \$145.

The entry fee was bumped up to \$199 in 2013, and that's when crowd numbers began to decline (60,426), a trend that continued in 2014 when the cost peaked at \$209 (52,633).

Prices were cut after that, but it was too late. By last weekend, entry for two days was down to \$117 if you bought early, but fewer than 20,000 bothered. That's not much more than the crowd for a WOMAD weekend.

The Cake Tin holds about 34,000. Our Yarrow Stadium is smaller at 25,500, so numbers would need to be crunched to work out if holding the tournament here is financially viable. If we packed out and hit Wellington's 2014 number (just over 50,000) it looks doable.

Packing out would be a tentative given for the first year, at least, since Taranaki is a passionate rugby province and the novelty would presumably attract those with marginal interest.

You'd need to keep a close eye on entry prices. I suspect WOMAD now borders on being too expensive. This year our family will attend only one day, since last year's three-day experience cost two of us more than \$600 (and we live here).

But it's more complicated than entry fees and ground capacity.

Rugby writer Phil Gifford reckons Wellington (and sevens) failed because the rugby union turned its back on that version of the sport, discouraging All Black stars from participation. As he said, the first global promotion of sevens centred on mega-stars like Jonah Lomu.

It seems a key clash comes from the requirement to give ABs a break over summer and the following need for them to prepare for Super Rugby. I reckon the Barrett boys would be starters here, though.

The so-called “fun police” are another culprit. These are people repelled by the boozy party atmosphere that prevailed at Wellington.

They have a point. I recall attending a one-day cricket match in Sydney and watching people in the crowd section I’d stumbled into ignore what was happening on the pitch because they were partying hard.

There’s a possible solution to that, and it doesn’t necessarily involve booze-buying limits, which seem to have exasperated some Wellingtonians. Why not section off wild drinkers from the families and the serious rugby tragics.

There is another important factor in Wellington’s case, according to some commentators: people simply moved on. The event had its day.

Which is all the more reason to stage it in a new place. Like here.