

## Pukekura Park is a missed opportunity

I'm not a fanatical cricket follower. I've played backyard and beach versions, watch the big stuff on TV, enjoy the drowsy voice of radio commentary when I'm painting the house.

In fact, I have good reason to hate the game. It got me off to a bad start at high school, when I was a third former in the English class of a renowned cricketer. One day he sent me over to the cricket ground to see how the first eleven was faring.

"So, what's the score, Tucker?" asks he. "We're 130, sir," says I. "For how many wickets, boy?" "Don't know, sir." The derision from classmates seemed to last for the next several years.

I'm telling you this because I don't want you to dismiss what I'm about to say as the biased view of a cricket tragic.

I'm saying that we need to do something about Pukekura Park, because its current absence from the international cricket programme is a missed opportunity to promote Taranaki.

If, like me, you watched the last Black Caps T20 game against Bangladesh at Mt Maunganui you'll know what I'm talking about.

The Sky Sport cameras don't just dwell on the cricket. When there's a break in play, they roam the scenery. At various stages, they recorded one of the reporters as she strolled the beach and the foot of the Mount. It was priceless free publicity for the Bay of Plenty.

During five-day test matches, camera operators perched on high scaffolds and in the buckets of cranes pan around the scenery surrounding match venues, sucking up the beauty of various Kiwi landscapes.

We got a few brief shots of Mt Taranaki during live coverage of the national T20 final at Pukekura Park last weekend. Imagine what might be done during a Black Caps match.

We miss out, for a number of reasons. Pukekura Park is too small to meet international standards, its player facilities are not up to scratch, the terraces don't accommodate enough people, there's no night lighting, and there's nothing more than a tent for media.

That last point carries wonderful irony. A bunch of the same media - sports journalists and commentators from around the country - last year voted Pukekura Park third-best sports facility in New Zealand. Tent and all.

In 2007, cricket bible Wisden ranked it one of the six best small cricket grounds in the world. Similar accolades appear in cricket books and such elevated journals as the UK Guardian. Recently, the cricket pitch was declared the best in all the country's regional centres.

Which means the sporting body responsible for deciding where our national cricket team will play each year, Cricket NZ, has something of an embarrassment on its hands, as does our local cricketing organisation, and the park's owner, New Plymouth District Council.

Cricket NZ - because it can't fully use a ground acclaimed world-wide as a gem. Taranaki Cricket - because it doesn't have the wherewithal to meet international standards. And the council - because it can't afford to come to the party.

Given the controversy the council faces whenever it so much as lops a tree branch in the park, it has become gun-shy on this subject, quietly dropping any solid mention of it from long-term plans.

What could be done?

Increasing ground size would mean doing away with the main road into the park, and probably the lowest terrace beside it. That would make the boundaries similar to the shortest at Eden Park, which is internationally sub-standard.

A new main road could be built from the western end of Fillis St, emerging at the Bellringer Pavilion, which needs a rebuild to meet player standards. The Press would need a flash new tent.

For big games, temporary seating could be erected in the gap between the southern and eastern terraces. The last test played here in 1992 (between Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka) saw 6000 crammed into the arena, so extra seating may get crowd numbers up to levels seen at Nelson and Mt Maunganui (who have gone down this path).

These are speculations, of course. Does Cricket NZ actually want any more venues competing for games?

The upgrade will be expensive, so who provides the millions? The council is under pressure to do more for swimming, netball and basketball, and can no longer raid its investment fund.

And if the project ever becomes a starter, a key aim would surely be to do it without destroying the beauty that brings the acclamation.