

Most memorable Shield game I never saw

If you've lived in Taranaki for a while you're bound to have favourite memories of the Ranfurly Shield, and they were surely freshened when we won the Log for a sixth time. Mine go back to two earlier Shield eras, the one beginning in 1957 and the third tenure in the mid-60s.

A vague recollection from the 50s involves a match against North Auckland. A local identity called Cuddles showed little of the affection her nickname implied when she clocked opposition player Peter Jones with her umbrella. Jones, an All Black, gained notoriety in 1956 when he told national radio he felt "absolutely bugged" after a Springbok test.

The second memory has me packed into Rugby Park (now Yarrow Stadium) with thousands, many of whom like me needed the loo at halftime. When I finally got to the front of the queue in the close company of three other males emptying into the same facility, I froze. My affliction – which has a hyphenated label, both of whose words begin with "p" – stayed with me for the rest of the match, and on into young adulthood.

My 1965 recollection involves something that happened nowhere near Rugby Park. I'd just begun at the Taranaki Herald as a cadet reporter, a job with such low prestige there was no hope of being assigned to Shield matches. I was office-bound.

And alone on a September Saturday afternoon when one of the big old Bakelite phones rang. Being as yet unversed in the news business, I wondered who the hell could be calling during such a momentous event at the town's number one footie ground? This is what followed (mostly):

"Long, here," said the voice on the phone. "Where's Hinch?"

"Long" was Dick Long, the chief reporter, my new boss, who was calling from the park with his description of the first half of a Shield defence against Hawkes Bay. "Hinch" was Derryn Hinch, our star reporter, who was supposed to be manning that phone to type up Long's urgent prose as he dictated down the line.

"It's Tucker, Mr Long." "Where's Derryn Hinch?" "Haven't seen him, Sir."

"Who else is there?" "Just me, I'm afraid." And I was by then, just a little.

"Can you type?" "Um...I can give it a go. We didn't have typing at boys high, but..." "Never mind. Get the headset on and load up."

"Load up, Mr Long?" "Yes, yes...the typewriter. Has it got copy paper in it? Have you got a black?"

"A black, Sir?" "Carbon paper, for god's sake. It goes between two bits of copy paper. The second copy is for PA."

"PA, Mr Long?" "Oh hell...the Press Association. The top copy goes to the subeditors and the black to Mr Cave. He's the PA man."

Clem Cave, the news editor, was known to me only as a patient old bloke aged 100 who on my first day showed how to file the avalanche of other newspapers coming into the office. He said if I did an impeccable job I would become a fine journalist.

I thought it unwise to trouble Mr Long with any of that just then - there was typing to be done. As it turned out, my two-finger pecking got quite fast as his molten words poured into the headset, although there was a high error rate (mine). His patience lasted for a remarkably...um...long time.

Via my timid typing, Mr Cave's blacks and a teleprinter operator at the post office, the world got to read Mr Long's account of Taranaki's last win (21-17) of that Shield epoch.

The weak link in the system didn't turn out to be me, after all. It was Derryn Hinch, who'd gone to the pub with his mates from Truth. He was fired on the Monday. He went on to be a world-famous journalist, and be sacked another 15 times. Richard Long went on to be a fine editor of the Dominion. I went on to be editor of the Auckland Star.

JT column for Oct 14 2017 – Shield win

The Ranfurly Shield...well, it just went on, although not in my time. I grew up to be the rugby writer for a decade, but Taranaki didn't win the Shield again until 1996.

At the Star, I caught the start of Auckland's record 61-match era that began under coach John Hart in 1985 (he'd played a game or two for Taranaki at halfback, including one against King Country co-refereed by Colin Meads). Somehow it wasn't the same.