

Rugby great a reminder of changing times

Nothing could be further from my mind than disrespecting Sir Colin Meads, but I believe his death reminds us something central to New Zealand culture is changing.

It dawned on me as I watched a 20-year-old television tribute to Meads. One of Bob Parker's This Is Your Life efforts, it was intriguing just to see how young everyone looked, but also because of an anecdote told by fellow All Black Wilson Whineray (like Meads, still to be knighted).

It was about Colin's brother Stan, who in Whineray's telling was lying injured on the ground during a test match. After asking Stan how he was, Colin told him he had to get up and rejoin the game because the two of them had a scrum to lock.

That would have resonated with those taking an interest in rugby's attempts to deal with concussion. It's a slow transformation in attitude, one that had major impact on the recent Lions tour - when All Black second five Sonny Bill Williams was ordered off for a dangerous tackle - and in the Super Rugby final in South Africa, when the effect went the other way.

Rugby has always been a game for tough people. Time was, you played on with snapped limbs (Meads with a broken arm in South Africa, Taranaki's Ian Eliason with a broken leg once) or broken heads, and to do anything less was cissy.

Such mindsets have persisted for much of rugby's history, an uncompromising approach that has made us great at the game. Until now. We're still great, but something has changed, and that's partly because of a man from one of the bastions of rugby fortitude, Taranaki.

Dylan Cleaver grew up here, went to New Plymouth Boys High School where he played rugby, was educated as a journalist at Auckland Institute of Technology, and has worked for both major newspaper companies, Fairfax and NZ Herald. He's currently the latter's sports editor-at-large.

You might say he has an impeccable background in rugby culture, and is possibly the last person you'd expect to challenge the sport's under-lying ethic. But that's what Cleaver did when he came across something that looked like more than a coincidence - a higher than expected incidence of dementia among veterans of a famous Taranaki rugby team, the Ranfurly Shield holders of the mid-1960s.

When his articles began to appear last year - the first told of '60s players who were regularly knocked out in matches and still expected to play on - there was denial from the rugby union, then acceptance, and now sustained efforts involving managers, referees, coaches, team doctors and rule-writers to make the game safer.

I heard the story behind the story recently when Cleaver addressed the NZ Centre for Investigative Journalism annual conference in Auckland. It was an emotional occasion for me for several reasons, not least being an odd sense of guilt. I was a rugby reporter in that era. Like everyone else, I didn't give a thought to the long-term costs of what I wrote about with celebratory prose.

I felt sorrow during Cleaver's address, too, because in a uni-dimensional way I got to know many of the players in those teams. Like Meads they were good blokes, whose sporting acts helped build our sense of community. That their courage may have come at such a terrible cost is difficult to comprehend.

I also felt pride at Cleaver's achievements, because he was one of my students at AIT, and although he arrived pretty much fully formed, I like to think I might have contributed in some small way. He has won many sporting awards for his work, to go with those recognising his concussion series.

But there's a much more important point to be made about this. Cleaver was almost apologetic when he stood up to speak at the conference, because as someone noted when introducing him, sports stories rarely feature in the annals of investigative journalism.

JT column August 26 2017 - concussion

In my view, however, his work rates ahead of much of it. The reason relates to a book I used for teaching. Called *The Journalism of Outrage*, it said the most significant work results in fundamental change to society. Take a bow, Dylan Cleaver.

Incidentally, rugby still has a way to go in its metamorphosis. There was irony last weekend when Sonny Bill Williams may have suffered concussion during the test match against Australia. Nobody noticed. He played on.