

## Filling sports reporting gap

When he quoted a former US jurist's comment about what he read first in his daily paper, Bruce Lawrence may have noticed his letter to the editor lamenting loss of local sports coverage appeared the same day Aussie cricket ball tampering filled much of the sports section.

Irony aside, Chief Justice Earl Warren was on to something when he started his day reading about sports. In his opinion, the front pages were dominated by human failure.

It's not my place to debate the whys and wherefores of sports reporting cutbacks, but I do have some news of interest to sports people. Sport Taranaki, the local organisation charged with nourishing sport here, has begun a scheme to help sports clubs help themselves let the world know of their achievements and challenges.

A bunch of us has embarked on a project to train club scribes to recognise sports news within their ranks and report it with words and photos (maybe video too, eventually) that can be submitted to the Daily News' new community sports pages.

The DN editor is keen to see the standard of club submissions improve beyond routine accounts of who beat whom. Much preferred are sports reports that focus on people – who they are, what they do, what they've overcome, what they think. The personal touch, in other words.

Asking non-journalists to write news is hardly a new idea. One or two practised club scribes already provide the paper with good quality material, but they are too thin on the ground to ensure the great range of activities in sports-mad Taranaki gets coverage.

I recall in the 1960s and 70s the Taranaki Sports edition came out every Saturday evening filled with the words of amateur scribes. The newspaper was staffed by journalists who wrote for the Taranaki Herald during the week, but whose numbers were too small to report all the Saturday sports fixtures.

Late on a Saturday afternoon, reporters and fast typists from the front office recruited for the purpose spent a frantic hour and a half taking copy over the phone from rugby club people around the province. They provided stories about every club match played that day. Other sports did the same.

We so-called pros made fun of some of the accounts, which used the full range of sports cliches. The title of a popular TV sports programme of latter years, A Game of Two Halves, was undoubtedly reference to the writing of those club stalwarts...and some so-called sports journalists.

When I was at New Plymouth Boys High School, our English teacher, the inestimable Mr Wit (Alexander), reckoned he came across a man with a notepad on the sideline of a club rugby match, writing down a list of numbers. When he asked why, the man said each number corresponded to a cliché in a big book back at the newspaper office. Saved him a lot of time.

I later found Wit was wrong when it came to the experienced journos, legendary Taranaki rugby writers like Graham Coddington, Richard Long, Roger Urbahn, Dion Crooks and Gordon Brown, people who brought literary flair to their reports.

When I later became the Herald's rugby man, I would sneak down to the newspaper file room to check out Cod's brilliant story introductions from the late 50s Ranfurly Shield era and recast them in new guise. I regarded it as fair training, although I'm not sure Graham would think the same.

Cliches and all, those club scribes did a good job, and their colleagues appreciated it. But as newspaper sports staffs grew in intervening years, the professional coverage expanded too. Self-help traditions faded. Now everybody is used to the idea their events will automatically be reported by someone from the paper.

As newspaper resources shrink before the internet's onslaught, Sport Taranaki CEO Howie Tamati and board chair Gordon Brown acknowledge the need to respond. They have started workshops for

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those willing to learn. While initial attendance has been patchy, it's expected to grow as sports groups notice what may start to dominate the community sports pages.

Ruth Jarman, Tracy Coker, Will Johnston, Adele Turner (gymnastics) and Luke Frame (Sport Taranaki) are among the first to cotton on, with Ruth already providing excellent coverage of cycling, Tracy disabled surfing, and Will rugby.

The plan is to run the free training workshops for a year. We'll work on the cliches, maybe even invent some fresh ones.