

End games'll be novelty at first

Here's some advice for those heading to Yarrow Stadium next Friday to watch the first home-ground defence of the Ranfurly Shield – take binoculars.

You'll probably need them for some parts of half the game, because you'll be sitting in what may be a world first – a rugby ground in which only the assistant referees, ball persons and a few other officials will be able to watch the game from the sidelines. You'll be sitting at one end.

Nobody I've talked to seems phased by this bizarre development. Everybody is just thankful we're getting games at the stadium at all, following shock discoveries the grandstands are earthquake-prone.

How will it feel watching from one end? Democratic, I should think. Once, the uncovered terraces at the northern and southern ends were the cheap seats. The poobahs sat along the sides.

It will have some advantages for half the game, because Taranaki will be scoring tries right in front of you. Watch the photographers – they patrol the ends to get the best shots.

I recall when I worked in Auckland and sometimes attended matches at Eden Park during Auckland's multi-season grip on the Shield. Some in the crowd were keen to sit at the end where Auckland would score, and they migrated to the other end at half time in expectation Auckland would keep scoring.

I mentioned that to Taranaki Rugby Football Union chair Lindsay Thomson recently and he agreed it was an interesting approach for spectators to take, but he hopes it won't happen here – he wants all 14,000-plus seats full for every match. Good point.

Having seen the extensive preparations the union is making to host Taranaki's home games this season, I'm confident the experience will be fine, in fact novel for the first couple of occasions. They're covering the seats at the southern end with temporary scaffolding to keep the regular ticket holders dry.

I am a bit worried about the media, though. In the past, the union has been somewhat neglectful of reporters who don't work in the golden hallways of television. When the new west stand was opened early this century, the TV people got lavish quarters, while the rugby reporters from this newspaper and those accompanying visiting teams were given a concrete cell with a big pillar in the middle of it.

I recall going to have a look and being appalled at such cavalier treatment. After all, I live largely in the past, when there was a well-appointed press box on the top of the western terraces, a place where I spent many a Saturday afternoon for a decade reporting on Taranaki's various triumphs and tribulations.

Those were the days (60s and 70s) when a big international would see the front row seats in that long box occupied by the greatest rugby scribes in the world, and such New Zealand legends as TP McLean, Hedley Mortlock, Bob Howitt, Alex Vesey, Lindsay Knight and Gabriel David, writers whose words were read and picked over by rabid fans everywhere.

The back of the box was occupied by the pie and soft drinks shop. On one cold, wet occasion when the ground was empty, the women who worked there and who never usually had time to watch the rugby, spent the game peering through the glass window that separated them from us and providing a running commentary. Rugby writer Dion Crooks based his entire report on their insightful and sometimes funny rundown.

Who would blame rugby writers nowadays if they simply stayed home and covered matches from the TV.

Nobody knows yet how long the end games must continue. People like John Yarrow of the family that has donated generously towards rugby and the ground want a decision on the future of the stadium made by year's end.

The options appear to include shoring up the west stand to make it safe and trying to properly brace the east stand. Neither idea may fly, so perhaps both stands will need to be demolished and rebuilt. Worst case scenario would see the ground abandoned and replaced elsewhere.

For those of us who like to use the perfect vision of hindsight, it might be tempting to blame our well-meaning forebears for laying the playing field out in the wrong direction, from north to south. That meant the grandstands were eventually built on top of deep fill.

A far-out option would be to turn the ground 90 degrees and build stands on the terraces that will be occupied by the crowds this year.