



Mellow Yarrow

The story behind the plight of Yarrow Stadium is full of “what-ifs” and “with-the-benefit-of-hindsights”.

What if they hadn't built Taranaki's premier rugby ground in a swampy valley? What if the NIMBY neighbours around Sanders Park in Westown had accepted the first plan to build Rugby Park there in 1927? With the benefit of hindsight, should the playing field have been laid west-to-east instead of north-south, so the grandstands weren't built on fill?

Now that both stands have been declared earthquake-prone, a lot more what-ifs loom over the investigation into what should be done ...including the big one: can it stay there?

Although Yarrow Stadium may never again attract crowds as big those during last century's Ranfurly Shield eras and international games (nearly 40,000) memories of extraordinary occasions linger within most Taranaki family histories.

We've got too much in to abandon the place, and initial alarm has been displaced by determination to fix it.

WORDS: Jim Tucker PHOTOS: Jim Tucker, Puke Ariki



If he was still alive, there'd be nobody more shocked than **James McLeod** at the news Yarrow Stadium's stands have been declared an earthquake risk. He died in 1944 after a distinguished career as a politician, chair of the Taranaki Rugby Football Union for more than 30 years, manager of the provincial team and at least one All Black touring team – and the man most responsible for building Rugby Park.

His work getting the original ground under way in 1929 and opened by 1937 is celebrated with a memorial erected in 1947. Regular patrons coming into the ground from the main Maratahu St entrance will be familiar with it at the top of the northern terraces.

They're likely to see a lot of it over the next long time, now that the stadium is restricted to seating crowds on the two end embankments. The main stakeholders - the rugby union, the stadium trust and main parent body Taranaki Regional Council, managers New Plymouth District Council, and Sky TV – have decided Taranaki can defend the Ranfurly Shield there if the two grandstands are cordoned off.

Under that arrangement, the stadium can still hold more than 14,000 - but will they come if they can't view the games from side-on? Nobody knows for sure, but there is optimism, given the province's current grip on the shield...and the crowd behaviour at some other Shield-holding locations in the past. In Auckland in the 80s, for example, locals swapped ends at halftime to get a closer view of their try-scorers.

Taranaki Rugby Football Union chair **Lindsay Thomson** hopes it doesn't come to that, because he's counting on both ends being full. Thomson believes that Yarrow Stadium must not only be saved in the long term, but must be made serviceable in the short.

“This stadium has been the spiritual home of Taranaki rugby for more than 80 years. We can't allow that history to be lost and must do everything possible to retain the stadium we enjoyed prior to the recent problems arising,” he says.

That assessment was formed after considering alternatives in Inglewood and Hawera, talking to Sky Sport about how much light power they need for night games, and acknowledging the superior nature of the Yarrow arena.

The fact is, there's nowhere else in Taranaki with lighting good enough to stage night-time rugby, which Sky Sports naturally prefers while Taranaki holds the country's most coveted provincial trophy.

Thomson and newly appointed TRFU chief executive **Jeremy Parkinson** (who arrived in January) say in the meantime it's their job to put the Taranaki Bulls on the best field to play the best rugby.

“We need it to be a free-draining, sand-based ground,” says Parkinson. “We've got a Super Rugby backline, so we need to give them the tools to operate off. That's Yarrow Stadium, and Yarrow Stadium lighting, which is world class.”

Parkinson says the TRFU has worked with the NZ Rugby Union and Sky, and while it was decided at first the ground must be closed, further analysis of various structural reports and earthquake risk assessments swung things back in favour of playing at Yarrow after all.

“It’s given everyone peace of mind that everything is safe and there’s no risk to the public or players or anyone,” he says. The draw for the Mitre 10 Cup, starting on August 16, has Taranaki’s first home game scheduled on August 24, a Ranfurly Shield defence against Manawatu.

For patrons, the end terraces it is. The Star Gymnasium and Spotswood United Rugby & Sports Club’s facilities will be borrowed for catering and hospitality, and temporary dressing rooms built in the south-east corner of the ground. Training has decamped to the racecourse stadium, while TRFU management has moved into the bottom floor of the Sport Taranaki building on the edge of the number two ground.

It’s an arrangement that may have to do for quite a while, years perhaps. At this stage the stakeholders are focused on getting through the rest of this winter season, so how the elephant on the field can finally be shooed away is still being investigated.

When news of Yarrow Stadium’s problems surfaced late last year, there was some initial confusion over whose responsibility it was to sort them...and who was to blame. People asked: who owns it? And who’s going to pay? The answer to the first question is not as straight-forward as you’d think.

Although a sign at the stadium says it’s owned by Taranaki Regional Council and operated by New Plymouth District Council, neither is directly responsible – technically speaking. New Plymouth Mayor **Neil Holdom** declined to discuss it in February: “We don’t own it – ask Taranaki Regional Council.”

The stadium is officially owned and governed – as opposed to operated - by a body called the Taranaki Stadium Trust, a council-controlled organisation (CCO) based at TRC’s offices in Stratford. The regional council provides annual funding to operate the trust and appoints its members.

Basil Chamberlain, the regional council’s CEO, says NPDC has an agreement with the trust to manage the facility – “including managing the challenging issues of the present moment”.

He says work is under way on four fronts – finding alternatives for the major tenant and others; completing engineering and related work to provide clear understandings of the issues and problems, and fully complete the earthquake building code assessments; seeking proposals to “fix” the identified problems; and investigating whether there were faults in past professional advice or decisions, for which redress could or should be sought.

Until some expert work has been done, neither TRC nor the trust nor NPDC will speculate on what the remedial options might be. The trust’s examination of who might be at fault is privileged for obvious reasons, Chamberlain says.

He’s optimistic.

“We all need to acknowledge there is complexity present. Whatever 'solutions' emerge, I’m sure Taranaki will move on them expeditiously in the best interests of Taranaki's future - because that’s who we are.”

Mellow - the first word used in the headline for this story - has many meanings, but the ones applying here are “matured, aged, seasoned”. Few Taranakians will be unaware of the second word: Manaia baker **Noel Yarrow** and his wife, **Melva**, were generous benefactors, hence the stadium and west stand are named after them.

The stadium’s history has had nearly a century to mellow out, decades during which many thousands have enjoyed its facilities, contributed to its development, cheered on sporting heroes within the echo of its stands.

Early photographs (rediscovered recently in a Puke Ariki Museum photo album, complete with typed history) show the first physical labour to shape the ground was done with axes, shovels and picks, horses and carts.

Before that, the need for a stadium was first addressed by the Taranaki Rugby Football Union (formed in 1889) in 1927. It first chose what is now Sanders Park (home to Tukapa Rugby Football Club) in nearby Wallace Pl, but empowering legislation fell through when neighbours objected.

By that time, interest in rugby was growing rapidly. Four fields were being built on the New Plymouth racecourse, others on the Agricultural and Pastoral Association’s grounds at Waiwhakaiho. So, MP James McLeod – who chaired the rugby union for 32 years (1912-1944) – had no intention of giving up.

Later in 1927, he got an option to buy today’s location, more than 15 acres (six hectares) of vacant valley land owned by the Standish Estate. The union offered to buy that and another couple of acres for £1500, and had plans drawn up for terracing to accommodate 7000, two grandstands seating a total of 2000, development of two playing fields, and £1800-worth of grassing and drainage.

Its first offer was turned down by the estate’s lawyers, but a deal was eventually made in February 1929 - 15 and a half acres for £1400. To provide access to the valley, the union also bought the former Witiara Golf Links and another town section for £325.

The union sent a local engineer, Mr Palmer, to Wellington to look at Athletic Park, and when he returned plans were redrawn to build seating for 10,000 people. No mention is made of whether he advised on grandstands, but the first one - a wooden structure - went up on the eastern touchline in the mid-1930s.

The first task was tree clearing, which began in April 1929. Some wood was sold for firewood, while the trunks were buried... to gradually rot away and cause the first playing field to sink later and need re-levelling. Some were disposed of under filled parts of the park, areas bordering the west and east touchlines, ground that would later have to support grandstands.

Fundraising began to help pay off the mortgage used to buy the land. In December 1929, the union got permission to run a raffle, with a first prize of £500-worth of gold. It was drawn in March 1930, and after giving £500 each to the New Plymouth Aero Club and the Pukekura Park Committee, the union netted £5936. It also got a £5000 loan from the NZ Rugby Union.

Efforts to form the grounds began, helped from 1931 by manpower provided under a government unemployed workers scheme, brought in to offset the effects of the Great Depression (1929-1935). The main rugby grounds were sown in lupin and potatoes in preparation for turf.

The terraces were delayed as the cost of earthworks reached nearly £2500. The union then got a government subsidy of £1200 to keep things moving, and redrew the plans to comprise concrete terraces and wooden seating for an expanded capacity of 14,000 (today's estimate of what the two ends will hold).

Another deal was done to swap land near the Tukapa St entrance at the northern end so trees could be planted in front of any "Scotsman's grandstands" (with all due apology to the Scots - these were unreformed times).

The aim was to be playing there by 1933, but development took longer than expected when swampy ground beneath the fields needed further draining. Work went on into 1936, including terracing, field preparation and a clock. Duncan and Davies nursery put in 6437 trees.

The first club game was played on May 12, 1937, when Tukapa and Stratford drew 6-all. The arena performed to expectations over the next couple of months, which was fortunate because on August 1 it hosted a crowd of 20,000 to see Taranaki beaten 17-3 by the touring Springboks.

As the seasons went by, it became obvious there were seepage problems originating in a gully behind the west embankment; water was coming through under the western terraces and turning the playing field into a bog. It got so bad in 1943, the ground was closed and it was estimated £400 would be needed to improve drainage.

The NZ Rugby Union offered to clear the local union's remaining land purchase debt of £4000 – on the condition the arena was offered free to the New Plymouth Borough Council. There was a proviso the council pay off nearly £1000 still owed for the stand and do work needed to make the ground viable again.

The deal fell through, and would not be successfully done until the end of the millennium, when the stadium was finally taken over by NPDC and later vested with the stadium trust.

Back in the 1940s, the union struggled on with ownership, and managed to get the ground open again for the 1946 season and a second international. The game between Taranaki-King Country Combined and Australia was burgled 9-8 by the Aussies.

In the last year of World War II (1945), the iconic broadcasting and (later) press box was built above the western terraces, with well-known radio commentator Mark Comber installed behind a live microphone every Saturday. In 1947, the union and clubs staged a province-wide queen carnival that raised £9700, reinforcing Taranaki-wide buy-in to the park.

Drainage problems persisted through to the 1970s and beyond. A wet day at the park saw senior club teams milling around in a mud bath that rendered their jerseys unidentifiable.

Further attempts were made to fix it after the 1957-59 Ranfurly Shield era, and several times in the late 1970s. In the end, the field was re-laid in 2011 with a sand base to bring it up to standards required for the Rugby World Cup tournament.

Other improvements were funded by the longish Shield eras (the second in 1963-65), province-wide raffles, and contributions from other sporting organisations using the park, such as athletics, cycling and softball.

Works included re-levelling of the main field, adding more terracing and seats, building additional outer grounds (there were five in the end), moving the clock to the southern end, sealing the cycle track (1949), and filling Gum Tree Valley (partly with rubbish), because its water build-up still aggravated flooding in the stadium.

More land was bought for the Star Gym project, which began in 1954. In the first of a complicated history of deals between union and council, ownership of the gym was that same year transferred to the New Plymouth City Council (which became a city in 1949).

Plans were drawn up in 1961 to move the old wooden stand to the south-east corner and build a new one where the current TSB Stand sits on the eastern touchline.

Foundation tests were completed in 1962, and the resulting report said the bores “indicated some solid ground, mainly at each extremity, but there were many obvious deep soft spots which gave cause for concern.” Roebuck Construction’s tender of \$136,331 was accepted to build the stand.

The Puke Ariki photo album and history records that a series of precast concrete piles up to 60ft (20m) long were driven into the ground there and a floor foundation laid over the site. Exterior walls were made of reinforced concrete and RSJ steel beams were used to support seating and roof structures.

Pre-stressed concrete beams were made off-site and transported to the park to be placed in position for seating and foot treads. The rear top wall was originally designed for glass, but was eventually made of asbestos fibrolite.

By the time it opened in 1965, the stand cost \$177,482. It was partly paid for by the sale of 505 \$50 season tickets and a loan of \$50,000 from the NZ Union, with the Taranaki union stumping up the remaining \$77,000.

Taranaki Stadium Trust has just two members, TRC councillor Mike Davey and council corporate services director **Mike Nield**. It’s the minimum number needed for what would ordinarily be a routine governance job.

The day *Live* talked to Nield, he wryly conceded it had suddenly become anything but. After getting the council’s long-term plan process completed without incident,

he had been looking forward to a relatively quiet couple of weeks to catch up - then, wham.

He says TRC first got involved when the Taranaki Events Centre Trust started knocking on the council's door about 1999. It had released plans in 1997 for a millennium project to turn Rugby Park into a modern multi-event stadium. The land (taken over by the district council in the 1990s) and the rugby union's assets had been vested in the trust.

“They wanted the TRC to look at it from a regional viewpoint and put in some funding. We agreed to run a public consultation process during 1999-2000. It came out that two thirds of the people wanted us to support the project, which was estimated to cost about \$17 million.

“TRC ended up putting in just under \$10 million, and the stadium was rebuilt. We put a rating system in place that recovered two thirds of that money over 10 years. So from about 2001 to 2011, ratepayers throughout the province (through their district council rating systems) contributed \$876,000 a year.”

A study showed 78 percent of the stadium's benefits accrued to New Plymouth and North Taranaki, about 17 percent to South Taranaki, and five percent to Stratford District.

On that basis, ratepayers in Stratford and South Taranaki paid on average about \$11 a year, while residents in New Plymouth District contributed about \$20, and commercial ratepayers on average parted with a little over \$100. “So everyone has had a real stake in the stadium since the turn of the century.”

About three years into the process, the events centre trust found itself under pressure, so in 2004 was taken under the wing of New Plymouth District Council, which took over the stadium operations.

Later, NPDC in turn came under financial pressure following the global financial crisis, when it found it could no longer count on \$20 million a year from its Perpetual Investment Fund.

Nield: “Long-term development and maintenance of the stadium was not occurring, and that came to a head when \$1.8 million was needed to upgrade the stadium for the 2011 Rugby World Cup.

“Our 10-year special rate scheme was due to finish about that time, but we thought it made sense to plug the hole by carrying on with it. We went out to public consultation again and got more or less the same result, with some hard questions asked by some people south of New Plymouth.

“But the deal was done to continue with the rate. The current setup was put in place in 2013-2014 for TRC to take over from NPDC the control (appointing trustees) and funding of the events centre trust, which was renamed the Taranaki Stadium Trust.

“The arrangement was for a partnership between ourselves and NPDC. There's a clear division of responsibility. We would provide \$876,000 a year for long-term

development and maintenance, and NPDC would continue to be the operator. That partnership – and the special rate – exists to this day.”

A joint committee from the two councils decides how the rates intake is to be spent. The trust signs the cheques. “It works well,” he says. “We get a lot more done than a single council operating on its own.”

Work has included replacing the old scoreboard, strengthening the stands’ roofs to take high winds, and expanding hospitality facilities to attract more and better events and corporate sponsorship (where the real money is made).

It was during one of those projects – to move food and beverage outlets in the Noel and Melva Yarrow west stand into buildings behind and add hospitality blocks - that the first signs of earthquake damage in the foundations were discovered. It had been caused by the biggest Kaikoura quake, two minutes after midnight on November 14, 2016.

“We found there had been a slight movement of the stand away from the foundations. Not good, but we decided we would repair that damage while we were doing the other work on the stand.”

Two new hospitality blocks (they have food and drink facilities, and seats in the stand) were built there to add to the stadium’s first one, the Legends Lounge in the east TSB Stand, all in time for last year’s All Blacks match against Argentina on September 9.

“In preparation for that game, they were doing some spring-cleaning, and needed to use a cherry-picker on the concourse on the first level inside the east stand. Someone asked whether it would take the weight.”

A similar problem had arisen at the Len Lye Centre when Lye’s *Trilogy* sculpture was being installed, and the gallery installed temporary propping underneath. Possibly with that in mind, the same approach was taken at the stadium - and it prompted a decision to do earthquake compliance testing after the season ended in October.

“It was the proper thing to do,” says Nield. “We had found some earthquake damage, and spotted some weak spots.” The Christchurch effect? “The industry has learned an amazing amount post-Christchurch, and building standards have definitely changed. What you build now is significantly different from what you built before.

“The assessments were done, and in November we got early advice that there were problems with the foundations underneath the east stand - particularly their design. It was likely to be declared an earthquake-prone building and there were public safety issues.”

What problems, exactly? “With that stand being on swamp land, it’s not particularly strong land.” Fill? “Correct. With the foundations, you’ve got piles going down to solid ground, and you’d also expect to find bracings going both north-south and east-west. What’s missing is the north-south.

“In the event of there being an earthquake, instead of it being a solid unit, you’d have movement. With the ground, you’d have subsidence. Not quite liquefaction, but subsidence. The biggest risk would be if the building did something like the CTV one in Christchurch and pancaked.”

The stand rated only 15 percent compliance with the Building Act 2004 code, so the stadium’s managing body, NPDC (the building control authority), had no choice but to give it an E rating. Anything under 34 percent is considered earthquake-prone, and an E (for less than 20 percent) means the risk is extremely high.

Depending on a building’s importance and public use, the rules say an owner has anything between 12.5 and 25 years to improve its rating to 67 percent.

Nield says at that stage the trust was getting ready to go to the marketplace and say: “What can be done? We’ve got a whole lot of clever engineers who have learned a lot out of Christchurch, the technology has changed significantly - can this be repaired?”

But then came the problem with the west stand.

Built on a soil embankment, it was a different proposition and required a complicated geo-technical investigation. “They got a preliminary report to us a few weeks ago to say the ground was so poor the stand would be deemed an earthquake-prone building as well.

“They knew it was fill from an old dump up behind the embankment, because they had geo-technical reports from 1999-2000. But the technology’s changed significantly since then.

“They hit some solid objects, but the report said foundations would need to go down about 30 metres before they got solid ground. They predicted that in a big earthquake, the ground could just slump in a big curve. The stand on top is well-built and rigid, but it would go with the ground and slide down.

“People in it might be okay, but there’s a likelihood the roof and boxes would break and fall onto the seating.”

The possibility of such a big earthquake happening during a game is considered miniscule, but as Nield points out, it’s not possible to contract out of public safety. “If there were fatalities, how would I feel as a trustee? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

The trust is looking at liability,” says Nield, “because if we can identify someone who is at fault and they’ve got liability insurance, there may be money to put towards remediation, which is going to be expensive.” He won’t say who might be in the frame.

It’s a matter of public record that Fletcher Construction did the recent building work. When approached by *Live*, the company said it had “build-only contracts for the East

Stand project and the West Stand extension project. We were not contracted to undertake design or geo-tech work on either project.”

Nield says it’s not accurate to say Yarrow Stadium has been written off or condemned.

“Nobody’s condemned anything, and our preference is to repair the stadium, if it can be done. Logic suggests it will be cheaper to repair the existing stands than build something new at the site or somewhere else (New Plymouth’s racecourse or vacant land outside the city are locations suggested by letters-to-the-editor writers).”

He expects the cost and complexity of modern building mean the raffles and fund-raising events that figured prominently in the stadium’s history will be supplanted by a sophisticated appeal to the marketplace.

The trust is keen to get things moving sooner rather than later, as has been the case in Christchurch, which still has no proper replacement for its wrecked rugby stadium. “I would envisage getting the fund-raising package together by the end of this year or early next,” says Nield.

John Yarrow - son of Noel and Melva - will welcome that news: “I believe personally the situation with the stadium needs to be sorted urgently,” he told *Live*.

“The public needs to know exactly what has happened and how, and we then need a go-forward plan so we don’t end up seven years later in the same situation as Canterbury.”

As a ratepayer and a major employer in the region, he says it would be unacceptable to let the situation fester as Christchurch has done. “We cannot sit on our hands and hope.

“In my humble opinion, we need a high-powered Taranaki task force to discuss in principle an urgent repair or replacement plan, and that may be in place already. That plan should be put out to the public well prior to Christmas, if not adopted by then.”

He says as a family the Yarrows are very Taranaki proud and believe strongly that the “Naki” punches well above its weight. Yarrows has sponsored rugby and other sports since the early 1990s, and has once again just taken on sponsorship of the Taranaki Bulls for 2018. “We already support the stadium and ‘Kids Eat Free’.

“We were dismayed to learn first of the problems with the TSB Stand, and then those with the Noel and Melva Stand, with the probable closure of the stadium. That news was devastating. After all, the stadium has been voted the third best sports arena in the world - and it’s true.”

He was pleased to learn this season’s NPC and Ranfurly Shield games will now be played there. “We really do congratulate the union and all involved for making this happen – a very good, pragmatic decision.”

It would be uncharitable to say out loud, but some earth engineers may now think a key factor was something that happened more than 90 years ago – the playing field was probably laid out the wrong way.

Nobody is keen to comment publicly, but is it possible the ground would have been better suited to heavy grandstands if it went west-to-east, so the touchlines ran alongside the original hillsides encasing the stream valley?

The early photo at the start of this article seems to show what happened: earth was cut from those hillsides to shape the ground and its end terraces and fill the west and east ends. Test bores have confirmed solid ground lies at least 30 metres below the west embankment and nearly as far below the east side.

Test bores were drilled recently on the north and south terraces to check their capacity to hold 14,000 people. “The testing was simply to ensure they could be used for the upcoming Mitre 10 National Provincial Championship games,” says Nield. “It confirmed the ground was strong enough for the weight of people attending a game.

“The testing was not designed to - nor was it extensive enough to - confirm whether the weight of stands could be put on the terraces. More work would be required to consider such an option - such an option is not currently on our radar.”

If all else fails, such an extraordinary measure might have to be.

Rickards ready thanks to Coops

By Will Johnston

Rugby coaches will tell you their approach to the job is shaped by many influences.

Those curious to know what helped shape Willie Rickards need look no further than his family - he and his wife Anna named their second child Cooper.

The new head coach of the Taranaki Bulls reckons Colin Cooper taught him much.

His predecessor has been an inspiration, he says, as well as a wonderful friend and a sounding board giving him some direct feedback when he needed it.

“If you ask a lot of ex-players or staff who’ve worked with him, they don’t so much talk about the coach he is, more about the great man that he is,” he says.

“The learnings I’ve had from him are more around how he lives his life, his values, how much his family means to him, how he treats people – those have been key things for me.”

Aged 34 and a former Taranaki provincial player, Rickards took over as head coach last November after Cooper accepted the same role with Super Rugby side, the Chiefs. He was Cooper’s sideline man from 2015.

He has now had time to soak up the honour of being appointed top coach. “I was lucky to have played for Taranaki (at centre), and I had an opportunity to captain the side, which was another massive privilege. Now to be the lead is something special.”

Before the start of their 2018 Mitre 10 Cup campaign, his team will play two Heartland provinces in pre-season Ranfurly Shield defences in Tikorangi and Hawera. Rickards is not taking the matches against Poverty Bay and Whanganui lightly - they are his first as head coach, so in a way his toughest challenge so far.

The games will be exciting for club players, he says, because Taranaki will be without its Super Rugby players. There have also been changes to the rugby union’s organisation (new CEO Jeremy Parkinson started in January), and the coaching setup will also be new.



“We’ll be defending the shield with our top club performers, and that’s something to be excited about, rather than overwhelmed or daunted. It’s why the club programme has been a big focus for us.”

He has had assistant coaches Leo Crowley and Paul Tito devote large parts of their role to the club competition, working with players and coaches. He is also confident he has inherited a well-oiled machine, so while there will be some change, it will be nothing drastic.

“Coops was one of the first people to say to me: ‘You’ve got to put your own spin on it.’ So, it’s an 80-20 approach – 80 percent you have to keep the same, because there is a lot of good here, but with the other 20 percent you have to look at things differently.

“You look at players differently, training differently and schedules differently. We are always looking to grow and develop our players and our game.”

Rickards’ strengths as a coach appear to be his connections with people and an ability to build relationships with players and staff.

“That starts with spending time with people, and then you start to build trust. Once you have trust, you can start doing anything. You’re in a position to know to put your arm around a player’s shoulder or give him a boot up the backside to get the best out of him.”

Having been a player helps, he believes. “I was never a rock-star player, but I’ve been in similar shoes around Mitre 10 Cup time. I have good empathy about what they’re going through and on the back of that I can give guidance and shared experiences.”

He will base the season around what he calls the “three Cs”, the first being “continuity”. Rickards is proud of what the team has achieved over the years. “We have been a consistent top four team, we won the championship in 2014, been in the semi-finals in 2015, 2016 and 2017. This year’s about continuity in performance.”

The second is “connection” with Parkinson and several other new staff members. He wants everyone to feel part of the organisation that will operate around the team.

The third is “community”. He says it is important the Taranaki Bulls and the organisation is integrated with the community, especially in schools and within club rugby. “We need to be sure the impact we have is positive and something we’re proud of.”

He is confident the team roster is in a good position. Although captain Charlie Ngatai has been lost to Lyon in France, 90 percent of players from the last couple of years will be staying on.

Recruits include former Francis Douglas Memorial College midfielder Tei Walden, who has been playing in Otago since leaving school. We’ve brought Jesse Parete back from Bay of Plenty, to bolster the lock and loose forward space, and Chris Gawler is another Taranaki player returning to us.

“We always keep the door open for players who want to move away or travel.”

Speaking of which, Rickards takes a never-say-never approach about having a Barrett line up. “Scott, Jordie and Beaudie are contracted to us, so it would be wonderful to have them home for a game.

“But even if they’re not playing for us, look at the influence – they’re still inspiring Taranaki people. What I admire about them is they always acknowledge where they came from, their upbringing.”

Even without a Barrett or two, Rickards says the roster is looking strong, with a challenge of re-integrating Super players back into the domestic season.

The second challenge is around the stadium.

“The thing that will combat that is the people. It’s not about bricks and mortar, it’s about people. From our fans in the community to our front office staff, we have great people. We’re happy we’re at Yarrow Stadium - it’s important to us. It’s our past, it’s our history, it’s our home in Taranaki.”

Taranaki begins its Mitre 10 Cup season with an away game against Bay of Plenty on August 18. The first home match - and Ranfurly Shield defence - at Yarrow Stadium is against Manawatu on August 24:

Taranaki Bulls fixtures in 2018

Saturday, July 28, 2.35pm, Tikorangi Domain: v Poverty Bay (pre-season match and **Ranfurly Shield** defence).

Saturday, August 4, 2.35pm, Hicks Park, Hawera: v Whanganui (pre-season match and **Ranfurly Shield** defence).

Saturday, August 18, 7:35pm, Rotorua International Stadium: v Bay of Plenty (Mitre 10 Cup).

Friday, August 24, 7.45pm, Yarrow Stadium: v Manawatu (**Ranfurly Shield** defence and Mitre 10 Cup).

Wednesday August 29, 7.35pm, Ecolight Stadium, Pukekohe: v Counties Manukau (Mitre 10 Cup).

Sunday, September 2, 4.35pm, Toll Stadium, Whangarei: v Northland (Mitre 10 Cup).

Sunday, September 9, 4:35pm, Yarrow Stadium: v Waikato (**Ranfurly Shield** defence and Mitre 10 Cup).

Friday, September 14, 7.45pm, Trafalgar Park, Nelson: v Tasman (Mitre 10 Cup).

Saturday, September 22, 7.35pm, Yarrow Stadium: v Auckland (**Ranfurly Shield** defence and Mitre 10 Cup).

Saturday, September 29, 5.05pm, Yarrow Stadium: v North Harbour (**Ranfurly Shield** defence and Mitre 10 Cup).

Saturday, October 6, 7.35pm, AMI Stadium, Christchurch: v Canterbury (Mitre 10 Cup).

Friday, October 12, 7.35pm, Yarrow Stadium: v Wellington – (**Ranfurly Shield** defence and Mitre 10 Cup).