

Rugby's annus awful-ness

I'm guessing that if anyone can claim to have predicted Taranaki's awful rugby season, they won't be speaking up. Yet the signs were all there - in the form of cumulative losses of top managers and players, and the crippling of Yarrow Stadium.

No provincial rugby union is strong enough to sustain significant blows like those without something giving way. I don't know the exact statistics, but I'm guessing this will be one of the worst performances by Taranaki in decades, with the Bulls relegated out of the top echelon, a place they seem to have inhabited forever.

While the players are ultimately responsible for score-lines, it would be harsh to let them take all the flak. High performance sport operates on a razor edge these days and outcomes are affected by the slightest factor.

Like not having the roar of your home crowd echoing across the ground as you put pressure on the opposition. Ferdie does his best, but greatly diminished crowds hanging in there at the distant ends of the playing arena can't provide the atmosphere that spurs a team at key moments.

The uncertainties created by having to abandon the stadium's familiar facilities, the temporary feeling of training alternatives, the lack of atmosphere in hastily erected sheds, a new corner entry to the ground, have created a sense of dislocation that casts every game as an away fixture.

Those unfortunate influences would have been enough on their own to shake any side, but couple them with other big changes at Taranaki Rugby Football Union, along with the impact of injuries and All Black call-ups, and the effect has been disastrous. The players would have been superhuman to come through unscathed.

The slide began with the Chiefs. Taranaki manager Mike Collins did the job well enough here to get himself promoted to the same role at the Waikato-based Super Rugby franchise, leaving after last year's highly successful season. By coincidence (or not) we lost one of New Zealand's best coaches, Colin Cooper, to the same place.

Their replacements are doing their best, but the kind of miracle changeover we've seen in Christchurch with the break-dancer is unusual. New managers and coaches need time to settle in and put their own stamp on things. Just taking over the team would have been a big enough challenge without having to deal with the stadium traumas as well.

The stadium has been its own enigma. Initially condemned as highly susceptible write-offs because of earthquake risk, the stands seem to have morphed into semi-habitable-when-suits repositories for those with influence and work-people prepared to ignore the hazard.

For example, how did the western stand go from being a rigid structure likely to topple forward in one piece and slide down the slope, killing and injuring all within it, to a place where TV staff and hospitality suite habitués can safely see out hours of rugby? Would they ride the structure down the hill, yahoing with the exhilaration of it all?

How come it's now safe for dozens of lucky people to sit under tents along the eastern touchline, when towering above them is a structure that is apparently so poorly braced it would be expected to crumble in a big quake?

And while we're talking about the east stand, how did those enormous advertising banners that now cover much of the seating get there? By drone? Did whoever erect them have to sign forms that somehow protect the Taranaki Regional Council, the New Plymouth District Council and the rugby union from liability? What do the insurers have to say?

OK, needs must: something obviously had to be done to keep the season at least partially on track. A number exceeding \$2 million has been mentioned in terms of paying for temporary facilities, although who is actually paying that is unclear.

Personally, I'm beginning to side with those who say this is starting to resemble the meth house false alarm. I've heard a rumour, completely unsubstantiated, that another rugby union elsewhere in the country encountered the same problem with its stadium but somehow managed to keep the matter under wraps and quietly got on with fixing it. Tempting thought.

One other thing hasn't helped. I was as delighted as anyone to see Angus Ta'avao perform for the ABs, but the timing in losing such an able captain (who replaced the equally missed Charlie Ngatai) was unfortunate. Let's not even mention Triple T, the Barretts, Waisake...