

## Huge smile on two long legs

No offence to Smiley Barrett, but if Legs Eliason hadn't presented on the rugby field with such an impossibly long pair of pins, an ideal nickname for the Kaponga man would have referred to his much showing of the pearly whites.

Did anyone ever meet him and not get that broad, welcoming smile? Don't think so.

At the celebration of Ian Matheson Eliason's life - attended by several hundred people at New Plymouth's TSB Stadium following his untimely death from a brain tumour in February – his son Matthew mentioned one or two moments on the farm when he'd departed from the programme and Dad Legs showed a bit of disapproval. But it never lasted into the next day.

Everyone who spoke remembered an eternally cheerful man, who approached life and other people with such warmth and genuine interest beyond his own realm that none could imagine him angry.

Determined, yes. Committed, hell yes. You come up with the synonyms - they'll all be apt when describing this extraordinary human being, who delighted friends, family, rugby contemporaries...and strangers in lifts carrying violin cases.

That was mentioned in one of the eulogies. Ian and family were on holiday in the US and standing in a hotel lift when a tiny (by comparison to Ian, anyway) woman hopped in. She had a violin case.

He asked if it concealed a gun. A violin, she said, not twiggling to the joker. Play a bit? Yes, said the woman – do you? Only the fool, said Legs.

He always knew when to end the tomfoolery and how to employ self-deprecation so nobody took offence. Life was for fun, but not the hurtful kind.

Grandson Lucca recalled being in Ian's car when he realised Poppa was going down a one-way street the wrong way. Ian laughed as he corrected, but then Lucca saw they were driving the wrong way down another one-way street, the car still resounding with mirth.

I didn't know Ian personally, but I watched him play rugby for Taranaki for a decade. Two things stand out in my memory, one being his resilience when he played on in a provincial rep match with a broken leg, even scoring a try.

"C'mon Legs, you can do it," said one of his teammates, who learned later to his amazement that the leg was broken. Colin Meads was hailed a legend when he took on the Springboks with his half-healed broken arm in a leather protector. Legs had a pressure bandage...on a broken leg.

There are those reading this who will be old enough to recall mid-winter days at Rugby Park in the 60s and 70s, when it was freezing cold, the rain horizontal and the ground could only be described as a bog.

It was on one of those that I sat in the comparative warmth of the old press box on top of the western terraces, scribbling notes for the story I would later bash out for that night's *Taranaki Sports Edition*.

Roger “Spider” Urbahn was there for the *Taranaki Daily News*, and probably Leo Walsh before he became provincial coach, Brian Bellringer and Des Paul. Behind us through a glass window were a couple of women selling pies, or not.

Because there was nobody in the ground apart from the ref, his touch judges, the ball boys...and 30 players. They’d have been unrecognisable because of the mud. All but one of them, that is.

As play wheeled around the halfway line, the ball impossible to grasp and all play confined to the mystery of rucks and scrums, there towering above was a giant with several players hanging off him or binding to him, all seeming the size of schoolboys compared to his big frame.

I turned to Roger, a kindly man who looked after novice rugby reporters like me, and asked what seemed an obvious question: “How come Legs stays with Kaponga? He could be playing for any of the bigger clubs, couldn’t he?”

Roger was never one to put anyone down, but he looked at me and sighed: “Jim, you’ve got a way to go before you understand how Taranaki club rugby works.”

Many of those “schoolboys” would have been at the stadium to hear the tributes to Ian. Dozens of Kaponga club members formed a guard of honour for his departing casket. Older men now, each one could have told a dozen better stories than mine about their great friend.

Go well, friend to everyone.