

Arts v sport is a needless disjunct

One of Taranaki's great strengths is the range of interests pursued by its people. We follow or engage in many diversions, sports and hobbies.

Some people, however, behave as though there's an irreconcilable split between the physical and the cerebral.

In their scenario, sport has the upper hand. It has more devotees from a greater range of backgrounds, probably because it's more readily accessible and a route to health, employment, even renown.

Obversely, the arts have to fight for every centimetre of advantage, but enjoy patronage that some believe attracts a disproportionate share of public money.

I was reminded of this last weekend while sitting in the car in a dark backstreet a block away from the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, listening to the final minutes of Taranaki's rugby win over Counties-Manukau.

When the whistle went, my shout of joy would have been heard from the gallery. I strode there feeling pumped by such an auspicious sign of recovery from last season's downer run.

I was dying to impart the good news when I arrived 20 minutes late for the opening of a new exhibition, but the crowd in the big space at the top of the Len Lye Centre's ramp was pre-occupied.

Something struck me: why would they start such an event at 6pm when Taranaki's match ended at 6.15pm?

The organisers probably didn't know, and even if they did, would have believed there was no clash, that their arts occasion had little appeal for sports followers.

But how presumptuous is it to assume that all Taranaki people confine their interests exclusively to the arts or sport, and can't do both?

Very presumptuous, if my experience is anything to go by. The majority of my friends and most of the wide range of people I interview for articles or write books about are interested in both.

They attend Womad (if they can afford it), play occasional rounds of golf or a few ends of bowls, watch rugby and cricket on TV...and take in the occasional play, show or art gallery exhibition, or display at Puke Ariki Museum.

Thing is, there's a wide choice. Each pastime attracts its core following who go to every occasion, but for many of us there seems no great need to commit to regular attendance.

It wasn't like that while I was growing up. My parents had no interest in the arts, but took us to every Ranfurly Shield defence, and never missed a race meeting. The beach played a big part in our lives, but we knew bugger all about Shakespeare or Picasso.

After the Govett-Brewster opened in 1970, Mayor Denny Sutherland summed up for the majority of his fellow Taranakians when he said a Billy Apple installation comprised of hessian sacking draped over a metal frame looked like a "Rugby Park dunny".

He was outraged when he discovered Apple had scattered broken neon glass tubing down the internal fire escape stairwell and spelled the F-word with it on the top step. The mayor's supposedly philistine reaction amused art fanciers.

Nobody would bat an eye today, given the extremes to which the arts have gone since then to shock and repel us.

Now the joke is over. Many of the so-called great unwashed ignore art...unless it's going to hit their pockets. It has for some people in Taranaki with New Plymouth District Council's foolish move to charge "outsiders" to see Len Lye.

It embarrasses those of us who want to show our out-of-town visitors what's in the stunning-looking building at the top of town.

It enrages Taranakians from outside the district, mystifies tourists who can get in to everything else free, and probably perplexes people from cities like Whanganui, which tried charging for its public art gallery and abandoned the strategy as a failure.

The Len Lye entry fee is a political strategy by the mayor and some councillors to court what they think is a body of arts-indifferent voters who originally opposed the centre.

There may still be disapproval, but that's most likely generated by the scarcity of working Len Lye sculptures, something I noted at the art occasion.

I did arrive in time for the opening speeches, and something else struck me as odd. The exhibition was pitched as a "spirited conversation" between a current artist and Len Lye, yet when the lead speakers (the gallery's new joint curators) thanked people, they didn't mention John Matthews – the man who made the Len Lye Centre possible.