

Rugby's chance to leave pedestal

If like me you want to take a guess at where rugby is headed, look at what's happening to other ailing New Zealand institutions...and check out Mark Robinson's hint.

The NZ Rugby Union leader didn't mean to hint, I suspect, but there it was in the last thing he said to the *Daily News* about the implications of a big report on rugby's future.

"We know that rugby in our regions has a rich and proud history and we want to maintain those connections," he said.

On face value, that's just the usual PR crap you get when an organisation is on the defensive and is about to do something we won't like.

But beneath it lies a truth we can guess at – that the organisation headed by this man with strong Taranaki connections is about to do something necessarily radical to save the game from a slow death, and one of his biggest challenges is not alienating the aging support base, the people who created the history.

A big ask. New Zealand is strongly parochial. It's geographic divisions encourage clusters of territoriality whose pride is expressed in communal achievement, best displayed through sporting contest.

Robinson's "rich history" was created by a century of unforgiving combat on cow-pat strewn paddocks, preceded by insults and followed by jovial imbibing. Town versus town, province versus province, is where his "pride" reference sheets home.

Parochialism always means trouble when independent groups face amalgamation. Some of us still wonder about the last big one affecting Taranaki rugby, the Super Rugby shift we made from the Wellington-based Hurricanes to the Hamilton-based Chiefs.

Do you recall the promises about how much better we would do? We were down to one Hurricanes match a season if we were lucky, so it seemed logical to believe the Chiefs when they talked about getting at least a couple.

We got two, at first. Then the Chiefs were lured away to Fiji for a game, and guess who lost out to allow that to happen?

It seems logical to compare that experience with what might be about to happen with inter-provincial rugby. Where do we end up? We're geographically on the arse end of anything you can dredge up in your mind.

If we're amalgamated without too much thought, the Taranaki Rugby Union will be part of something like the Chiefs grouping. Let's hope they get on with the Mt Messenger and Awakino improvements to rid us of the mental and physical barriers that have always hemmed in our north.

If the coming merger is much more limited, we'll feel entitled to take over Whanganui. If it needs to be bigger, arguments will start over whether Palmerston North is to be HQ or New Plymouth (how about Hawera or Whanganui?).

A clue lies in other reorganising arenas like horse racing and polytechs. The latter face a bleak reality, one that from my experience is linked to the country's unemployment level. If people can't get a job, they train. That crams the polys and gives their bureaucrats unrealistic views of the world.

Unemployment has been low for a while, so polytechs are merging the bureaucratic end of their operations to save money on duplication. But that's just stage one, the easy bit. It will get tricky when what become lean branch operations don't perform any better and savings from the top-end aren't enough.

Again, Taranaki is a problem because of our isolation. If the current fiddling doesn't help, watch for the suggestion that all business is centred on Palmerston North, and Bell St is merely a set of classrooms. And beyond that, they're closed.

The big rugby rethink is a useful excuse for Yarrow Stadium naysayers to raise their ugly heads, but let me attempt to make them more handsome. Surely the coinciding of two such weighty issues is a rare chance to sort the future in a constructive way.

As Winston is doing with racing, start by looking at what you own and sell it off to finance a modern future in which sports diversity is the reality. Does rugby own anything? It doesn't own Yarrow, so what more can it do than hold out its hand?

Through Sports Taranaki, every other Taranaki sport is looking hard at its prospects, and from that exercise an appropriate renewal ought to emerge. Join the party, rugby - it might be your last chance to avoid being sucked into a national initiative you won't like.