

## Was first NZ rugby played in Taranaki?

There's an old rule in journalism that says beware claims involving superlatives, the most dangerous of which may be "first".

I learned the rule early, after interviewing a man who claimed to have grown the biggest pumpkin/marrow/tomato/runner bean or whatever. The day after my story appeared in the *Taranaki Herald*, someone wrote a letter to the editor saying his (whatever vegetable) was bigger. And it was.

You'll not be surprised, then, to know my interest was piqued by a *Sunday Star-Times* review of sports writer Ron Palenski's latest book, *Our Game*, which dethrones Nelson as the place where we supposedly played our first game of rugby in 1870.

Palenski found an advertisement in the *Wanganui Herald* promoting a game that was to be played on June 12, 1869 – "under the Rugby Rules", which was likely referring to the first set of laws issued by England's Rugby School in 1845.

You know the story: in 1823, a pupil there, William Webb Ellis, picked up a soccer ball and ran with it, leading more than two decades later to the school publishing its rules for the new game. Other English schools did, too..

Rugby School's rulebook can be found on its website and is worth a look for the amusement value; teams were allowed to have hundreds of players, there was no tackling except for the holding of one arm (good sense), and matches could last for hours, days even.

It was okay to play on a pitch with trees: "A player having touched the ball straight for a tree, and touched the tree with it, may drop from either side if he can, but the opposite side may oblige him to go to his own side of the tree."



Illustration of early rugby at the English School by the same name.

Image: Rugby School

The Palenski claim looks solid, but only because newspaper advertisements and stories prior to 1869 don't mention rugby rules.

There were plenty of mentions of "football", but as the *SST* says, several variations existed in those days, including soccer, Australian Rules, rugby rules from other English public schools, and mixtures of more than one.

A *Taranaki Herald* report (on *Papers Past*) from April 1, 1874, seems to settle any arguments that Wanganui did beat Taranaki to it, saying people celebrated the province's 33rd anniversary with an exhibition and "on Poverty Flat witnessing the first football match in New Plymouth".

**THE thirty-third anniversary of the Province (31st March) was celebrated by a general holiday. The public offices, banks, and stores were closed, and all who did not visit the country were at the exhibition or on Poverty Flat witnessing the first football match in New Plymouth. The weather was delightful, and therefore it enabled all who kept the holiday to enjoy themselves to the utmost.**

However, that story may contradict an advertisement in the same paper on February 13, 1868, which announced an Ancient Order of Foresters fete at Standish's Farm on February 16 - at which "foot ball" would be contested.

Whatever was played preceded the Whanganui event by more than a year, but no reports seem to exist to confirm it was rugby.

There's further evidence football of some form was played in New Plymouth as early as 1866.

That year, an advertisement appeared on the *Taranaki Herald* front page on 14 occasions promoting the sale of "first class Cricketing material, Archery, Football and various sports and games..." that could be imported from Sydney.

British troops came to Taranaki in large numbers in the late 1850s as clouds gathered for the first of the Land Wars (1860), and as stories in newspapers elsewhere suggested, they were keen on their footie.

Sadly, NZ newspapers failed to describe exactly what kind - until that fateful advert now discovered by Palenski.

New Plymouth wasn't the only Taranaki town to play football. That leaves open a claim from the other end of the province, Patea, which by 1873 was engaged in regular annual home-and-away matches against Whanganui.

Did those begin in Patea in the late 1860s? I've been unable to find out.

Another intriguing aspect is the reference to "Poverty Flat" or "Poverty Square" as the venue for New Plymouth's earliest sporting contests. It occupied land later taken for Central School.

Cricket was played there as early as 1864, and it was later the scene of regular football matches between the Egmont and Taranaki Clubs.

A report in 1874 indicates the rules had changed since 1845, with full tackling now allowed: "The members of both clubs displayed a large amount of energy in kicking

Amusements.



A. O. F.

FORESTERS' FETE.

**T**HE FORESTERS' ANNUAL FETE will take place, by the kind permission of Mr. Rossiter, at his Farm (Standish's), on TUESDAY, 16th instant.

The Brethren of the Order will march in procession from the Foresters' Hall, at 1 p.m. sharp, to the grounds.

The Sports to consist of

ARCHERY,  
FOOT BALL,  
CRICKET,  
FOOT RACES,  
FIRE BALLOON, &c.

**M.** McMAHON, BRUSH and COMB Manufacturer. Importer of first-class Cricketing material, Archery, Football, and various sports and games; portmanteaus, valises, travelling bags; perfumery and fancy goods of every description. Cricket clubs supplied.  
410, GEORGE-STREET, SYDNEY.

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the ball, which at times was seen bounding over the flat...then hurriedly snatched up by some swift runner, who would make for the other goal, until arrested in his flight and borne to the ground. Then followed a scuffle..."

Sounds about right.