

Keeping hold of the log-o'-wood

Who'd want to be Ian Foster. Appointed All Blacks coach despite many rugby followers thinking Canterbury's Scott Robertson was the logical choice, he faces some particularly thorny decisions.

His dilemmas are much like those that confronted All Blacks and Taranaki selectors back in the early 1960s.

When Neil Wolfe returned to New Plymouth from university in Wellington at the end of 1962, he was one of the best-known rugby players in the world.

Over following seasons - ones that included a famous Ranfurly Shield era (1963-65) - Wolfe's coach in Taranaki, John Stewart, was presented with the same problem as Foster: too many extraordinary players.

Stewart preferred Ross Brown over Wolfe for first five-eighth, which meant the latter was played out of position for the best years of his career, costing him a place in the All Blacks (something not helped by a serious injury in 1963).

Only coaching genius Fred Allen later realised what had happened, picking Wolfe as a first-five for a tour to Australia in 1968.

Stewart believed his best chance of holding on to the shield after Taranaki won it off Wellington near the end of 1963 was to go defensive, encouraging Brown to become a strategic kicking (and dropkick) maestro.

Brown often got more than one droppie in a single match to help his side hold on to the log-of-wood against teams with superior attacks.

The alternative - Wolfe at first five eighths and Brown at second, as used successfully by the All Blacks in 1961 - would have employed Wolfie's wonderfully unpredictable flair at key pivot to play a more expansive game. It could have been just as successful, but we were never to know.

With that in mind, how will Foster deal with a similar scenario? He has four stars to accommodate - first-fives Beauden Barrett and Richie Mo'unga, and fullbacks Jordie Barrett and Damian McKenzie. All must play, surely - but in what positions?

Is it possible to conceive of a Wolfe-Brown-like double act, with Beauden and Mo'unga playing interchangeably at first and second-five? There's no guarantee of success: Dan Carter never looked comfortable when tried one place further out for Canterbury.

Foster's other challenge is who to put at fullback: Jordie and McKenzie are both playing extraordinarily well there.

Either could go out to the wing, an old stop-gap that invariably diminishes the impact of whoever has that lesser card dealt to them (and denies the presence of a specialist winger).

In Neil Wolfe's case, he was often stuck at centre by Stewart, and although he had his moments of irrepressible success, it was not his natural position. Will Foster be tempted to try that for Jordie or McKenzie? Or will he resort to the wing or the bench?

Whatever he does, he risks further opprobrium from Taranaki, which has just reminded the world its rugby resilience remains forever boundless, despite a horror 2019 without earthquake-condemned Yarrow Stadium, and patchy success on the field.

Few who have watched Lachlan Boshier's ascent in ruck ball retrieval skills to the heights of former All Blacks skipper Ritchie McCaw and his Ozzie counterpart, Michael Hooper, can figure out why Foster overlooked him when choosing the initial ABs squad.

The irony is that Boshier's misfortune (surely temporary) is Taranaki's good luck, because (at the time of writing) it means he'll still be here to help defend the shield, rather than heading off to the All Blacks training camp at Whakatane with the Barretts and promising young Taranaki lock Tupou Vaa'i.

The point I'm heading for is the one Stewart faced nearly 60 years ago as his team drove back to Taranaki on a bus, stopping at every small town north of Whenuakura to hold the shield aloft and receive the adulation of thousands: how will Taranaki hold on to it? Playing expansively or defensively?

Boshier is a key figure. His amazing turnover in the interminable pileups during the last minutes of Taranaki's win against Canterbury, plus four crucial ones before that, points the way to success for Taranaki.

Barrett brilliance is always fantastic to have, but in the end a JJ Stewart mentality, a defensive wall that never misses a tackle, may be the best way to make more Taranaki Ranfurly Shield history.

Taranaki's coaches have a wealth of emerging talent to choose from...and fewer of the dilemmas faced by Foster.