

Please, God, make me an All Black

What makes a good biography? Just about any Kiwi you care to name.

Most will modestly tell you otherwise. They'll say an account of their life would make a pretty short book. But then they'll be able to talk about this so-called nondescript existence for hours and hours, and after a bit of hard labour by me, there it is, a book, and a bloody good read, at that.

Not because of my writing, but because the subject matter will be of interest to the rest of us as a personal journey through recent New Zealand history, a unique viewpoint of things that filled news media, made some people famous and others notorious, and ensured we're special in a tough world. It'll also reveal where exactly someone originated; there's always a surprise or two there.

This can apply to anyone. But what if that person has done extraordinary things, is remembered for reasons that will endure time? That's a different story, and I'm feeling elated this week after publication of just such an account, a book with a single word title, such is the central figure's fame. Wolfie.

If you live in Taranaki there's only a slight chance, slender as a cobweb, you won't know who I'm talking about. Never mind. I'll explain anyway. "Wolfie" is Neil Wolfe, a former All Black whose rugby feats are locked into the memories of every aging follower of the game, Taranakian or not.

His rapid rise to prominence began in 1956 when he was a fourth former at New Plymouth Boys High School. A gruff and most-times scary teacher called "JJ" singled him out after a lower grade match on the New Plymouth racecourse.

Neil: "He said: 'Bend over, Wolfe' and he whacked me once on the arse with his cane - not very hard - and said: 'Next time you get the ball, pass it, don't kick it. And by the way, you're playing for the first fifteen on Saturday'."

That half-hearted corporal punishment launched a coach-player relationship lasting nearly two decades and eventually led to both men achieving international rugby acclaim. Wolfie became a renowned All Black and John Stewart an All Black coach.

It seems no accident that from the time Neil started playing for JJ's first fifteen the team - hitherto with a decidedly patchy record - went on a five-year unbeaten run.

After his four years in the firsts (1959 as skipper), Neil went to Wellington in 1960 and played so well in a pre-season friendly featuring many current All Blacks, he went close to selection at age 18 for that year's All Blacks tour to South Africa. He would have been second youngest of all time. He didn't quite make it, thank heavens, because they were beaten in all four tests.

It was quite a different story a year later. At 19, he was picked at first five-eighths for the national side, which took out a rated French touring team by three tests to nil. Neil's performances were such that hardened rugby scribes like Terry McLean, Alex Veysey and Gabe David struggled for words to describe his quicksilver skills and thinking. Newspapers around the rugby world raved.

One in London's Fleet St despatched a reporter to the mining valleys of inner Wales to track down Neil's Welsh rellies. An aunt delivered what to me is the best quote in

my book, an observation about the rugby-mad 11-year-old who had visited from New Zealand with his parents.

“He said his prayers every night before bed,” she recalled. “After praying for everyone in the family, he’d say: ‘And please God, make me an All Black’.” God obliged. Even from the heavens it must have been obvious this young Taranaki kid was someone special with a rugby ball.

When I mentioned to people I was doing a book about Neil, some were concerned dementia might have robbed him of his recall of such things. How untrue that turned out to be.

We spent eight hours together while he related in detail many wonderful memories he has of those rugby days. He even remembered the Queen’s first visit to New Plymouth in 1954, when he and the Taranaki school choir sang her a Taranaki Maunga song at Pukekura Park.

He sang every word to me in a movingly melodic Welsh way.

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