



Unsuccessful tries and eventual conversion

*Singular recollections of rugby
in New Zealand in the 1960s*

by **MURRAY BRAMWELL**

I THINK THE YEAR MUST HAVE BEEN 1958. It is Palmerston North, a large-ish town in New Zealand's North Island. I am at a school like many, all up and down the country. Hokowhitu Primary School, with maybe four hundred other kids – boys with fair-isle jumpers and freckles

and ringworm haircuts, the girls in plaits and white ankle socks, the teachers in tweed with pipes and brown brogue shoes. It is a school assembly and the deputy head is winding his way through a long list of notices and dire warnings, class information and sports results – and then I hear my name mentioned. My name is never mentioned. I am a pale, nondescript kid, shorter than most, always in the front row of the school photo. The word for me, made popular by Charles Atlas body-building courses of the day, was *puny*.

I am named at assembly for an exceptional act – so my peers are told. It occurred during sports on Monday afternoon during the rugby match between two scratch teams from our school. I was in the back line and when I was charged by a much bigger, heavier player I dived at him, wrapped my arms around his calves and tackled him to the ground. This was a creditable action on my part, the deputy told the school – it showed guts and a determination to play hard despite the odds.

I would have remembered this event more clearly – then, and now, as I struggle to reconstruct it 53 years later – if I had not been semi-concussed at the time. It is all very well to apply the tackle grip around the lower legs of an adversary, but, rather like felling a very large tree, you have to have worked out in advance where it's going to land. And, of course, this player fell on me. He fell across my face, whacking my forehead and my squinting eyes and beaky nose while the back of my head hit the not very soft turf of the playing field.

Most of this recount is not actually a memory, more a factual summary I am entitled to concoct. However, I do actually remember what was going through my head before I made this decision to step in front of the equivalent of a moving truck – and that was that I had no choice. This was rugby and if you let your man through you were a failure, or worse, a chicken. Never mind that the mixed ability of the team also extended to an extreme

disparity in weight. Never mind that there were no other sports available to play. The fact was that you went on to the field and, if needs be, you spilt your blood. You didn't complain and you certainly didn't ask why.

So on that day I was elevated to the highest attention of my school. My tackle was described rather as if I had taken out a machine gun post or wrestled someone stealing a handbag. The fact that I was carted off the field and was wobbling about like Daffy Duck with an aura of dizzy stars was quite irrelevant to my moment of sporting gallantry.



I DECIDED RIGHT THEN that this was a rather painful way to get an elephant stamp...

(or perhaps a rather too literal one) and, in future games, discretion became the greater part of valour as Falstaff so ignobly put it. I played Centre and Wing – well out of harm's way. Especially, because when I played the next season in the Hokowhitu C team, riding my bike to Ongley Park in the sleety winter weather, I knew we had a secret weapon.

His name was Bruce Adcock and he was First Five Eight. He lived near us and his father yelled at him a lot – and maybe that meant he had more to live up to than me. Whatever it was,

he was like a streak of lightning, very greased lightning. No-one could get near him, let alone tackle him. He stomped and fended his way to the try line and scored all our points. The ball never got past him. For half a season at Centre I never even touched the ball. When I was Wing I fed the ball to the lineout. That was it. No glory now, of course. No mention in dispatches. But I wasn't being brained on a weekly basis either and, I am ashamed to say, that counted for more.

And this is the point, on the brink of adolescence and all that it entailed, when we puny weaklings started to take a dim view of our national sport. We all went to the big games of course. At high school – Palmerston North Boys' High to be exact – rugby was a very serious matter. Our first XV team played curtain-raiser when Manawatu/Horowhenua played the British Lions and we all marched to the ground wearing our eight-foot scarves, bellowing the various school cheers and sitting on planks of wood like duckboards in the mud on the sideline.



RUGBY IN THE EARLY
1960s was an
important and solemn
part of New Zealand life.



Men like the great goal kicker Don Clarke and the front row prop Stan Meads were grim, purposeful blokes who looked more like our grandfathers than even our fathers. With their short back and sides Brylcreemed hair, their cauliflower ears and their open shirt collars tucked over their jacket lapels, they were Kiwi archetypes. In daily life they were (or would have been) farmers, freezing workers, or colourful racing identities – and while they looked middle aged they were just young men in their twenties.

Our school had a very good rugby team. And we had a very good coach. His name was Colquhoun but his nickname was *Coke*. He was also surreptitiously called *One-Ball* because it was rumoured that he had only one testicle. It was also said that he caned with his left hand because he drew blood with his right. The veracity of that was unknown since, amidst the carnage of the school's corporal punishment, he never caned anyone. He never had to. He maintained perfect discipline on reputation alone.

Coke was not a principal or a deputy but he was a powerful figure in the school. He was Master of the Boarders' Residence, Officer-in-Charge of the Cadet corps and he coached the First XV. He was also a very good English teacher but even when I once topped his class it meant very little since, by then, I was clearly a rugby malingerer and a cadets avoider. And – like nearly everybody at the school – I was trying to grow my hair long. In 1964 that meant having any hair around your ears at all. It was the fault of the Beatles, of course. And the Stones and the Animals and the Pretty Things and the Who. The school generally (and my parents in particular) recognised that this was the thin end of a very big wedge. As history was to prove, they were right. Everything from civil rights to the invasion of Prague had something to do with the freedom flag of hair.

My friend John Loveday was at the centre of this vortex in June 1964. I remember going into the boys' toilets at school and finding John, a close friend and, in junior years my frequent protector against the hyena bullies of the fourth form, standing in front of the mirror. He was combing his wiry coarse hair forward over his forehead like a rather strange verandah – in a manner similar to that of Ringo Starr. He also had tears streaming down his face.

It is disconcerting to see a fourteen-stone schoolboy cry, especially when he is a key front row forward in the school rugby team. John had just come from footy practice and a confrontation

with Coke. John had announced he wasn't able to attend next Thursday's practice because he was going to Wellington with a busload of other teens to see the Beatles play in Wellington Town Hall. Even among Beatles fans, John was fanatical, a devotee. He sang in a cover band called Boys named after an early B-side. He loved the Fabs and was trying to grow his afro hair into a trademark Liverpool mop. But Coke had other ideas. You can go to the concert he said, as reasonable as a viper, but, if you do, you are out of the team.



MORE THAN FORTY YEARS LATER
it still rankles that anyone,
let alone my friend, should be
faced with such a choice.

This was worse than something in a Brecht play, an O Henry story, or the tale of Abraham and Isaac. In one of the great Canute moments in an ideologically divided decade, Coke had marked the fork in the road. There was the High Road of Rugby and Cadets and your hair shaved up to your temples, and there was the Low Road of duffel coats, bohemian hair, Rubber Soul, *I Can't Get No Satisfaction* and (with any luck) girls in green stockings. John caved in and sadly relinquished his tickets – while many of us looked on, seething and plotting. We always privately knew that it was true

that rugby was part of the authoritarian order, but never had it been made so excruciatingly vivid.

Just as no-one in 1988 had any idea that the Berlin Wall would be down and totally obliterated within a year, so the culture wars – the haircut skirmishes of 1964 – looked doomed for all time. Instead, within two years the dissent was everywhere and the greening of rugby union – and everything else – was well under way. By 1970 my own brother was Regimental Sergeant Major of the school cadets with sideboards below his earlobes and a hank of hair over his collar. He looked like Che Guevara.

The following year, Robert Burgess, a gifted Boys' High player in my year, distinguished himself as an All Black when the British Lions toured New Zealand. Bob, as he was known in rugby, was notable not only for his two outstanding tries in the second test in Christchurch but for the shoulder-length hair that waved in the wind as he scored them.

He toured the UK and France several years later but also made headlines when he announced himself unavailable for trials for team selection to play against the racially-segregated Springboks. He received white feathers in the mail but he stuck to his principles and his example, in part, inspired the later anti-Springbok rallies in New Zealand in 1981, a time of national division brought on by the then Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon. Robert Burgess remains a prominent example of the shift in thinking in New Zealand rugby that ushered in a new era. And another postscript: in 1978 John Loveday toured with the All Blacks in the Grand Slam tour of the UK. All things must pass, as George Harrison once said.

To bring my idiosyncratic account forward to the present I am thumbing through the Foxtel guide for the Super 15 fixtures for 2011. I have lived in Australia nearly forty years and followed rugby only sporadically until about twelve years ago. I still barrack for New Zealand in the Tests and I follow the Wellington

Hurricanes. Now rugby, like all winter codes from League and Rules to the World Game, is more a part of show business than anything else. Distinguished but dour All Black captains like Brian Lochore and Sean Fitzpatrick have been replaced by Tana Umaga and the tough but impish Richie McCaw. Young men routinely play in dreadlocks and buzz cuts, with tattoos and coloured boots. Ma'a Nonu streaks to the try-line with coloured ribbons in his leonine hair. All Blacks like Dan Carter are modish metrosexuals – he models for Jockey undies and more kids copy his hair style than any other pop figure in the country.

What does this mean, that I am enumerating this trivia? Perhaps it is the trivial that bespeaks the larger intangibles. It means that rugby is now fun in a way that it once wasn't, that it includes everyone, even the puny ones who can't play, or would be brain-damaged if they did. It has demilitarised a game once captured by authoritarians and sometimes self-satisfied bullies. It has reduced the homophobia of rugby and a more general Puritanism that plagued all sport. It has led to a large female fan following and a burgeoning women players' competition.

And it certainly doesn't ask a talented kid to choose between playing for his school and going to see the Beatles. Preparing to watch a game on my new flat screen, as I switch on the blinking LED light on my Hurricanes supporters' badge and pour myself a nice glass of Nelson Pinot Gris, I call that the kind of progress that's worth celebrating. ■
