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On the right track

Helensville are unbeaten, Mahurangi have surprised, Takapuna are yet to hit top gear, injuries have plagued Northcote, Silverdale and Marist and all the while Navy continue to struggle.
North Harbour Senior A club rugby hit the halfway point at the weekend and tomorrow the long haul to the playoffs begin.
Sports reporter Brett Robinson talks to coaches Mick Smith (Helensville), Tony Keepa (Glenfield) and Don Clark (Marist) about the first round and prospects for the second round in the new format competition.

You ain't seen nothin' yet. That's the warning Helensville coach Mick Smith has issued as his team of country boys head into the second round of the Senior A club rugby competition.

"At the beginning of the year we divided the season into four parts," says Smith.

"The semis and finals are parts three and four and for the first round we concentrated solely on defence.

"For the second round we want to focus on playing more expansively and try a few options."

It's the sort of message that will send a shiver down the spine of a few teams, especially coming from a side that is yet to drop a game and who head the points table.

As Smith says the side is bang on target.

The Villains have proven by far and away the toughest defenders in the competition and you just have to look at the stats to confirm that.

Helensville have had only 76 points scored against them in 11 games, some 50 points ahead of the next best defensive team Takapuna who have 123 against.

If you break it down even further, they've incurred only six points against their name in the last three games and of their last five matches they've only let through 30 points.

They've had their line broken just six times and two of those came against Kumeu, who are well out of contention in eleventh spot with five points.

That defensive effort has seen Helensville, along with Takapuna, shoot out ahead of the pack putting a 13 point gap between themselves and third place East Coast Bays, virtually assuring them a spot in the top four, bar any major lapses or a "bus crash" as Smith points out.

He admits that in some games the side has done just enough to win but the second round will see a strong Helensville backline start to throw it around.

"It should be quite amusing with some of the things I've got planned," laughs Smith who won't let on what he's got up his sleeve.

"We'll have a go at chancing our arm without getting too silly.

"But we've got that jump on the others and it's going to be a real fight to see who takes the other two."

Smith says he has yet to come across any major weaknesses with the lads and those players who did lack the experience at the start of the season, have risen to the level of the other players.

"We're one big happy bunch at the moment," says Smith of the combined senior squad.

"Ngarimu Blair has scored on every occasion, Dean Phillips our captain has done a sterling job and Darren Robson at first five is one of the best around.

"I think we've been a bit unlucky when it comes to the Harbour rep squads.

"But what we can't afford to do now is slacken off the pace."

Smith fully knows that the only place his boys can go is down and he says the only way the side will do that is if they start to beat themselves.

"We made a hash of the North Shore game last weekend. We were up by 30-3 at the break and only went on to win 44-6.

"Now we've got to hit full throttle and I know the players know that they can do that. We've got to maintain that continuity that has been working so far."

On the injury front Smith has been lucky and he admits that.

Injuries have plagued Northcote in particular and without their key players, they have fallen to ninth spot heading into the second round.

Silverdale too have had a bad run and Marist are in a similar boat.

"But we concentrated on fitness. Everyone knew it was going to be 22 games this season and it's simple – fit players don't get injured."

"But the double headers did take their toll on everyone and I think that may have to be addressed.

Helensville play Mahurangi at home tomorrow, a side that has surprised Mick and probably a lot of others too, especially after their wins over Takapuna and North Shore.

Glenfield

Coach Tony Keepa feels a bit like Brad Meurant at the moment.

"We're playing a bit like the Waikato Chiefs at the moments," admits Keepa of his Glenfield outfit.

"We've got a team full of excellent players but we're not putting together a team effort.

"I guess I'm thankful I've still got a job."

By anyones standard Glenfield have fallen short on their targets for the first round.

By no means are they out of the running, though.

They lie in that block of six teams separated by just seven points.

A big defensive effort in the first round by Helensville now sees them firmly at the top of the Senior A points table

Bar any disasters Helensville and Takapuna should progress to the playoffs but who gets those two last spots is anyones guess.

"It's going to be a real dogfight and it will be important to get points early this round," says Keepa.

If Glenfield want to be one of those, Keepa says continuity between the backs and forwards will need serious work on.

"I'm surprised with the way we've gone and I think the supporters are too.

"We're down on our targets and if we had have beaten Marist last weekend we would be third, not lying mid-table.

"We've got to be more focussed in our approach this round and I hope that the players have learnt from what's happened in the first round.

Basic errors and inaccuracy have tripped Glenfield up so far and Keepa believes that some of the guys are trying too hard to rectify that and not playing together as a team.

"In most of the games, we've played maybe one half well or half of one half and that's let us down," says Keepa

"It's the continuity thing. One week our forwards will have a great game but the backs don't and next week it will be the reverse.

"When they find the right gear and both have worked together we've run in some awesome tries.

"I know the players expect a lot more of themselves and when they don't perform they take it badly."

"Our focus is to repair some of the damage that we've done to our reputation as a team."

There are some positive aspects Keepa has identified, the first being the senior reserves who currently head the points table.

"Some of those guys are putting a lot of pressure on the Senior A boys to perform and we have made quite a few positional changes."

Keepa has been impressed with talented loose forward Chris Mayerhofler who has taken the reins as captain this year.

"Often when someone is given the captaincy their game falls away but not with Chris . He's been a great leader.

Alan Linstrom has been Glenfield's leading point scorer while Keepa has been very impressed with the development of Brett Ingham, in his first year at Senior A level.

Glenfield head into round two with six wins from 11 and lie bang in the middle of the table.

They begin the road tomorrow with a game against Massey and for the occasion Glenfield have decided to give the game a bit of razzmatazz.

Cheerleaders and some funky tunes are on the cards and Keepa says it may be the thing to give the guys a bit of a rev.

"We've got a lot to prove and with the way the competition is, it's going to be cutthroat stuff to see who makes the top four."

Marist

The new 22 game format was always going to stretch those clubs that didn't have a lot of depth.

And so it has turned out. Injuries have plagued a number of teams in the first round and as a result they have had to dig deep in to the senior reserves to field a Senior A squad.

Northcote are a prime example as is Silverdale, both who are back in ninth and tenth spots respectively.

Marist too have been hard hit.

Coach Don Clark knew at the beginning of the first round that it was going to be demanding on his young senior squad of 41. And so it has proved.

"The first fortnight really screwed us up," says Clark.

"Five games crammed into a fortnight was a bit rough. Sure we knew there were going to be 22 games but I don't think a lot of people realised the pressure of that first fortnight."

Marist lost seven players in those first four games.

"It's stress related injuries because their bodies aren't getting the chance to recover in time.

"It's not just us. My old club Northcote have been hit pretty hard and so have Silverdale. The country boys seem to be okay though," laughs Clark.

Marist's spate of injuries have caused havoc when it's come to fielding a consistent side and Clark says its only been in the last two games against Kumeu and Glenfield that he has been able to field the same 14 players back to back.

"It's been hard to get a pattern because of our injuries,"says Clark.

"At one stage we had 19 players out.

"We've got the depth I feel, but when you take 19 out of 41 it's a bit of a struggle."

Most of those injuries came to the inside backs and tight forwards and that has meant other players have had to step in from below.

"Considering the way things have turned out I'm pretty happy where we are. We're only four points of third and we're still in with a show.

"We've got to now focus on our tight play and take it up another notch and also increase our accuracy and eliminate mistakes.

"We've spent the last 11 weeks putting something together and now I've got 40-odd players who know what to expect," laughs Clark.

"But it's been good to see that some of the young guys have stepped up when the first string players have been out."

Being able to field a consistent squad over the past two weeks has seen the results come.

Last week Marist defeated Glenfield 25-11 and in the previous week they beat Kumeu. In just those two games the backs raked up 11 tries.

The scrap to find the top four makes for some interesting times ahead according to Clark and he knows his side are still very much in with a chance

They lie in that group of six teams separated by only seven points.

"That makes it interesting now. We could get a few turn ups in this next round.

"But with six teams very tight together it would be a very brave man to pick who will join Helensville and Takapuna."

Points table after round one of North Harbour Senior A club rugby

	P	W	D	L	F	A	PTS
Helensville	11	10	1	0	304	76	42
Takapuna	11	9	1	1	334	123	38
East Coast Bays	11	7	0	4	221	186	29
North Shore	11	7	0	4	277	228	28
Mahurangi	11	6	0	5	187	142	27
Glenfield	11	6	0	5	184	214	25
Marist	11	6	0	5	223	222	25
Massey	10	5	0	5	255	157	22
Northcote	11	4	0	7	215	236	18
Silverdale	11	3	0	8	184	266	13
Kumeu	10	1	0	9	126	307	5
Navy	11	0	0	11	79	432	1

Shore Weekender, Friday 23 May 1997

Start for McFarland

Hooker Slade McFarland is the only North Harbour player in a starting line-up for the NZ Maori trials in Tauranga on June 6. ...land is in Team Ikaroa ... Haydn Ferris (pic... ...ker Chris ... the re-