



Mike Te Paa (left) and Nigel Blake in the final

FINAL SUITED EAST COAST BAYS IN OPPONENTS AND WEATHER

Two seasons of North Harbour and two senior club championships. That is the proud record of East Coast Bays, who in 1986 beat Takapuna to take away – again – the New Zealand Couriers Cup.

Bays went into the semi-finals feeling they had a better chance of beating Takapuna than they did North Shore, who had been their opponents the previous time.

“Shore had two key players who could change a game in Frano Botica and Buck Shelford” says Bays Coach, Brad Meurant. “Either of them could turn a game around. Also they were there last year, had been through a finals situation and had the experience to be difficult, or the character to get into us”.

Bays set out in 1986 to move the ball more than in 1985 – using their backs to advantage. With Wayne Hill out on the wing and given Alan Pollock’s ability to straighten an attack, Meurant felt he was better equipped in the second season.

Victor Malbon at first five had a grand season using his boot to set up typical Meurant patterns that demand the game be played in the other side’s half.

Yet the statistics for the club season belie any criticism that Bays played “negative” rugby. They scored 100 tries, the three-quarters getting a poulitice with 17 for Tony Dawson, 13 for Wayne Hill and 12 for Alan Pollock, plus Mike Jelas at full back with 5 and replacement wingers Willie Walker and Kelly Donnelly also touching down a few each.

Up front the strength was the driving play. Bays were not great ball winners in lineouts against top sides, but the drive and the ability to keep the ball alive – with flankers of the calibre of Mark Anscombe – set up a lot of opportunities.

Mike Te Paa, Nigel Blake and Dave Thomas, all going forward on to the ball, made good use of what Malbon could achieve with his boot.

In the final, Paul Leonard threatened to carry the day for Takapuna, almost on his own, brilliant jumping in the lineout, winning possession time and time again when Bays were in a position to exert pressure and sew the result up.

Bays did not play as well in the '86 final as they had the previous year, yet they took their opportunities, knew that flair players like Paul Feeny and Gary Brunsdon would try for the unexpected, and they played to put pressure on these key opponents at critical times. It worked.

They force Feeny on to his right foot, stood up flat to put on pressure and felt justified when the first try came from these tactics.

Bays did not make many mistakes. Meurant has a theory that playing together guilds an extra quality into a rugby team and in his finals side only Jason Speedy – disrupted by injury for much of the season – had played less than 15 games, an important factor in pattern play.

Discipline is essential with no panic in tight situation, retaining the pattern to play the way out of trouble in Meurant's philosophy.

Bays' best performance during the Club rounds was against Silverdale the second time, because with some dull matches – including being held to 20-12 by Glenfield the previous week – Meurant detected a staleness creeping in.

"That was the crunch for us" he says. "Guys were thinking rep football. We had a little chat and went out and won by 40 points. That brought them back on track and I was confident we had the discipline to go on".

Young players in the side included Warren Tobin at number eight scoring the first try in his first final, John Murdoch as another looser, getting 11 games.

Good company makes basic players better, Meurant says. Nigel Blake for Bays is an example he quotes, an average individual in poor company but lifted and encouraged by the team performance around him to become both a useful and an accomplished player.

He puts Mark Hellyer from Glenfield in this same role, a man who flogs his guts every Saturday, sometimes with no prospect of winning, but put in the North Harbour pack he produced some superb football, including an exceptional demonstration of flank forward football at Athletic Park against top New Zealand Provincial team, Wellington.

"You've got to pick the right guys out and give them that chance" Meurant says. "That's the job of the coach. Victor Malbon could have been a winner in the North Harbour seniors when Frano Botica had leg trouble. Instead Peter Thorburn stuck with his players – on the

theory that playing within a known pattern had outstanding advantages – and the rugby produced by Jim Thompson bore out his theory”.

“You can’t win as a player against that, and many a good player is never seen in a rep team because he never gets the chance. It may not say he is one of less ability than those already in the side”.

Meurant has done two years as sole coach, the previous season as assistant coach and halfway through the 1986 season told his players this would be his last year. The response was a second successive championship.