

The Bubble Burst – But the lessons were well learnt...

Nearly but not quite. It was nearly the dream – rags to riches in the New Zealand National championship rugby in just two seasons.

North Harbour had won all its championship games in two years and was in front with time running out against Waikato at Hamilton for a place in the 1987 first division, when it came unstuck.

Yet now the roar of the home crowd has died down, North Harbour coach Peter Thorburn does not look on it as a lost cause. In fact, he points to major achievements in 1986 that augur well for the future.

Improvement in tight forward play was arguably his major achievement of 1986 in North Harbour Representative Rugby. There was a total acceptance of the concept and pattern, and a commitment to it which had not been present in the inaugural year.

“It showed up in the way we were able to drive other forward packs back in the loose, in the mauls and rucks” says Thorburn. “It showed up in the good ball we presented to the backs”.

“If anything I was a little disappointed that the back play did not develop as the forward play did. There were several very good individuals but they were a little disjointed. We didn’t put it together as well as we would have liked”.

Thorburn thinks for a long time before nominating the Waikato game as the best performance in games terms of 1986. His alternative is the Ranfurly Shield challenge against Auckland.

Again he hesitates “I still don’t know how far the closeness of the Shield game was a result of Auckland being over psyched” he says.

“In my view, there were too worried about the result. They were unrealistically worried about North Harbour. One or two of us were the only ones who realised we were heavier than them in the forwards”.

“We also realised that not a lot of them were used to playing under a lot of pressure, regularly under pressure, even though 13 or 14 of them had reached All Black honours”.

“By putting them under pressure we created a different response from Auckland. We did not play negative football. We played very positively in the shield game. The one mistake we made was – basic – I underestimated our scrum, that we would hold them”.

“Part of our tactics was that on their put-in, later in the game, we were to screw the scrum quickly and get the loosies off and back behind the last foot, spreading the loose forwards”.

“Unfortunately, in the heat of the game three of them got off together before the scrum was screwed and Auckland retained the ball in the back, put the pressure on, and scored the try from that platform”.

“And I think that three of the penalties they got were from off-side play generated by us detaching from the scrums. It was the lack of experience from doing it in the heat of the moment and we had to learn it, practice it and do it, all in one game”.

“But that didn’t cost us the game. Andy Haden was superb in that he, of all the guys took hold of the game because he was experienced in that way, in the second half. An I thought that Grant Fox had an excellent game”.

For North Harbour, the forwards rate special mention from Thorburn. “They all had very good games” he says. “Mike Te Paa had a very fine game, so did Gary Braid, Ron Williams you never see, and the tackling of the loosies particularly Mark Anscombe – he tackled the best I’ve seen him play in our whole two seasons – and the work of Clinton Jones as hooker (because I believe that the hooker is a tight/loose forward) were all key factors.”.

In back play North Harbour set out to move the ball wide, had one or two lapses under pressure and Mike Mills going off disjointed both the attack and the defence.

“At that level of football if you’ve not had recent experience in a position it is hard to just slot in and both Richard Kapa and Allan Pollock moving in were playing out of position. It could be a tactical misjudgement on my behalf to send Tony Dawson on – although he played very well.”

“It was a misfortune to lose our anchor man in the back line but that’s not an excuse, although I think it cost us the game”.

Kapa was criticised by spectators for taking a “wrong option” of a cut-out pass. Thorburn says that the important thing is why it was done at the time, rather than the wisdom of hindsight. “It’s easy to be wise after the event” he says.

Tackling says Thorburn is a state of mind – easy to achieve in a game like this shield challenge because it is so important”.

“We certainly disjointed Auckland and it wasn’t until John Hart came on at half time and pointed them in a different direction that they looked like winning. In the first 10 minutes of that second half we had them in big brother.

By comparison, the Waikato game saw Braid, Te Paa and Paul Leonard towards the back winning more lineout ball than against Auckland.

“I’ve got a lot of admiration for Gary Braid”, Thorburn says “His play is as good as any tight forward in the country. He wasn’t as big as some of them but his skills and his speed and

fitness meant he was able to do admirable in his tight play and then he gave us a good bonus in the loose”.

“Time after time he was asked to play out of position in the lineouts and he did it, grafting, doing a fine job”.

“In the second half of the season he was superb and a very valuable asset for his tight forward play and totally consistent. He’s still a very fine runner with the ball, but as a tight forward he has never played better. Not even as an All Black”.

Against Waikato, North Harbour improved in lineouts, in excellent driving in rucks and mauls, but somewhat disjointed efforts did not use possession as well as in the backs, Thorburn says.

“Guys played exceedingly well, but the Waikato game was fated. Play those last 90 seconds again as often as you like and something would have happened to stop them scoring”.

“The ball went through 16 pairs of hands. There were individuals in our team who made three tackles in that 90 seconds, some made two and I don’t think that there was a player who wasn’t involved positively trying to stop the move from when it started at the grandstand end until it finished with a try”.

“There could have been knock-ons, three or four penalties, dropped passes, all sorts of possibilities. I don’t think it’s a bad thing. It just wasn’t meant to be”.

“If there is a lesson, we have to learn, it’s the point Buck Shelford made in the dressing room straight afterwards – the game is as long as the clock is running. Nobody sat back thinking the game was won. It just happened”.

Captain Shelford was not being critical. It was a statement of fact, honest recognition of the disappointment throughout the North Harbour team, a very committed footballer looking at reality”.

There had been other earlier threats to North Harbour’s aspirations of First Division status. One came in the last quarter of the Wanganui game, when they almost took charge, a hard physical side but not as skilful as some of the other opponents. That day it was on for North Harbour to “get it done”, Thorburn admits.

“Mid Canterbury was a threat of unknown ability. I know our team is very good – I sometimes don’t know how good the opposition is”, Thorburn says.

“I’m still feeling my way with they respond to each game. I’m getting more and more confident, they’re a tight knit group and that’s good and we get to know them well and can judge how they will perform”.

“I’m more confident now that – barring injuries – it’ll be right down to the line this coming season”.

Thorburn has a theory that “fear” is a motivator in sport – the fear of losing, or a fear of losing a place in the team. He does not likely predict a win in any particular game and he is anxious never to give an impression of expecting an “easy” win.

“That’s exactly where you come unstuck” he says.

Against King Country he almost went too far himself, taking out some of the key players for what seemed good reasons at the time, including resting men with heavy commitments.

“we almost negated our strengths” he says now “ forgetting that you still need a solid base against any opposition”.

For 1987, Thorburn says the thing to learn is discipline on the field, somebody calling the shots – particularly in the backs – and the others putting it into action.

“I don’t want to rule out their flair, but we want decision, not a consensus type discussion of somebody making another decision. There must be discipline in their own play so that when a move is called it becomes the total team’s commitment”.

Richard Kapa, ball in hand turned into a fine winger because he so often – almost invariably – put the advantage line under pressure. He also worried his marker.

Thorburn talks of “free spirit guys” like Allan Pollock, Scott Pierce, Wayne Hill and Paul Feeny who are strengths and winning cards but in 1985 against lesser teams they had been able to make mistakes and still recover – and win.

For 1987 he is looking coldly at our 1986 programme, you’d have to say we were insane to take it on – but it worked. Thorburn says it is another reflection of his positive approach that he does not say “nearly worked”. In another aside he will tell you that “rugby was the winner in that final at Hamilton”.

He sees a similar hurdle – or set of hurdles – being organised for “87” with selected First Division opponents organised to provide experience got North Harbour without the risk of losing four championship points.

“we’ve got an excellent build-up again” he says.

Thorburn goes for an “underdog”. If you push him to name a player of the year and picks Jim Thompson, first five-eight as an understudy to Frano Botica initially, under pressure to even make the club season who came through against Wellington with a masterly performance, a fine display in the Marlborough match, an excellent try against Hawkes Bay, kicked well in the Waikato game and gave endless backing up and support.

“After being a utility back, a reserve, he had to come on when Frano was hurt and take his place as first five in his own tight, gaining confidence and responding – I think he epitomises North Harbour” Thorburn says.

“He got his blazer and he’s an excellent guy, not an All Black first five eight. 90 Percent of our team are not All Blacks in their position. There are certain things that most individuals don’t have, but he’s a great team man”.



*Two key figures in the 1986 team, skipper Buck Shelford (left) and Gary Braid during the Emerging Players game at Onewa Domain.*



*Coach Thorburn does some fine tuning at half-time*