

The Launching of a Rugby Supporters Club

Establishment, growth and development of the North Harbour Rugby Supporters Club – from a first move just six weeks after the Union came into existence – has been a fabulous experience of great enjoyment and immense value to rugby.

This is how President Graeme Scott sees the work of a band of enthusiasts who are more visible at representative matches than any group except the North Harbour team.

Scott's personal commitment to "getting it right at the start and doing something worthwhile for rugby" proved an infectious spirit. The ripples went far beyond the Supporters Club itself/

"It's one big family" Scott says. "Everybody loves being part of the rugby scene. Because of the reciprocal feeling from the North Harbour Union and the senior team especially, it is both more worthwhile and enjoyable".

"It has to go further. It has to go right down through the ranks, infecting all North Harbour teams. In time it will, but we had to start somewhere, concentrate at one level and as we gain strength and experience we can spread our wings and cover them all"

Events moved so quickly that when North Harbour began its playing existence against Queensland Country at Onewa Domain the Supporters Club was in there in force selling souvenirs and quietly injecting a mood of enthusiasm into the crowd.

The now familiar black jerseys with a Jonathon Livingston Seagull type emblem and striped at chest level have been wherever North Harbour has gone.

But perhaps more importantly, senior coach Peter Thorburn gave an undertaking from the start.

"If you have a Supporters Club function after a match the team will be there," he said "Getting along and helping build the enthusiasm for North Harbour is as much a team responsibility as training, or turning up for a game".

Thorburn was as good as his word. When the Supporters Club gathered at its headquarters, Windsor Park Hotel there was always an air of expectation.

Without fail, Thorburn and team would arrive in force, mingle with the crowd and settle into an evening of convivial pleasure where rugby remained forever the dominant theme.

Just as rugby is nothing without players so the social functions took on a magical quality once the team arrived.

Pending that event however, there was always a big screen in one corner and a video of the day's game would run throughout the evening.

Later, when the first flush of enthusiasm had been satisfied, it would be typical to find knots of players clustering within sight of the screen – some serious and some ribald humour – replaying the events and salting away the lessons hindsight can teach.

It became traditional, too, to have a player of the day, announced before the end of play and followed up with a presentation at the after game function.

Supporters Club functions after representative games became the mecca of rugby people throughout North Harbour, a place where individual club identification was hard to find as everyone joined what foundation President Scott so comfortably describes as “a family atmosphere”.

Discussions in the Auckland Supporters Club inspired Scott to make the first moves for a similar body in North Harbour. Union Secretary Peter Dolan suggested to Scott he contact Earl Satherley and Gary Inglis as likely enthusiasts who had made similar enquiries. Out of a first meeting of the three came a public meeting on February 13, 1985.

“If there was ever going to be a Supporters Club I felt it should get involved right at the outset” Scott says “and help as much as I could”.

Eighty to 100 people turned up, forming a steering committee to check feasibility and do something, made up of Scott, Satherley, Gary Inglis, Don Ross, Malcolm Munro, Trevor Hyland, Phil Cooper, Graeme Scott and Jack Buisson.

Initial finance came from donations by Gary Inglis, Dominion Breweries and New Zealand Couriers. “Without them we would not have got off the ground” Scott recalls.

A membership of 350 in the first year, with members present at all games played by North Harbour’s senior team indicated the strength of the club.

“Everybody felt they were a part of the family of North Harbour” Scott says “The strength of the management committee of the union provided the impetus and the atmosphere at matches generated by the team – the attitude they adopted to playing rugby – built up a marvellous response”

Senior coach Peter Thorburn had a major effect on the bond between the many elements of the Union.

“He was most appreciative of Supporters Club activities and he did everything possible to help us create the convivial atmosphere after games.

“Without that assistance and the liaison of Peter Dolan, Chris Kennings and John Paterson the whole approach was one of co-operation and enthusiasm – by Union, sponsors, players and coach.

“The Auckland Supporters Club couldn’t do enough to help, to guide us, to encourage us. There was a very close liaison.”

Yet the North Harbour Supporters Club was totally different. Small enough so the Supporters knew each other and players knew Supporters, it was truly a family feeling.

“A lot of people mix and mingle casually because of the spirit in the new Union and because of the basic familiarity” Scott says.

“With the big numbers in Auckland they tend to have small groups within the Club”.

The colours and designs for North Harbour Supporters Club mascots, souvenirs and apparel are substantially the work of New Zealand Couriers who made a graphic design artist available to the Club”.

As a result of that help we did very well in the first 12 months.

“I would like to express my personal thanks to Peter Thorburn, Peter Dolan, Chris Callen and his men, the players and everybody involved in the Union.

“Without them it wouldn’t have been so easy. It might not even have been possible”.