

They Shall Not Pass – North Harbour 21, Taranaki 16

Taken from Rugby News, 9 October 1997

North Harbour survived a spirited challenge by Taranaki to record their first victory at North Harbour Stadium and gather precious Air New Zealand points in the process.

But, it was a close run thing!

In a bizarre but exciting finish North Harbour kept their line intact through 11 consecutive scrums within metres of the goalline, before the final whistle sounded.

Both sides scored two tries but Taranaki could consider themselves a shade unlucky after storming back during a rousing final 25 minutes.

North Harbour had scored two tries to lead 21-8 and appeared set for a comfortable win. But Taranaki would not lie down and gradually began to exert the upper hand in the battle upfront.

The build-up in pressure coincided with an increase in North Harbour mistakes which the visitors capitalised on to climb back into the match.

After a penalty goal by first five Jason Holland had reduced the deficit, Taranaki winger Scott Paterson marked his blazer (20th) game for the Union with a try, 18 minutes from the end.

Holland missed the conversion but the try left the home fans on edge for the remainder of the game as Taranaki surged forward seeking the match winner.

But as has been the story of Taranaki's NPC this year the crucial points just wouldn't come despite their late siege of the North Harbour line.

Three times the back peddling North Harbour scrum collapsed and was penalised but the penalty try that Taranaki sort – and probably should have received – never came.

Instead Southland referee, Paddy O'Brien awarded three consecutive penalties to the visitors which added to their frustration.

Taranaki's cause was not helped when North Harbour replaced prop Api Talamaivao with a fresher Stan Toomaolatai midway through the siege stiffening up a scrum that was clearly under pressure.

The substitution was the last of a number of gambles the North Harbour camp took which included the use of regular winger, Eric Rush in his former position on the openside flank.

And the gamble paid off. The Taranaki front row – who had given their all – were unable to shift Toomalatai and North Harbour survived.

But it did seem strange in the final stanza that the visitors did not attempt to move the ball through their backs who had threatened North Harbour repeatedly especially when hard running Mepi Faoagali had the ball.

North Harbour was glad they didn't and after another error ridden performance, coach Peter Thorburn and captain Ian Jones could barely hide their relief at the final whistle with their side a step closer to salvation from relegation.

However both stressed that Harbour were not yet in the clear and would have to beat Waikato at home next week to secure their first division spot.

North Harbour:

Glenn Davis, Glen Osborne, Frank Bunce, Rua Tipoli, Matt Cardy, Walter Little, Mark Robinson, Malua Tipi, Eric Rush, Troy Flavell, Blair Larsen, Ian Jones ©, Api Talamaivao, Slade McFarland, Tony Coughlan

Replacements: Chris Mayerhofler, Stan Toomalatai

Taranaki:

Mark Urwin, Scot Paterson, Mark Robinson, Mepi Faoagali, Jason Holland, Richard Jarman, Andy Slater ©, Neil Crowley, Daryl Fale, Kevin Barrett, Scott Lines, Gordon Slater, Shane McDonald, Greg Feek.

Replacements: Filipo Toalai, Michael Carr

Crowd: 6,500