

VODAFONE



Sir Peter Leitch Club

AT MT SMART STADIUM, HOME OF THE MIGHTY VODAFONE WARRIORS

Newsletter

19th September 2018

#236

I Hope So

By David Kemeys

Former Sunday Star-Times Editor, Former Editor-in-Chief Suburban Newspapers, Long Suffering Warriors Fan



WITH OUR season just a fading memory there are all sorts of reviews taking place, and more on that later, but first up let's deal with the most optimistic man around at the moment.

And no it's not Pete, it's Autex Industries head honcho Mark Robinson, the company that owns a chunk of the Vodafone Warriors.

No prizes for guessing he is a much smarter man than me – though few aren't, given he runs a very successful company with a long history in our game, so let's hope he is right in his claim we can win a premiership within three years.

Autex is part of the group that took over the club earlier this year, from undies magnate – and many other things – Eric Watson.

Robinson reckons we have everything we need to succeed, and that we are building for 2019, 2020, and 2021.

The problem with that is we have heard it all before, but on the flip side, we have undoubtedly improved.

It's going to take a lot more improvement though, and with only one player, Leeson Ah Mau, incoming, it's a little hard to see us continuing our climb.

“We're looking at signing players who are going to be there for those three years. We expect to be in the finals each of those years, and we're expecting to get one, maybe two.”

Aim high I say, I've had enough of being satisfied with not being last, so all power to the man.

Most of our players will go round again next season, and Robinson says we are in talks with Issac Luke, which is great news.

“There are always going to be one or two who drop out, and there are always going to be a couple who come in.”

But overall he was pretty satisfied with where we got to, and why wouldn't he be given the dross we have endured?

“The club has achieved lots to make the eight. The team is as good as it could be, I think they deserved to be in the top eight, but they weren't ready to win a final.”

By George!

Our old friend David Long at Stuff took a novel approach, getting boss Cameron George to run through his thoughts, and it made interesting reading.

The Aussie at our helm broke it down into key events, one of which was getting the signature of our captain Roger Tuivasa-Sheck.

Fair point, especially given there was plenty of speculation he was going to join the Blues – which is rather like going from the frying pan to the fire, but there you go.

“If Roger had decided to play rugby it would have deflated the already low confidence from the seasons before. It was hugely important to us as a club, the playing group and our fans,” George said.

For a man with a corporate background, one of his other events was not being corporate, George arguing it was critical to rip up the corporate approach to become a footy club. Bringing in guys like Brian Smith and Alex Corvo show that’s happening, and more importantly, and the third of his key events, the sale does to.

Think back to the nonsense of Hawaiian businessman Richard Fale, before the Auckland Rugby League came on board on behalf of the Carlaw Heritage Trust.

It dragged on and on and was massively destabilising, but we have owners now steeped in the game.

His first of his three other points was the Denver Kiwis test, and the least said about that the better.

We didn’t want our best players nipping off to the United States, but they did, and we paid for it, the players getting stuck there and only arriving back days before we played the Sharks.

“Sadly for the NZRL, the promoter has gone walk-about and left them short financially, so it hasn’t worked out well for anyone.”

Perhaps more predictably, he also singled out not beginning with a target of making the eight, but of winning the title.

“My line throughout the year was that every time we play we’re there to win and that expectation filtered through the club.”

That shift in attitude would be acknowledged by all

but the most pessimistic. Apart from a few wobbles we competed in every game, and you could not say that about sides from the past.

It was most obvious in our run of five wins to start a year.

That doesn’t mean he wasn’t disappointed when we lost to the Pantherz

“I was absolutely shattered. We proved a hell of a lot of people wrong, but there was still a heap more I wanted to prove wrong.”

Corvo-ing It Up

Dave was playing the Long game, going into a second part with Alex Corvo, the high performance manager who was credited with giving us a team that was lean and mean and ready to go.

He joined from the Broncos and the old “Warriors always run out of puff” mantra was laid to rest.

Corvo is a modest sort of a coot, which rather suits the club. “I’m only a part in the overall performance of the team.”

That’s probably selling himself a bit short, because he revealed the players attitudes were generally good, and they wanted to improve, but there was a big gap in his definition of fitness and theirs.

“I certainly let them know what I thought were the minimum standards. For a lot of them it was an eye-opener.”

That will come as no surprise to fans of long-standing, fitness gurus or not, because most of us could have pointed at players in the past and wondered if they were tucking into pies at halftime instead of sucking on oranges.

All that pre-season work ends when the ball is kicked on game one though, and Corvo had to shift his focus to preparing the team for games and also coping with injuries.

Let’s face it, he did something right because while we had our share of injuries, we weren’t reduced to crocks and reserve graders by the end of the year like we have been before.

“My philosophy is that if you build a resilient athlete, you’ll have one who’ll train better than a non resilient one, it will lead to reduced injuries.”

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Like his boss, he rates the season at best a pass. "Let's be honest, we were poor (in the finals).

We've got to be better and I'm burning inside, If we've got players or staff that aren't, they're probably not people we want here."

He had a simple message for the players too.

"Last year the players might have had the excuse that they didn't know what to expect. Well they certainly know now."

The Big Membership Deal

I am all for this one. Some aren't, arguing they hate the bandwagon jumpers. Personally I could care less. A bum on a seat is better than an empty one, so the club's bold plan to slash season-ticket prices is a brilliant idea.

George has come out and said they want every seat in Mt Smart sold by Christmas.

That's fine, price is one thing, but you have to have a product. Ask yourself if you could go to the Blues for a fiver would you?

"We want to be the most entertaining sporting brand in New Zealand. We want to sell out the stadium before Christmas and our membership pricing and structure makes that achievable."

At the end of the day it's all just talk, but at least it's talk about positive things, about having a goal and a plan to get there. That's more than we have had for a long time.

Down To Four

Two rounds of finals and the eight is now four - the bottom four sides all eliminated, even if narrowly in some cases. The footy has been incredible, exciting and holding your interest to the final whistle, which is a neat trick when you don't have a dog in the race.

Now it's the Storm v Sharks on Friday night, and Roosters v Rabbitohs on Saturday.

Who wins? Don't care, as long as the games are as good as they have n so far.

KIWIS V AUSTRALIA CORPORATE HOSPITALITY PACKAGES

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You can be part of history as the Kiwis, Kiwi Ferns and Junior Kiwis take on their Aussie rivals at one blockbuster event.

It's been four years since the Kiwis took on the Kangaroos on home turf, so don't miss the chance to be there alongside Sir Peter Leitch.

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Gates open at 2.30pm:

Junior Kiwis v Junior Kangaroos - 3pm

Kiwi Ferns v Jillaroos - 5pm

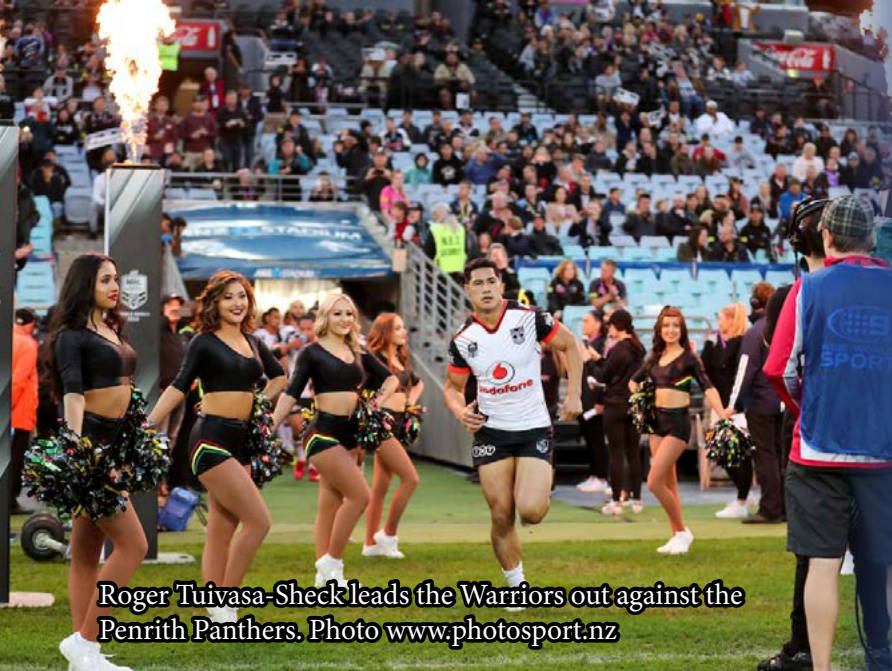
Kiwis v Kangaroos - 7.45pm

It's been four years since the Kiwis took on the Kangaroos on home turf, so don't miss the chance to be there.

Tickets start from \$35 for adults and \$15 for kids. – this is one you simply can't miss.

Want to bring your team to celebrate the end of the season? You can take advantage of the bundle deal that includes 6 children's tickets and one adult ticket for \$96.

3 Tests. 1 Day. It's Time.



Roger Tuivasa-Sheck leads the Warriors out against the Penrith Panthers. Photo www.photosport.nz



By John Coffey

Is RTS Destined For Dally M Award?

THERE WILL be a greater sense of anticipation among New Zealand viewers when we watch the telecast of the prestigious Dally M awards from Sydney on September 26, the Wednesday before the NRL Grand Final. Warriors and Kiwis fullback Roger Tuivasa-Sheck has been a very warm favourite on both sides of the Tasman to take out the Player of the Year award since voting closed at the end of the minor premiership.

On the Australian SportsBet charts he was at \$2.05, and there appears to be only three other contenders. South Sydney hooker Damien Cook was at \$4.50, while Cronulla's Valentine Holmes and Newcastle's Kalyn Ponga shared the third line at \$5. There was a long gap to Wests Tigers halfback Luke Brooks (\$23). On the New Zealand TAB it was RTS at \$2.25, Cook at \$4, Holmes and Ponga at \$4.50 and Brooks at \$11.

RTS is no stranger to being on the Dally M stage, but in a supporting role. A Team of the Year is also announced from the voting and while at the Sydney Roosters he was Wing of the Year in 2013 and Fullback of the Year in 2015. With Holmes and Ponga also in the running it is certain fullback will be the hottest category in 2018. However, Holmes started his season on the wing and Ponga also played some games at five-eighth.

A panel of former outstanding players selects three players from every regular season game on a 3-2-1 basis. The votes are made public during the first half of the competition but are kept secret from round 13 and not revealed until awards night. It has been written the 2018 awards have special significance now that Dally Messenger, the pioneering player they are named after, has recently been elevated to Immortal status.

Since the award's introduction in 1980 play-makers have dominated. Johnathan Thurston has won most, with four between 2005 and 2015, while Andrew Johns won three. Melbourne, Queensland and Australian hooker and captain Cameron Smith enjoyed his second success in 2017, 11 years after his first. But he has always been competing for votes with fellow Storm champions and past winners Cooker Cronk and Billy Slater.

The sole New Zealand outright winner was long-serving Kiwis scrum-half Gary Freeman when he was at Eastern Suburbs in 1992. Cowboys loose forward Jason Taumalolo shared the 2016 award with Cronk. Interestingly, Taumalolo was the first running forward to become Player of the Year since Cronulla second-rower Gavin Miller in 1988 and 1989. No front-rower has ever been honoured as the best of the best.

There have been conflicting Australian indications whether RTS will be the third Kiwi and first Warrior to carry off the top prize. On August 2, with five rounds left, an nrl.com article by Michael Blok recalled Penrith five-eighth James Maloney led when voting went behind closed doors. Blok mentioned Andrew Fifita, Brooks, Ponga and Cook as possible winners but ignored RTS altogether. Perhaps he had a mental Blok.

Meanwhile, the Sporting News website had an anonymous "expert" known only as The NRL Lurker compiling votes from every regular-season fixture. His top eight after round 25 had RTS with 27 points beating Brooks 24, Ponga 23, Maloney 22, Cook and Holmes 21 each, Smith and Fifita 20 each.

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The Lurker might be a man of infinite rugby league knowledge or a dribbling maniac locked in a dark room with his TV stuck on Fox League!

If RTS does claim the Player of the Year award he will have finished ahead of Holmes and Ponga and thus also be Fullback of the Year and the first New Zealander to be included in the Team of the Year three times. The only previous “doubles” have been North Sydney second-rower Mark Graham in 1981-82, Bulldogs centre Nigel Vagana in 2001-02 and Taumalolo at loose forward in 2015-16. RTS could also be Captain of the Year.

As mentioned, Freeman and Taumalolo are the only Dally M winners from New Zealand. But here is a list of Kiwis to be recognised in the Team of the Year as the best in their positions:

Fullback: Matthew Ridge (Manly) 1995, Roger Tuivasa-Sheck (Roosters) 2015.

Wing: Daryl Halligan (Bulldogs) 1994, Sean Hoppe (Warriors) 1995, Taniela Tuiaki (Wests Tigers) 2009, Roger Tuivasa-Sheck (Roosters) 2013, Jordan Rapana (Canberra) 2017.

Centre: Nigel Vagana (Bulldogs) 2001 and 2002.

Five-eighth: Benji Marshall (Wests Tigers) 2011.

Scrum-half: Gary Freeman (Easts) 1992.

Prop: Dane Sorensen (Cronulla) 1981, Paul Rauhihi (Cowboys) 2004, Roy Asotasi (Bulldogs) 2006, Sam Kasiano (Bulldogs) 2012, Jesse Bromwich (Storm) 2016.

Second-row: Mark Graham (Norths) 1981 and 1982, Hugh McGahan (Easts) 1987, Ali Lauitiiti (Warriors) 2002.

Loose forward: Tawera Nikau (Storm) 1998, Jason Taumalolo (Cowboys) 2015 and 2016.

Footnote: The only Australian to be recognised while at the Warriors was Steve Price, the Prop of the Year in 2007.

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Kiwis Forwards Should Be Ready To Fire

By John Coffey QSM

Author of ten rugby league books, Christchurch Press sports writer (44 years), NZ correspondent for Rugby League Week (Australia) and Open Rugby (England)



THE KIWIS forwards will be primed for action in the Test match against the Kangaroos at Mount Smart Stadium on October 13. Nine of those named by coach Michael Maguire in the wider squad are with clubs which reached at least the second week of the NRL playoffs and should be up to speed for an historic triple-header when the Kiwi Ferns also play the Jillaroos and the Junior Kiwis take on the Junior Kangaroos.

More concerning is the fact that Penrith's Dallin Watene-Zelezniak was the only back with previous Test experience still in action last weekend, and his season ended when the Panthers were eliminated 21-20 by the Sharks. The three backs involved in this weekend's Grand Final qualifiers, Storm utility Jahrome Hughes, Sharks wing Sosaia Feki and Roosters centre Joseph Manu, have not previously played for the Kiwis.

Maguire's 36-man list had a familiar ring. There were plenty of hardened middle forwards, a more than useful group of second-rowers, and some potentially exciting if raw outside backs. But again the halves were short on numbers and depth. Only Te Maire Martin, Shaun Johnson and Kodi Nikorima have been regulars in their clubs' number six or seven jerseys and Martin actually finished his NRL season at fullback.

The Kiwis wider squad comprises:

Backs (17): Roger Tuivasa-Sheck, Dallin Watene-Zelezniak, Jahrome Hughes, Jordan Kahu, Jamayne Isaako, Jordan Rapana, Reimus Smith, Sosaia Feki, Ken Maumalo, Dean Whare, Gerard Beale, Joseph Manu, Peter Hiku, Esan Marsters. Te Maire Martin, Shaun Johnson, Kodi Nikorima.

Forwards (19): Martin Taupau, Nelson Asofa-Solomona, Jesse Bromwich, Herman Ese'ese, Leeson Ah Mau, Isaac Liu, Jared Waerea-Hargreaves, Brandon Smith, Issac Luke, Danny Levi, Joseph Tapine, Raymond Faitala-Mariner, Kevin Proctor, Corey Harawira-Naera, Tohu Harris, Isaiah Papali'i, Kenny Bromwich, James Fisher-Harris, Adam Blair.

Tuivasa-Sheck and Watene-Zelezniak have been among the NRL's best fullbacks, but RTS has undergone knee surgery and is probably out of both the trans-Tasman Test and the tour to Britain and France. While DWZ was arguably our best player in the 36-18 loss to England at Denver in June, his wife is expecting a baby next month. Their likely absence from the tour weakens the fullback and wing positions.

The rampant Rapana should be back on one wing. Isaako and Maumalo debuted in Denver, and top NRL points-scorer Isaako has the inside running this time. Reimus Smith (son of former Kiwi Tyrone) was dazzling for the Bulldogs late in the season. Feki is an interesting choice after a long absence. He was a member of the 2014 Four Nations squad but did not actually get on the field in that tournament.

Of the centres, Whare is recovering from a broken arm suffered against the Warriors last month. Newcomer Marsters did enough in Denver to retain his place and Manu has roared into contention with the title-chasing Roosters. Kahu, Hiku and Beale all have utility value, and well documented strengths and weaknesses. Whoever is picked faces a tough challenge against Greg Inglis and the Kangaroos second-rowers.

As mentioned, halves are in short supply. Hughes did well as the Storm's number seven late in the regular season after first making his mark at fullback. But he was overlooked for their first semi-final. Johnson missed Denver but is still the first choice and – with Maguire just the latest Kiwis coach to ignore Benji Marshall – either Martin or Nikorima should be alongside him. No more wildcards (such as Harris) please.

Asofa-Solomona and Jesse Bromwich will be on the charge against the Sharks in Melbourne on Friday, with Waerea-Hargreaves and Liu firing for the Roosters against the Rabbitohs on Saturday. Ah Mau has been in rousing form for the Dragons over recent weeks. Taupau (whose Manly mate Addin Fonua-Blake has opted for Tonga) should again be a lock-in, while Ese'ese had his initiation off the bench in Denver.

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Of the 17 who played against England in June only Newcastle hooker Slade Griffin (who later suffered his fourth serious knee injury) is out of contention. Levi replaced Griffin in the Knights starting line-up but is probably now third in line behind Luke and hard-tackling Storm interchange dummy half Brandon Smith. Hopefully Luke will not be distracted by ongoing contract negotiations. His country needs him.

Of the other forwards, Kenny Bromwich has been consistently good for the Storm, and both Harawira-Naera and Fisher-Harris compiled strong seasons at Penrith. Faitala-Mariner and Tapine missed

late-season games through injury but are believed to be available. The experienced Proctor is seeking a recall after a year in the wilderness. Harris, Papali'i and Blair have compelling Warriors form to support their cases.

Maguire might also name his first captain. Although Luke led the team onto Denver's Mile High Stadium Maguire emphasised there was no official captain. With Jesse Bromwich unlikely to be restored to the role, Tuivasa-Sheck could have been given the job after his inspiring deeds at the Warriors. Unfortunately, his knee surgery is likely to foil any such plan. It is just one of many intriguing selection questions.



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TENSE, TOUGH and tightrope walking football was the order of the day in both semi finals over the weekend. There was plenty of emotion, both on and off the field, as the teams fought to continue in the 2018 competition. Sharks half, Chad Townsend, was the hero on Friday night at Sydney's Allianz Stadium with his match winning, but wobbly, field goal with seven minutes to play. The next night, at ANZ Stadium in Sydney's west at Homebush, it took not one, but three field goals from Souths cool thinking halfback, Adam Reynolds, before the Rabbitohs cemented a place in this weekend's preliminary finals. The last player to land three field goals in a winning playoff game was NRL Hall of Famer, Billy Smith in 1971. Now 76 years of age, Billy is still active and lives in a comfortable aged care centre at Miranda in Sydney's south. Billy played 26 Tests for Australia between 1964 and 1970, captaining his country in one of these Tests, against Great Britain in 1970. He also played in four winning Grand Finals with St. George and still holds the record of 297 for most games played with this club. At the Sydney Cricket Ground on 11 September 1971, Billy kicked three dropped goals in the 15-12 win over Manly in the preliminary final. The 1971 St. George team was coached by Jack Gibson, who in 2008, was named as coach of the Australian Team of the Century.

It was good to see Shark's half, Chad Townsend, receive deserved recognition for his efforts in Cronulla's 21-20 win over Penrith on Friday night. Now 27, Townsend has played 138 first grade matches and scored 335 points. He had two seasons with the Warriors in 2014 and 2015. Not only did he kick the winning field goal, but he also scored his team's first try after just four minutes, while his kicking game was first class. On the NRL statistics site, Townsend is top of the table for Players in Support with 583, while he is fifth on the Kick Metres table with 6,797. Townsend and his five eighth, Matt Moylan, were standouts against the Panthers. Moylan's defence was important and he certainly won the much publicised battle against his opposite number, James Maloney. Moylan is also 27 and he has played 112 first grade matches in which he has collected 28 tries.

Cronulla coach, Shane Flanagan, began his first grade coaching career with the Sharks on 20 July 2010, when Ricky Stuart resigned. After the Penrith win on Friday, he has 101 wins from 183 games as Sharks boss. He is contracted until the end of next season and over the past few weeks, the club has been working to sign him to a new three year deal. That would make him the first coach to be in charge at Cronulla for 10 years. Flanagan's son, Kyle, celebrated his 20th birthday on Saturday by scoring eight points for the Newtown Jets in their great win over minor premiers, Penrith, in the NSW Intrust Super Cup Preliminary Final at Leichhardt Oval. The win moves the Jets into the Grand Final, which will be played at Leichhardt Oval this coming Sunday. Young Flanagan, who has played one NRL game for the Sharks, in the 38-12 win over the Knights on 26 August, has scored 159 points for the Jets in Intrust Cup games this year.

Souths had luck on their side against St. George/Illawarra on Saturday night. They were behind 12-11 with six minutes to play but two big errors from the Dragons gave them an opportunity to win. The first of these Dragons mistakes was a one on one ball strip and the second was deciding to run the ball on the fifth tackle with a minute or so to play, rather than kick deep to Souths corners. Paul McGregor's team really put it to Souths and the criticism he has endured over the past month or two, should ease. If the Dragons had have won, they would have gone in against the Roosters this Saturday night without Gareth Widdop (shoulder) and Tariq Sims, who had to leave the field with a leg injury just two minutes into the second half against Souths, while Jack de Belin's continuing ankle problem could have seen him also miss the game.

The Roosters-Souths game on Saturday night at Allianz Stadium should draw a reasonable crowd. The two clubs are foundation clubs of the game in Australia and the rivalry has been constant since 1908. Saturday's game will be the last at Allianz before it is pulled down and a new stadium built on the site.

The Sharks will be closely monitoring the fitness of key forwards, Paul Gallen and Luke Lewis all this week. Both were injured in the win over Penrith, but are keen to play against the Storm on Friday night at AAMI stadium in Melbourne. Like Souths and the Roosters, there is definitely no love lost between the Sharks and the Storm.

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I was pleased to see that a female refereed the Group 7 Grand Final on Sunday between the Shellharbour City Sharks and the Kiama Knights. Karra-Lee Nolan was the first woman in the history of the NSW Country Rugby League to control a men's Grand Final. The game was played at Collegians Sports Complex at Figtree near Wollongong, 85 kms south of Sydney. Steve "Slippery" Morris, father of Brett and Josh, had two other sons, Matt and Dylan playing with Kiama in this Grand Final, while a fifth son, Scott, coached the Kiama reserves in their Grand Final with the Albion Park-Oak Flats Eagles. The NRL has two excellent female touch judges, Kasey Badger and Belinda Sleeman, but unfortunately they were not used in last weekend's big games.

Again Rugby League crowd numbers were behind the Aussie Rules attendances. At Allianz on Friday, just 19,211 turned up to see the Sharks beat the Panthers, while at Homebush on Saturday, 48,188 were at ANZ Stadium. That gave a total of 67,399. Both Aussie Rules semi finals were played at the

Melbourne Cricket Ground. On Friday, Melbourne beat Hawthorn in front of 90,152, while on Saturday, Collingwood defeated GWS Giants with 72,504 at the ground. Those figures resulted in a total of 162,656.

Up on the Gold Coast, the Australian Rugby Union were unhappy when just 16,019 fans saw the Wallabies beaten 23-19 by Argentina.

Last week, the English media gave plenty of coverage to England Jimmy Anderson becoming the fast bowler with the most Test wickets. Australia's Glenn McGrath was the previous leader with 563 Test wickets but Anderson now has 564 following the recent fifth Test against India at the Oval in London. Anderson certainly is a class bowler but he had to play 19 more Tests than McGrath before overtaking the Australian. Also 368 of Anderson's wickets, or more than 65 percent, were taken in his home country. McGrath meanwhile, took 289 wickets in Australia or just 51 percent. These figures indicate that McGrath was good under all conditions, while Anderson was dominant only in his homeland.

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NEW ZEALAND v AUSTRALIA
3 TESTS 1 DAY
IT'S TIME

SATURDAY 13 OCTOBER
MT SMART STADIUM

GET TICKETS



By Miles Davis

Die-hard Fans

Photo www.photosport.nz

WELL MY Dragons are out of the play-offs as well as the Mighty Vodafone Warriors so what now? I'll tell you what – I can't wait for next season to start! Such is the grip their team has over a true fan (after all fan is short for fanatic which indicates a lack of rationalism).

In my experience the Vodafone Warriors have arguably the most fanatical and loyal supporters in New Zealand. There may only be a hard-core of 8,000 plus of them but they turn up week in week out to cheer on their team and make sure the opposition know they are in hostile territory. They also make it clear to match officials when they disapprove of their decisions and perhaps to think more carefully before repeating that mistake. They are the reason the club exists at all.

Of course if the Vodafone Warriors win all their games then that number swells to over 30,000 but the life-blood of the club is those who do not need constant success to feed their support. What is needed now is to increase the numbers of the faithful so that the club can strengthen its financial position which helps strengthen the whole club. The main way this works in English football is by indoctrination of whanau. I strongly believe it is the responsibility of the true fan to ensure that their children are afflicted with the same passion for the club. This way the foundation can be laid for developing the next generation of fan. No point in developing future players if there is not a crowd there to support them. Each fan must make it his or her responsibility to preach the gospel of their club. Basically become a sort of sporting missionary spreading the faith.

There are plenty of choices children can make in life but which team they support should not be one of them. To allow them this choice is absolvment of parental responsibility in my book. My sons have had no choice in this matter and (although they often wish I had picked more successful teams for them to support) they look forward to each game with eager anticipation and a large amount of blind optimism.

All of them support West Ham United, Wellington, Hurricanes, St George and of course the mighty Vodafone Warriors. They obviously get upset when any of our teams lose but that does not dampen their spirits one iota. Like true fans they can't wait for next week when things may be different.

Take this Premier League season for instance. West Ham has had a miserable start losing all of their first 4 games. They were rock bottom of the table and the only team in the 4 professional English football leagues to not have picked up a solitary point. This weekend just gone we were playing away to Everton. One of our bogey teams who we rarely beat. Everton were unbeaten so far and we were playing them away from home. A positive result looked unlikely. None of those facts dampened the enthusiasm of my sons who were all up at 3am ready for another 90 minutes of torture.

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The potential result didn't matter what mattered was another opportunity to support our team and share the experience – good or bad – as a family. As it happened this was one of those rare weeks when things went out way and there was much celebrating at the final whistle when our beloved West Ham ended up 3-1 victors. Next week when we play league-leaders Chelsea it will be more than likely that normal service will be resumed and another defeat be inflicted (although in true fanatical style we are all convinced that we will win that one as well!).

Being a true fan is not for the faint-hearted. It involves a lot of heartache but the rewards when things go right are well worth it. The highs are never so high if the lows aren't low.

So I ask all true Vodafone Warriors fans to not only keep the faith but to keep spreading it. Make sure your tamariki inherit your passion for your team. It will undoubtedly enhance your game day experience but will also lead to a strengthening of the club. If you fail in this duty I will deem you a bad parent and report you to the appropriate authorities. Roll on the 2019 NRL season!!

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EAGER TIGER: Dannevirke Tigers scrumhalf Tama Petera beats his Tamatea counterpart Mataeus Marsh during this burst on Saturday. PHOTO/HAWKE'S BAY TODAY



By Shane Hurdell
Hawke's Bay Today
Sports Reporter

Bridge Pa Captain's Season Gone

A SEASON-ENDING BROKEN hand injury took the gloss off Bridge Pa captain Jeston Craig's blazer game in Hawke's Bay's premier club rugby league competition on Saturday.

"Jeston thought it was dislocated about 10 minutes into the game. He played the remainder of the match, received his blazer at the post-game presentations and then went to hospital where he learnt it was broken," Bridge Pa player-coach Ihaka Waerea said as he reflected on his team's 62-4 win over Maraenui at the Hawke's Bay Regional Sports Park in Hastings.

Bridge Pa players receive their blazers after 25 games.

With defending champions Kahuranaki no longer in the competition Bridge Pa secured the favourite's tag for the title with Saturday's victory.

"The boys hit their straps by playing with a bit of purpose and width," Waerea said.

Former Kahuranaki utility back and former Hawks basketballer, Czebalos Smiler, produced a player-of-the-match display at fullback for Bridge Pa. In his debut for the club former Omahu Huia player and former Hastings Boys' High School 1st XV rugby first five-eighth Shamara Brooks dicatated terms well from stand-off.

Centre Jackson Waerea was another to shine in the winning backline. Secondrower Leroy Taiapa and prop Teira Cowan led the hit up statistics among the Bridge Pa forwards.

Busy backrower Ormond Heather, who was also forced from the field with a broken hand, and hooker, former Magpies rugby centre Karl Broughton, were the pick of the Maraenui forwards. Winger Tom Iosefo made the most of his limited opportunities in the Maraenui backline.

Secondrower Nevada Hemopo, another former Kahuranaki player, scored Maraenui's only try.

In the other premier game Tamatea beat Dannevirke Tigers 54-42. Prop Johnny Wang and secondrower Te Rira Rowlands were valuable on the carry for Tamatea.

Hooker Rukutai Craig impressed with his defensive workrate.

Inside backs Mataeus Marsh, another former Hawks basketballer, and Ash Robinson marshalled the attack well. Robinson, Marsh and Craig scored two tries each and Robinson kicked seven goals.

Rowlands, Terry Nikora jnr, Raumoa Timu and Witere Kupa scored a try each.

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Tigers manager Aaron Karena said he was proud of the manner his troops fought back and got within two points at one stage.

“We were short of players and had no subs. We’re probably going to meet Tamatea again in the semifinals so it’s good they haven’t seen us at our best.”

Scrumhalf Tama Petera was outstanding in his first match of the season after his fight in the previous weekend’s Battle for Life charity boxing event in Hastings. His brother, fullback Waka Petera, again impressed in the Tigers backline.

Backrower Rakei Ngaia, prop Parekaia Tapiata and hooker Adrian Whareatu were the best of the Tigers forwards.

Reserve grade action saw title favourites Bay Bulldogs hand defending champions Bridge Pa their second loss of the season with a 42-24 victory and Omahu Huia beat Flaxmere 52-20.

Women’s grade fixtures saw unbeaten defending champions Bridge Pa wallop YMP 84-4 and Tamatea beat Hastings Rugby and Sports 48-14.

One more weekend of round robin play is scheduled for all three grades before the September 29 semifinals and October 6 grand finals.

I can’t sign off without praising the quality of the two NRL men’s battles at the weekend. They were crackers.

I have to admit I didn’t predict either of them and as a result I’ve dropped to second place in our NRL Tipping competition set up by former league scribe Kevin Calvert. League fans in Taranaki will remember him from his days with the Taranaki Herald in the late 1980s as will Auckland fans when he worked for various publications in the big smoke during the 1990s before moving on to television.

He had the pleasure of reporting on former Kiwis Tony Kemp, David Watson and Barry Harvey as well as former New Zealand Maori stars Geoff and Willy Tangira during the early stages of their careers.

He’s a good bugger and if I am to be beaten in this comp I won’t mind if it is to him.

Hopefully this weekend’s games will be just as exciting. I’ll be surprised if they aren’t.



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Laura Langman to captain Silver Ferns



Photo Michael Bradley Photography

SILVER FERN Laura Langman returns to the international game with a new role after being named to lead the Silver Ferns.

“It’s hugely humbling to be named captain and to have gone through the process with the players in terms of nominating within our group. It’s really special to be able to lead the team through to 2018” said Langman in an interview moments after the announcement.

Langman will be supported by vice-captain, defender Katrina Grant, fulfilling their roles through to the Constellation Cup at the end of the year. The positions will then be reviewed looking ahead to next year’s Netball World Cup in England.

Silver Ferns head coach Noeline Taurua said Langman and Grant provide a strong captain and vice-captain combination as the Silver Ferns take on the remainder of 2018 Tests.

“Laura’s leadership qualities have been recognised in regards to her high standards she sets, her passion for the game and black dress, and her strong work ethic,” Taurua said.

“I know she’s excited to be playing at this level again and with the honour that comes with captaining your country and with the leadership experience that Katrina brings they will provide a strong foundation base for the side.”

When asked about her leadership style Langman expressed her belief in the importance of everyone playing a part in the team.

“We have made it clear from the outset that our strength is in everybody and everybody contributing.

“I’ve been really fortunate to have been under some great leader so I try to incorporate some of it from all of them.

“I certainly will be looking to our experience players and youth for ideas and where we need to go to next.”

The Silver Ferns will take to the court again in October for the Constellation Cup.

Congratulations to the Silver Ferns on their win against South Africa last night.





New Zealand Resident 18s team named for TOA Samoa U18s clash

By Brooke Hurdell -
NZRL

FOLLOWING TRIALS on the weekend, the New Zealand Resident 18s have been named to take on the TOA Samoa U18s on 6 October at Pulman Park.

The 18-strong team includes two players from last year's New Zealand 18s team who took on the Australian Schoolboys, Tyler Slade and Paul Turner, who have also been named in the 2018 Junior Kiwis wider squad for the Trans-Tasman Triple-Header on 13 October. Emmanuel Tuimavave-Gerrard and Kayal Iro are also eligible again having played in the NZ Select 18s side which took on the Australian Schoolboys too.

Many of the players have progressed through the New Zealand Rugby League age-group pathways with Christian Tuipulotu having captained the New Zealand 16s team to victory against the New Zealand Maori 17s last year, alongside his vice-captain Temple Kalepo and teammate Caleb Pese.

Brooklyn Herewini's naming in the 2018 New Zealand Resident 18s side serves as a reward for his fantastic National Talent Development Programme campaign being named as MVP in March this year. He also represented Manukura School earlier this month staging outstanding performances at the National Secondary Schools Tournament.

Name	Amateur Club*	Zone*	Name	Amateur Club*	Zone*	Name	Amateur Club*	Zone*
Aiden Aue	Mt. Albert	Akarana	Deighton Ieriko	Richmond	Akarana	Semisi Tapa	Otahuhu	Counties
Antonio Aufai	Otahuhu	Counties	Emmanuel Tuimavave Gerrard	Mt. Albert	Akarana	Temple Kalepo	Richmond Bulldogs	Akarana
Antonio Poua	Otahuhu	Counties	Junior Pua	Howick Hornets	Counties	Tevita Mikaeele	Otahuhu	Counties
Brooklyn Herewini	Whanganui Boxon	Mid Central	Kayal Iro	Mt. Albert	Akarana	Tukimihia Simpkins	Pikiao	Upper Central
Caleb Pese	Richmond	Akarana	Patrick Elia	Pt. Chev	South Island	Tyler Slade	Ellerslie	Akarana
Christian Tuipulotu	Otahuhu	Counties	Paul Turner	Mt. Albert	Northland			
			Potusa Fui-lala	Otahuhu	Counties			

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Head Coach: Tusa Lafaele

Assistant Coaches: Cody Walker & Daniel McEwan

Manager: Tania Harris

Lead Trainer: Jasen McCarthy

Assistant Trainer: Lee Paru

Physio: Allan Horn

Good luck to the Warriors Women for their MUST win game against the Broncos on Friday night in Melbourne!

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Bulls stamp their mark early in National Premiership

By Brooke Hurdell -
NZRL

THE CANTERBURY Bulls and Akarana Falcons will be happy campers both coming away with the win after the first round of the National Premiership.

In a hotly contested match-up, the Cantabrians sent a strong message to their opposition that they mean business in 2018 taking home a narrow 20-18 win over the Stingrays at Mt Smart Stadium two.

Both teams may have crossed the line for three tries but it was the handy boot of Canterbury Bulls captain James Baxendale which sealed the deal with two points being the difference on the final whistle.

Earlier in the year, Canterbury Bulls Coach Andrew Auimatagi led his Linwood Keas team to a thriller Canterbury Club Grand-Final win over the Hornby Panthers and is already taking his early season form into the National Premiership.

While Counties weren't victorious, they'll have plenty of positives to stew over fielding a young side full of up and coming talent with the likes of youngster Sheldon Roger, who has come through the New Zealand Rugby League age-group pathways featuring in last year's New Zealand 18s squad.

2017 National Premiership winners and favourites, the Akarana Falcons also proved why they've held the title as back-to-back champions asserting their dominance over Waikato with a 46-6 win.

The blowout scoreline was the result of a superb team effort that saw Akarana fullback Polima Siaki pick up a double and six of his teammates cross the line to accumulate eight tries in total, seven of which were converted between captain Francis Leger and Chaz Brown.

Waikato's cause wasn't helped when their star fullback left the field with a serious injury. However, the players were full of enthusiasm heading into round two where they'll take on Canterbury who will be riding the high of momentum following their round one win.

In the National Championship, Northland staged an upset on their home turf with a 16-14 victory over the Wellington Orcas. Ruakaka turned out a cheerful crowd who witnessed their home team in a nail-biter sending the Orcas packing

Continued on next page...

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National Premiership

Counties 18 zanterbury 20

Akarana 46 Waikato 6

	Played	Win	Lost	Draw	Scored	Against	Points	Pts	diff				
NATIONAL PREMIERSHIP													
AKARANA FALCONS				1	1	0	0	46	6	2	40		
CANTERBURY BULLS				1	1	0	0	20	18	2	2		
COUNTIES MANULAU STINGGRAYS						1	0	1	0	18	20	0	-2
WAIKATO	1	0	1	0	6	46	0	-40					

National Championship

Northland 16 Wellington 14

	Played	Win	Lost	Draw	Scored	Against	Points			
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP										
NORTHERN SWORDS				1	1	0	0	16	14	2
WELLINGTON ORCAS				1	0	1	0	14	16	0
OTAGO WHALERS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Next week's fixtures:

4pm, Saturday, 22 September, 2018

National Premiership

Canterbury v Waikato

Christchurch Stadium

2pm, Saturday, 22 September, 2018

National Championship

Wellington v Otago

2pm, Saturday, 22 September 17, 2018

Petone Recreation Ground, Wellington

Akarana v Counties Manukau

Mt Smart Stadium 2

IT IS fantastic to see flight centre back involved with Rugby League. They are now the key partner for the Warriors Women's team.

Previously they were part of the Kiwis sponsorship in 2010 and when they agreed to sponsor the Kiwis and the NZRL they also made a significant contribution to the League 4 Life foundation and in fact they were the first sponsor to get involved with League 4 Life foundation that helps so many people across the game.

Check out the video made for the competition which has now closed: <https://youtu.be/C52xNiXre54>

Anyway, fantastic to see them back involved in our great game !!!!!

Sir Peter (Mad Butcher)

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2018 Howick Hornets Masters v “The Firm”

By Dave Brown

SUNDAY 16TH September saw the second annual Howick Hornets Rugby League Masters team v “The Firm” take place.

“The Firm” is the Howick Hornets supporters group. Initially formed by a few mates who are passionate about league and the Hornets it has now grown into a large support system who fund raise specifically for the Howick club. All monies raised are fed back to the club in some form or another whether it is waterproof jackets for the minis/junior team coaches and managers, new gazebos for topside player’s huts or free sausage sizzles throughout the year.

A large family orientated crowd cheered on the teams as they fought hard and although the Masters may have scored a few more points the match was declared a draw.

Playing for the team again this year was Dave Brown and two of his sons Ben and Logan (pictured above).

Thanks to Scott Electrical for their sponsorship of the Hornets over the years



NRL team lists: Finals week 3

The official team lists for the penultimate round of the Telstra Premiership finals series.

Click here to learn more: <https://www.nrl.com/news/2018/09/18/nrl-team-lists-finals-week-3>



Canterbury moves to top spot at Ford NHL

By Hockey NZ

Photo: BWMedia

Ohn Turkington Forestry Central Mavericks Vs Tiger Turf North Harbour

The first game of the day promised to be an attacking affair with two sides that possess great flair. The John Turkington Forestry Central Mavericks got themselves on the scoreboard early with a well worked penalty corner which saw Jordan Cohen slide in for a deflection.

In the 28th minute of the game Shea McAleese slotted home a shot from another penalty corner. Just before the half time break Tiger Turf North Harbour earned a penalty corner and Cory Bennett flicked in a goal to make the score 2-1 at the half.

In the 39th minute Robbie Capizzi tied the game with a well worked field goal. Steven Edwards then put Tiger Turf North Harbour in front with a great counter attacking goal. Central Mavericks struck back instantly with a Hayden Phillips shot past the keeper. Cory Bennett then flicked in another penalty corner making it his ninth goal of the campaign so far.

On the final hooter, Central had a penalty corner and managed to touch in a loose shot to send the game to a shootout. The shootout saw the game go to sudden death where Robbie Capizzi held his nerve to beat the keeper and secure the win for North Harbour. The win gets North Harbour to 11 points and leaves the Central needing a big finish to the week to get a spot in the semi-finals.

Final Score: North Harbour 4, Central 4 (3-2 SO win for North Harbour)

Central: 4 (Jordan Cohen, Shea McAleese, Hayden Phillips, Jason Peel)

North Harbour: 4 (Cory Bennett 2, Robbie Capizzi, Steven Edwards)

Halftime: John Turkington Forestry Central Mavericks 2-1

Auckland Vs Southern

Southern were looking to build on an impressive performance yesterday where they had a narrow loss to North Harbour. Auckland were in need of a regulation win to separate themselves from Central in the race for the final semi-final spot. The first half saw both teams creating opportunities in front of goal but neither side were able to capitalise and went into the sheds at half time tied 0-0.

Auckland ramped up the pressure in the second half and managed to earn themselves a penalty corner where Tarrant Hami-Jones came forward and put a drag flick just underneath the goalkeepers foot. Auckland continued to press and were rewarded with a goal to Hamish McGeorge in the 53rd minute. Southern, desperate to get back into the game, pulled their goal keeper.

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Unfortunately for the Southern team they couldn't quite get the two goals they needed and went down 2-0. The win moves Auckland to 10 points and firmly into the top 4.

Final Score: Auckland 2, Southern 0

Auckland: 2 (Tarrant Hami-Jones, Hamish McGeorge)

Southern: 0

Halftime: 0-0

Canterbury Vs Ricoh Capital Cobras

The top two teams in the competition met in what was going to be a highly entertaining match. The Ricoh Capital Cobras started strongly and showed some great movement and ball speed around the field. They were rewarded with a powerful drag flick to Oliver MacIntyre in the 8th minute of the game. Canterbury then came back strong having a number of close scoring opportunities.

Eventually in the 24th minute David Brydon got a nice touch from a ball put across the circle. From there on the game was a bit of an arm wrestle until the last frantic few minutes. Sam Lane scored a well worked field goal in the 58th minute which looked to have sealed the win. Capital struck back in the last minute to send the game to a shootout.

Canterbury won the shootout 3-2 when George Enersen pulled off a great save on a shootout from Benedict Van Woerkom. The result lifts Canterbury past the Capital on the table to 14 points. Capital are breathing down their neck on 13 points.

Canterbury 2, Capital 2 (3-2 SO win for Canterbury)

Canterbury: 2 (David Brydon, Sam Lane)

Ricoh Capital Cobras: 2 (Oliver Macintyre, Daniel Harris)

Halftime: 1-1

Finals To Be Live Streamed

The Women's K Cup Final and the Men's Challenge Shield Final, along with the respective bronze medal games will be streamed live simultaneously on the Hockey New Zealand Facebook page and in full high definition on YouTube.

[Click here for the 2018 Ford NHL Women's draw, results and standings.](#)

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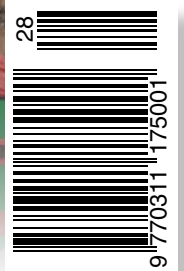
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Eyes on the prize

Four teams remain, but only two can go through to the biggest game of the year



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Simon Mannering

WARRIORS

After 301 NRL games across 14 seasons, the journey has come to an end following the loss to Penrith. How are you feeling?

I've had a wonderful career and I'm proud of everything I've achieved. It was unfortunate that we didn't bring our best game against the Panthers. We knew it was going to be a tough match, and they were too good for us in the end. At full-time it was a funny feeling – I was proud of the boys with how well they played throughout the whole season, but it was disappointing that it has come to an end. That's just footy. We weren't good enough against Penrith. They put us under a lot of pressure on our own line and they got the better of us.

The season may have ended after Week One of the finals, but you must be proud of what your team achieved in 2018...

We played well in so many games when we were under pressure. After the poor run we had for the past six seasons, my goal was to help this team get back into the play-offs and we did that. We weren't ready to finish our season in the first week, but that's the case. I'm proud of the boys. We finished the regular season just one win away from the top of the table – it was a really tight competition. We had 15 wins this year – a lot more than we've had in previous years. Hopefully it's something we can build on.

Do you think the experience of playing in the finals this year will help the younger players for future seasons?

I know our guys will be better for it after getting some experience in finals footy. Lots of the guys had their first taste of it and hopefully it's something we can build on moving forward. Hopefully the team keeps improving and we make the finals again next year. It was a disappointing way to end but it's been great to see so many young players grow so much this year. Some of them had their best seasons of their careers and it's definitely something we can add to. This is the first time some of these players have played finals footy, I was lucky enough to play in the finals early in my career. Some clubs are there every year and you see the experience they get from it – they get to these big games and they handle it really well. We probably didn't handle the experience well enough against the Panthers, but we know we'll learn from it.

Now that your playing career has come to an end, what are your plans for the future?

I'm not too sure yet. I've always said I'll assess that once I finish playing. I'm going to lay low for the next week or so and then I'll reassess and see what happens.

Would you like to take up a role with the Warriors, perhaps as a mentor for the younger players?

I'd love to, footy has given me so much. I was lucky enough to have some good mentors early in my career and it'd be really selfish if I didn't pass on my experience and knowledge to the young players coming through. I will help out some kids as much as I can and I'd love to give back to this club that I love.

Are there youngsters coming through who you expect to succeed in the NRL?

I think so. We've got so many great younger players coming through, especially in the forwards. Some of the players have had their best seasons yet. So many of them are still learning and they'll get better from here. There's a lot of potential here.

– As told to Michael Blok



6 BIG LEAGUE 2018 Finals Week Two

BIG LEAGUE

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PHOTO: Shane Wenzel/Phototek

WOMEN IN LEAGUE

FIONA BOLLEN
SWOOP



Wonder Warriors

ONE started the Warriors' campaign in the best possible manner, one ensured it finished with the best result.

Hilda and Laura Mariu have been together for six years and married for six months. Ever since they met they've played in the same team, and last weekend they ran out for the first game of the NRL Women's Premiership.

They're both in the record books. Hilda will forever be the first try scorer in the women's competition, while Laura is just one of four inaugural captains for the league.

At home, the atmosphere can be subdued if the team's suffered a loss, but they didn't have to worry about that last weekend.

The Warriors defeated the Roosters 10-4 in the NRLW's first game and it was a crunching tackle by Laura on Roosters centre Isabelle Kelly as she attacked their line late in the game that ensured the Warriors finished in front on the scoreboard.

"We do talk footy. We do," Hilda says. "I'm lucky - she's had a lot of experience throughout the years. I have that respect for her as a player."

"She's very humble. That was an attraction for me, because she's so humble with the accolades she's been able to achieve over the years."

"When there's a loss in the house, it's quiet for a little while, then we talk to each other and talk about the good things and the things we need to work on for the next game."

The two have an on-field relationship that works - there have never been blow-ups during a game. Plus, they couldn't be happier off the park.

And to be able to share in the NRLW experience not only with each other but also the rest of their Warriors team-mates means the world.

"I was really proud of where we both are," Hilda says.

"To be able to run out together and make history for the NRL, the first NRL women's competition - there were lots of emotions knowing it's the first game, playing together, just everything."

"You think about the women [who have played league] before, so that was on our shoulders. We had all of that. We looked at each other as a team and were like, 'Right, we're here, let's just do the business now.'"

That they did - but it wasn't easy.

Up against the early favourites in the Roosters, the Warriors were relentless in defence and for the most part sharp in attack.

Two months of training came to fruition and the players' tight bond helped the team overcome a treacherous arrival in Sydney.

FIELD OF DREAMS:
Laura Mariu lands a game-saving hit on Isabelle Kelly.



After a diverted flight across the Tasman that ended up landing late in Brisbane the night before game day, then an early departure to arrive in Sydney in time to play, the Warriors women pulled together to keep calm and focus on why they were there.

"The girls showed resilience, having only had three or four hours' sleep," Hilda says.

"We were just trying to make sure no one was on phones and we were really relaxing

and trying to concentrate, have a sleep if we could.

"We got back to the hotel, had a late breakfast, jumped back on the bus after our meeting and had to switch on.

"We knew we'd be flying over here and knew we had to keep tight over the next three weeks.

"Our culture of our team is we've kept it really tight for each other. We're basically family now."

UPFRONT | TEN MINUTES WITH...

Anneka Stephens

ST GEORGE ILLAWARRA DRAGONS

How exciting was it when the Dragons claimed their first win of the NRLW against the Warriors last Saturday?

It was awesome. The atmosphere was so good and it was great to get the win – I loved it. We played so much better than our first game against Brisbane because the girls gelled a little bit more. Hopefully we can continue our winning ways again this week.

How important is this weekend's game against the Roosters?

The game against the Warriors was a must-win, but this week is more of a do-or-die. We know how important this game is and if we can win there's a good chance we'll be in the grand final. We want to get the win and create history by playing in the first final. When we signed the papers to play in this competition, playing in the grand final was our main goal. The win against the Warriors felt surreal. If we could play in the final and win it, it would top everything off.

We hear you've travelled far to play in the NRLW...

I'm originally from New Zealand but I'm based in Perth now. This is my first year playing rugby league. I'm normally a rugby union player because we don't get much league over there. This year everything is building and we've finally got a league comp. Things are going well and hopefully the game keeps growing in Western Australia. I'm thankful for the opportunities I've been given.

Having been away from your family for the past few weeks, have you found the time away challenging?

I've got a one-year-old, a 10-year-old and a seven-year-old – they're back home with my partner. It's been really hard being away from them, but I know we're making history here. My seven-year-old daughter plays league as well. I'm someone she can look up to and hopefully she'll take the steps and will be here one day too. They were with the nanny for the game against the Warriors and I got a message after the game saying they were watching the game and saying, "Go mummy!"

It was nice to hear from them. I'm loving the time here with the girls and making friends, but I can't wait to get home as well.

How important is this competition to you and your team-mates?

It's so important to all of us. There are younger girls looking up to us. Now girls know they can have a future in rugby league. Yes, there were the Jillaroos, but that was usually just a one-off game. Now there's a proper competition and girls can look forward to playing at this level. Hopefully this competition keeps growing and in a couple of years' time it's bigger and better. It's pretty cool to say I'm one of the first players to play in this competition

How does it make you feel knowing you're a role model to lots of kids and people are looking up to you?

It's surreal and I never thought I'd be in this position. After the game I went around the field and there were little girls who wanted me to sign their ball. I was the one normally looking at other people, but to be here with the little ones looking up to me is pretty awesome.

Would you be interested in playing representative footy at the end of the season?

I'll take it as it comes. I'll fulfil my job here with the Dragons and if I do get picked in a representative team then that's a bonus. I've lived in Australia for eight years but I'm still a Kiwi and eligible for New Zealand.

– As told to Michael Blok



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UPFRONT FEATURE

The NRLW is off to a sensational start and Apii Nicholls is shaping up to be one of the competition's biggest stars. By MICHAEL BLOK

YOU wouldn't be able to tell by the way she's killing it in the NRLW, but the past month has been exhausting for Warriors fullback Apii Nicholls.

On top of travelling from New Zealand to Australia each week to play in the new competition, Nicholls has also continued her full-time job as a police officer back home.

For most, playing a professional sport would be tiring enough, but Nicholls returns home to work long shifts several times a week – proving her commitment to rugby league and typifying the sacrifice she and other women make to play in the NRLW.

The fullback admits the heavy schedule is draining, but she wouldn't have it any other way because she knows how special this opportunity is.

"I might be exhausted, but it's worth it because we're creating history," Nicholls tells *Big League*. "Not many of us will get this opportunity so I'm very grateful for it. It's exciting for me because I'm living someone else's dream."

Nicholls recently graduated from the Royal New Zealand Police College, alongside the Warriors and Kiwi Ferns captain Laura Mariu.

"Before we went to college, I didn't know [Mariu] well," she says. "I knew of her and she was a star to me because I looked up to her in rugby league."

Nicholls credits her captain for helping her along both paths.

"I've learnt a lot from her both on and off the field," she admits. "She's taught me a lot about character and how to carry myself. At college we stuck together and we're still together now."

"To be able to play next to her is surreal. I've got her back and she's got mine."

Nicholls is still new to rugby league, having only transitioned from rugby union over the past couple of years. Even though she's fresh to the code, she's already found much success and even won the

2017 New Zealand Women's Player of the Year award.

"I played rugby union and learnt a lot from that in terms of how to tackle, how to pass and how to run the ball," Nicholls says. "I was asked to join rugby league and I thought it would be a good idea because I needed more contact and I need more game time."

She even gained representative selection straight away.

"I was selected into a wider squad for the Kiwi Ferns and then worked my butt off and actually got into the squad for the World Cup last year," she says.

On the field and as a police officer, Nicholls is tough, courageous and brave, but she admits she showed a different side before the first game of the World Cup.

"I was really nervous and shaking a lot," she recalls. "I got to a point that I just wanted to cry but I had a good team behind me who picked me up and supported me."

"I've learnt a lot from the challenges – I'm still here today and I'm still fighting."

The 25-year-old has also taken up the goal-kicking for the Warriors this season. With a background in soccer, Nicholls has taken her talent with the round ball and adapted it for the oval-shaped footy.

"I used to play soccer so I used those skills to help me kick goals," she says. "A few weeks before our pre-season game back home against the Auckland team, my kicking coach Tammy pulled me aside and said, 'I heard that you kick,' and she taught me a few tips. I've also had a friend back home who has been helping me."

This September may be one of the biggest months in Nicholls' life, and even though she's looking forward to a break at the end of the season, she's enjoying the ride.

"I'm grateful for the chance to play in this competition and I'm really enjoying it," she says. "We have a lot of support back home and that makes us really excited to be here." ❣️



Finals Week Three **BIG LEAGUE 2018 23**

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FIONA BOLLEN SWOOP



Breaking ground

IT'S been quite a season for women's rugby league, when you consider everything that's happened wasn't expected to occur for another couple of years.

The players, the fans, the clubs, even most of the administrators – nearly everyone thought a women's competition was due around 2020 or 2021.

Instead, the foot hit the accelerator and in the space of a year the NRLW Premiership has begun.

It's not perfect; it's definitely a work in progress. Next year it may not look anything like what it does now. It may be at a different time of year and in a different format. Or it could be almost exactly the same – it's wait and see at this point.

However, what those involved know is that the work put in to get the competition up and running has been worth it.

"It's a bit surreal to be honest," says Jillaroos coach Brad Donald. "There was a good reminder, I had the Jillaroos senior leadership group come in the week before (the competition started).

"We basically just reflected that it was less than 12 months ago when we were about to take four-and-a-half weeks off work each and go into a World Cup campaign, where we knew it was going to be big and there was a little bit of profile around it. But the girls weren't expecting any funding or any money.

"We were fortunate enough to be able to give them a payment through that World Cup and look after them well, but to think that less than 12 months later they'd be playing on the big stage again in club colours, it's extremely surreal.

"A lot of hard work has gone into the past 12 months to make it happen."

That first game, when the Roosters and Warriors ran out onto ANZ Stadium to kick off Round 1, was the culmination of all that.

Some Roosters players admitted the next week to being overcome by emotion as they walked down the tunnel for that first game. They were overwhelmed that the moment had finally arrived when they were able to pull on their club jerseys and represent in the NRL.

It was a similar feeling for those who have worked behind-the-scenes to pull it all together.

Then, to see how people embraced the competition has made it even more special.

Players and administrators came up with the "Same game, our way" tagline as a way of placing women's rugby league in its own lane, without completely detaching it from what it is at the core: footy. And fans are embracing it.



HISTORY ARRIVES: Simaima Taufa leads the Roosters out for the first ever NRLW game.

"After such a long time of talking about it and working towards it, that first game, to stand there on the field and see it happening before your eyes – that's a great moment for me, personally," says Tiffany Slater, senior manager of the women's elite program.

"To just go, 'This is what we were working towards and this is why we're doing it.'

"Overall, we've had great crowds, the footy has been really good, there have been lots of people came out in support of it – the known names in the game.

"What's really encouraging is people seem to be understanding what we're trying to do in 2018 and the strategy behind it and they're also really excited for what may come in the future," she adds.

PHOTO: Robb Cox/NRL Photos.com



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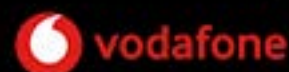
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