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This Glorious Tradition

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All Blacks at Dunedin: Greg Growden writes on a terrifying double.

In New Zealand there is no prouder recognition than the words: "He is an All Black."

Every time Colin "Pine Tree" Meads changed into his New Zealand jersey before a Test he would place his hand over the silver fern emblem on the left breast. It reminded him that he was a select member of a special breed a representative of a tiny country that for so long could identify itself as the best rugby country in the world.

The commitment to the cause is all-encompassing. As Meads, the toughest, meanest of all All Blacks, confessed: "You don't play to make yourself popular, now do you?"

Writer John Mulgan described the New Zealand phenomenon: "Rugby football was the best of all our pleasures: it was religion and desire and fulfilment all in one ... They looked on war as a game, and a game to New Zealanders is something that they play to win, against the other side and the referee, if necessary."

French coach Jacques Fouroux explained the All Black factor as: "They are always faithful to their principles, and they benefit from 100 years of applying them."

No wonder that during the epic 1956 New Zealand-Springbok series, Tom Pearce, a councillor on the New Zealand Rugby Union, declared it was imperative for the All Blacks to "have hatred in their hearts" when they played South Africa. New Zealand won the series 3-1.

All this should be remembered tomorrow when the Wallabies enter the most forbidding territory of Carisbrook to attempt to take a Test from the All Blacks. For decades Australia never had any real hope of beating New Zealand, such was the domination of those merciless dark monsters who lived to be All Blacks.

Now the Wallabies beat New Zealand regularly a brilliant feat in itself because while the standard in Australia has lifted incredibly, New Zealand have not dropped theirs.

The power and passion remains: they are still the rugby nation everyone wants to defeat.

It all has to do with the nation's biorhythms being connected directly to its national rugby team. Rugby remains New Zealand's lifeblood and to be part of that for even a few hours is a cherished experience. To be there when they win, and suffer it as an Australian, can be a demoralising experience. When they lose, you see a nation weep.

It brings the best out in everyone.

As David Campese put it: "If I was ever going to be on a side that beat the All Blacks, it would have to be on a team that played something close to perfect rugby."

The tension can be immense.

Bill Gray, who played six Tests for New Zealand from 1955-57, said recently: "I really didn't enjoy my games playing for the All Blacks, because the pressure was so intense, so severe."

Professional rugby is more demanding, but that stops no-one from attempting to join such formidable brethren.

On the cover of the 2001 All Black media guide is a stunning shot which features more than 100 illustrious New Zealand Test players. It is a combination of team photographs from over the decades, all rolled into one. All the greats are there, and it would frighten any opposition. It must be kept away from the Wallabies attempting to break the Carisbrook drought.

Inside the guide, the feeling is intense. The key articles have been written by Ron Palenski, who ranks right up there with the brilliant TPMcLean as New Zealand's most compelling rugby chronicler. In one story, Palenski tells of the speech by the Chief Justice of New Zealand, Sir Richard Wild, at the New Zealand Rugby Union's 75th anniversary dinner in 1967.

"Rugby exactly suited our climate and our soil, and it matched the temperament of New Zealand and in large measure it has moulded our national character," Sir Richard said.

"It is the team element which provides a spur for the weaker spirit, a curb for the selfish and a discipline for all. It treats every man as an equal from whatever background he comes. There's no yielding to status in a tackle, no privilege in a scrum."

In another article, Palenski describes how forgotten and famous All Blacks stand together, and of devoted players like "Red" Conway.

One of Conway's fingers had been injured and doctors told him that if he continued playing rugby, the finger would break and re-break.

With the 1960 South African tour looming, Conway was worried he would miss matches because of his finger. He decided to have it amputated.

And then there's the power of the All Black jersey. When Frank Oliver had his 50th birthday, his son Anton, the current All Black skipper, organised a special present.

Anton found his father's first Test jersey in the hot water cupboard and had it framed alongside his first All Black jumper. On his birthday, even a hard nut like Frank Oliver was moved close to tears.

Now you know why in Australia there is no prouder recognition in rugby than to say: "He was in a team that beat the All Blacks."

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