

SPORT AND  
THE LAW

## Rugby and race in New Zealand

PAUL HAMER explores rugby as a site of myth and meaning in Pakeha - Maori relations. The sport was promoted as a 'civilising' force, and hence became part of the ordering underlying the modern nation.



Rugby is central to New Zealand identity, culture and history. It has been much more than just a game, both wielding influence over how New Zealanders see themselves and seeming to confirm, at the same time, many of their heartfelt myths. Thus prowess at the game has served to confirm stereotypes of New Zealand masculinity; beating the mother country was once as important as serving in Britain's wars in proving colonial mettle; and the sport's universal appeal has stoked the notions of a classless and racially harmonious society. Indeed, rugby has been a place where the myths of New Zealand's race relations – the Pakeha 'civilisation' of Maori, the Maori love of combat, and the winning of mutual respect between the races – have been constantly looked for and found.

For a start, rugby was seen as a tool to aid in the civilisation of the savage. When the New Zealand Natives team<sup>1</sup> toured England in 1888, for example, an English newspaper remarked that, when Captain Cook had discovered New Zealand, the Maori were busy 'eating each other in the bush'. Now, however, they had 'civilised luxuries' such as the touring rugby team. In New Zealand, schools were the venue for civilisation through sport, which reflected the English public school ethos that playing wholesome and vigorous games would teach character and pluck. Maori, for their part, readily subscribed to the idea. The manager of the 1935 Maori side to Australia, Kingi Tahiwī, spoke upon arrival in Sydney of the 'wonderful stimulus of Western civilisation', with rugby providing the opportunity for 'developing the trinity in every man – his physical, intellectual, and spiritual sides'.

While rugby was agreed to be an agent of enlightenment, it was also routinely believed that Maori adoption of the sport was inevitable given their natural aptitude for the game. Anatomically, Pakeha felt that Maori were well-suited for the physical nature of rugby. Ernest Hoben, the founding secretary of the New Zealand Rugby Football Union, wrote in 1895 that Maori made excellent natural kickers because their 'loins and lower limbs' were more powerfully built than those of Europeans. Moreover, their agility on the field stemmed from the hereditary survival of skills acquired by warrior ancestors during 'spear play'. Echoes of this attitude continue today in oft-repeated comments that Maori have more 'natural' talent.

Natural aptitude came not just from hereditary tendency, however, but from the Maori custom of inter-tribal warfare. Hoben, again, suggested that rugby for most Maori had 'entirely taken the place formerly

held by the arbitrament of personal combat'. That this myth too has persisted is shown by the 1991 comment by T P McLean, the doyen of New Zealand rugby writers, that Maori had pursued tribal conflicts for centuries with 'surprising cunning and courage', but had then found that those same qualities were well suited to rugby. In other words, the fierce warriors of old had turned seamlessly into fierce combatants on the rugby field.

In holding this view, Pakeha ascribed to Maori many of the same characteristics they had done during the New Zealand wars of the 1860s: a courage and fearlessness mixed with a lack of discipline and a certain hot-headedness, often more favourably described as flair. This belief in Maori looseness and flamboyance also stemmed from Pakeha self-perceptions as solid, workmanlike and reliable. Allied to this have been the Pakeha views of Maori as not being 'quite so clever' as the best English players (according to a Pakeha member of the 1888-89 Natives side), being more inclined to give up when behind, and of regularly resorting to rough play. Again, these ideas readily persist today: All Black great Grant Fox said in 1993 that Polynesian players at his school were 'naturally superior' in talent but lacked 'discipline' and 'the right kind of mental attitude'.

Given the erstwhile armed conflict between the races in New Zealand, it was no wonder that the metaphor of warfare was routinely applied to Maori rugby.<sup>2</sup> The 1888 Natives team, for example, was said by an English newspaper to be invading Britain for 50 or 60 'pitched battles'. The performance of the haka by Maori and national sides contributed to the sense of impending battle. The popularity of this challenge was such that by the early twentieth century Australian, Canadian and South African teams were all soon using the supposed war cries of their own indigenous people, although so bogus and resented by the players were they that the other colonies soon dropped them. However in New Zealand the haka was never in doubt: Maori were involved in rugby at all levels and the haka stirred memories of the defiant Maori stands which were said to have won Pakeha respect and helped in nation-building.

In 1922, the year nationalist historian James Cowan published his account of the New Zealand wars, the All Blacks played an end-of-season match against the Maori side.<sup>3</sup> One headline read 'Maoris defeated on

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## REFERENCES

1. The team was so named not because all were Maori (four were not), but since all were New Zealand-born.
2. An almost universal phenomenon. England and Germany cannot compete at soccer without English tabloid headlines like 'Let's Blitz Fritz'.
3. The All Blacks were 'New Zealand'. The otherness of the Maori team saw them described as 'the visitors'.