

A Time for Change 1973-1984

Change came in many ways in these eleven years; the retirement of most of the outstanding players from the just ended Hawke cup era, the appearance of new players who were to become stalwarts of Taranaki cricket in the 1990's, the appointment of a sole selector, Taranaki gaining a major influence in Central Districts affairs, the beginning of coaching at the schools level by employing professional cricketers, a re-laid Pukekura Park pitch, a greatly strengthened financial position albeit with a few hiccups on the way, and, as a last act of this period, the disappearance of the four divisions as administrative units.

Denis Yardley continued as captain of the representative team but when the team won the right to challenge for the Hawke Cup in the 1974-75 season he announced his retirement. So ended an outstanding career which had begun in 1951; sixty matches for Taranaki, 1211 runs, 162 wickets captured, with his unceasingly accurate medium paced bowling, and astute captaincy. Ian Snook succeeded him as captain. By the end of the 1973-74 season only Ross Crow, of the players who had captured the Hawke Cup in 1970, was still playing for Taranaki. Batting against Wanganui in that season Ralph West and Greg Roberts scored 215 for the fifth wicket – which is the highest wicket partnership for Taranaki, heading by one run B.B.Wilson and S.Lay's third wicket partnership in 1928, also against Wanganui. Ralph West is the only Taranaki batsman to figure in two record wicket partnerships.

Another change that occurred at the end of this season was the discontinuance of charging admission for Taranaki representative matches played at Pukekura Park. With the constant playing of first class matches in Taranaki public interest had waned in representative cricket and the paying attendances were such that the gatekeepers wages were barely covered.

Unfortunately the right to challenge Southland in 1974-75 was not taken up by Taranaki as the clubs were not prepared to raise, by raffle sales, the funds necessary to finance the journey to Invercargill. The mid 1970's saw the ending of the practice of the challengers winning their way through by playing elimination matches the previous season and challengers were now found in the same season as the challenge was played. Recognising the uncertainty that the new arrangement created in terms of seasonal funding the New Zealand Cricket Council now funded challengers air travel in excess of \$700.

Taranaki were to win only two other Hawke Cup challenges in this period – both against Nelson and both resulted in high scoring matches – by Nelson. In 1981 Nelson scored 492 for 9 declared to which Taranaki replied with 157; in 1984 Nelson recorded the highest ever score against Taranaki with 641 for 7 with Wayne Hodgson, in reaching 265, setting a record individual score by an opposition player. Taranaki had scored 302, in normal circumstances a demanding total to beat.

The 1978-79 season witnessed the beginning of the Chapple Cup competition – for all the Central Districts associations – which required travel to the South Island every second year but enabled a better gauging of playing vying for first class selection. Taranaki won this trophy in the 1980-81 season with Peter Lewington, the English professional coach and off-spin bowler, capturing 41 wickets in 8 matches including 12 against Hawkes Bay in the final.

During these years Dennis Green and Ralph West passed the 2000 runs mark in representative matches with Alistar Jordan, now into his third representative decade, capturing his 300th wicket for Taranaki. The 1970's saw the emergence of Brian Richards and Roger Stachurski as notable players - Richards a dashing, if somewhat impetuous, batsman and an astute slow medium bowler, and Stachurski a bowler of infinite variety and guile.

A paradox of this period was that the lack of success at the Hawke Cup level, be it the gaining of challenge or the challenge itself, was counter-balanced by the superiority of Taranaki in the total number of representative matches played. Of the eighty played eighteen were won outright and thirty yielded first innings wins – a success percentage of sixty percent.

Players who came to the fore were Peter Blackbourn, a combative batsman and wicket-keeper who had one outstanding Shell Trophy season; Brent Lahood, a stylish opening batsman whose father and uncle had both played for Taranaki in the 1950's and 1960's; Wayne Martin, a fine all-rounder who was to become a Shell Series stalwart; Tony Sail, another all-rounder from Hawkes Bay who, in 2000, was to become Auckland's coach; Chris Kirk, an accurate left-arm spin bowler who brought first class experience from Otago; Peter Steward, another all-rounder whose accurate medium paced bowling was in the Yardley mould; and Ross Orminston, a stylish batsman who, though gaining Central Districts representation, only blossomed when he later played for Wellington.

The political balancing act of having two selectors, one each from north and south, finally came to an end in 1975 with the appointment of a third selector. Then, in 1979, B.McPherson became the sole selector, to be succeeded by the former representative fast bowler Geoff Hall in 1983. On leaving Taranaki Bryce McPherson presented a trophy to be awarded to the representative player displaying the best team spirit. Throughout these years the representative programme continued at the existent level of six to eight matches per season. Added to this was the sending of a B team to take part in the Auckland Country Week at Christmas time.

Gary Robertson, a fast bowler and hard hitting batsman and another product of NPBHS, was selected as New Zealand Cricket's Young Player to Lords in 1980 and by 1981 had won selection for New Zealand in a one day international. This began an international career which saw him play one test and ten internationals.

This high level of activity in representative cricket had its spin off in the selection of Taranaki players for Central Districts. In 1983-84 four Taranaki players – Ian Snook, Gary Robertson, Derek Stirling and Peter Blackbourn were chosen – the highest number ever in a season. Snook and Alistar Jordan captained Central Districts, both players having long first class careers – Snook from 1972 to 1988 and Jordan from 1968 to 1980. Taranaki's presence was also there in team selection – J.H.Crocker, the first Taranakian to become a Plunket Shield selector, was convenor from 1975 to 1977 being then succeeded by L.K.Denton, who held the convenor's post until 1982.

In the area of administration, O.Balsom, having been on the Central District Executive and managed Plunket Shield teams, became the regions president in 1982-84, whilst B.Bellringer, retiring from the position of Taranaki secretary in 1975, had already become that of Central Districts in 1974.

From the mid 1960's there had been in existence a junior advisory board, whose role was to promote cricket within the province's schools and arrange representative cricket at the various age levels. Throughout the 1970's there was a growing realisation that the provision of professional coaching was necessary if both coverage and excellence of cricket in the schools was to be achieved. Peter Lewington, who played for Warwickshire, was employed in 1980-81 by the Northern Division who then sub-contracted him to Taranaki for coaching work outside their divisional area and responsibilities. The following seasons he was engaged directly by Taranaki, with significant financial assistance from Lion Breweries and the Sports & Recreation Grant, funded by central government. But, as this and subsequent years were to show, a coaching scheme even funded at least fifty percent by fees was not viable in Taranaki and it was not until a fully sponsored scheme came in to being in the 1990's that schools coaching was able to properly progress. The coaches employed - Lewington, R.Dyer and D.Stirling - were all first class cricketers and so their presence strengthened Taranaki cricket but, as the 1983-84 season revealed, Stirling's selection for Central districts was a disadvantage to coaching plans.

At the club level Okato, in 1974-75, became the first Western Division team to win the Taranaki senior championship. New Plymouth Old Boys had, by the early 1980's, become the dominant senior club winning the provincial championship in 1981, 82 and 83 and arousing cries of despair from other clubs over its superiority.

Within this period the structure of the four divisions was beginning to disappear, with Country teams merging into North and West into South. At the same time there was growing concern at the availability of sufficient dedicated administrators to run Taranaki cricket, both at divisional and provincial levels. Patient negotiations proceeded in the early 1980's to see if it was possible, and practical, for the Taranaki Cricket Association to be responsible for all cricket in Taranaki. Lead by Neville Frampton and Malcolm Greenhill, this was achieved by 1984; a provincial senior competition, with lower grades still run on divisional basis but administered by one committee. Provincial unity had at last come, but as was often commented 'the mountain which dominates our province also makes provincial unity very difficult, no more so than in travel!'

Pukekura Park, despite its attractive surroundings, still had a reputation for being a pitch of more than necessary help for spinners and following a New Zealand V 'The Rest' match in 1975, which again confirmed this view, the pitch was dug up and re-laid. The experiment of using imported Papatoetoe volcanic soil had not succeeded and so the decision was made to bring in Plimmerton clay (used both for bricks and at the Basin Reserve). This was to prove successful and, after the loss of the Park for the 1975-76 season, was to see the ground win a reputation for both attractiveness and the excellence of its batting pitch. In 1982 Ian Berry became the grounds man and in the best tradition of the craft, nursed and nurtured the ground until his death in 1997. At the same time as the pitch was relaid the opportunity was taken to upgrade the other ground facilities of scoreboard and sightscreens. The challenge of constructing sight screens sufficient in height to cater for the tall New Zealand fast left arm bowler R.O.Collinge was met and so for some twenty years the Pukekura Park sightscreens demanded men capable of rigging steel and canvas.

Throughout this period Pukekura Park attracted large crowds to its first class games, with the packed terraces both colourful and alive. Then Plunket Shield and Shell Trophy (three day) matches were played here, whilst at the International level, England, Australia, West Indies and Sri

Lanka were visitors. The outstanding game was the tied match between England and Central Districts in 1978. The intimate nature of the Pukekura Park ground, with its high terraces and excellent general viewing and the relaxed nature of the match surrounds, made the venue one which touring teams liked to come to and the good gates kept New Zealand cricket contented.

King Edward Park in Hawera, being then the province's second ground, also received funding for the re-development of its pavilion.

Doug Bell, another North Country cricketer, succeeded Owen Balsom as Chairman of the Executive, whilst John Fullerton replaced Brian Bellringer as secretary, the appointment coming after his retirement as editor of The Daily News, the province's morning newspaper. This continued the tradition of the very close liaison between the press and cricket which has characterised Taranaki cricket ever since the 1920's. The presence of the former Canterbury and Central Districts player, Wayne Burttt in New Plymouth, brought to local cricket new ideas and enthusiasm, which was to be of great benefit to the province. Burttt together with Bryce McPherson, not only representative selector but also New Plymouth's P.R.O, enticed to Pukekura Park a star studded troupe of international cricketers – led by Fred Trueman and Brian Close, and also including the youthful Ian Botham – who entertained a large crowd and yielded net funds for the association of nearly \$2350 – an amount greater than the total equity of the association of the beginning of this period.

In 1981 Laurie Denton, yet again from North Country, became Chairman and he was to make his mark on Taranaki cricket in many ways. A sports enthusiast he was in turn, and sometimes simultaneously, a representative player, team manager, selector, chairman, president, media liaison, J.A.B. convenor – as well as being the Central Districts convenor of selectors.

An innovation that came into being in 1973 was the publishing of a handbook for Taranaki cricket – an attempt to better inform the province's cricketers about their game. In contrast the same year saw the ending of match programmes being published for first class games played in Taranaki – again changes in the modes of publicising cricket.

1975 was the 50th Jubilee of the revival of the association and a Jubilee dinner was held in New Plymouth at which the outstanding New Zealand batsman Bert Sutcliffe was the guest speaker.

Financially the association's affairs improved markedly in this period, the accumulated funds increasing from \$2183 to \$7133 in the eleven seasons. But there was considerable variance from season to season and crises still occurred. The refusal of clubs to continue to support the selling of raffles to fund representative travelling expenses, which led to the defaulting of the Hawke Cup challenge against Southland in 1974, forced TCA to bring in direct levies on clubs in addition to the divisional affiliation fess to ensure that the association's representative programme could be sustained.

In 1977 the first approaches towards sponsorship began in assisting the funding of the Trueman Festival match. Subsequently coaching was the venture for which sponsors were sought and needed – be it the commercial world or that of government, local or central. In 1981 and 1982 two major Cascade raffles were successfully run, which brought funds in excess of \$12,000 into the coffers, which were then spent on coaching and improvements to facilities at Pukekura and King Edwards Parks, and funding Hawke Cup challenges. The 1981 challenge against Nelson cost \$4065.

Thus by 1984 the face of Taranaki cricket had markedly changed; the divisional structure was to become partly a thing of the past, the cost of promoting the game had vastly increased, Pukekura Park was becoming a batsman's pitch rather than a spinners heaven, Taranaki cricketers were being recognised much more at the regional level, but the glory of the Bayley-Yardley Hawke Cup years had not returned.

RECORD HOLDERS



RODNEY BROWN batting against Hamilton, in the first defence of the U-Bix Cup in 1994. He scored a century (126), one of his six for Taranaki, and in scoring 200 not out against Hutt Valley in 1989 set the Taranaki record.



ALISTAR JORDAN in full force. In 104 games for Taranaki, he captured 375 wickets with his fast bowling. In addition he played 55 matches for Central Districts, taking 157 wickets for the regional team.



BRIAN RICHARDS showing the style which enabled him to score 4947 runs for Taranaki, with seven centuries. With 141 appearances for the association he holds the record for most matches, most runs, and most centuries. He also captured 100 wickets, and held 85 catches.