

Years of Challenge 1994-2000

If the years of 1973-84 are regarded as a time of change, then the six seasons from the association's centenary until the beginning of the 21st Century can be described as years of turmoil.

From the peak of the 1994-95 season, when the U-Bix Cup was successfully defended in six games, the performances of the representative team slowly fell away. This decline in playing success was, in a large part, due to the retirements of older experienced players and the loss of several talented players to other associations. Furthermore, in these six seasons there were four different convenors of selectors – not conducive to playing stability.

At the administrative level a new constitution was adopted which created a smaller executive with specific responsibilities for each member, yet in this time there were five different chairmen and in several seasons player and club behaviour challenged the executive's authority.

Pukekura Park featured one day rather than three day matches and Rugby Park, with its powerful lights, was developed as a cricketing venue to cater for the increasingly popular day-night matches.

And yet amidst all these significant changes, the association's finances grew at an unparalleled rate and new sightscreens and wicket covers were acquired for Pukekura Park.

The 1994-95 season would rank as one of the most demanding ever faced by Taranaki; twelve two-three day matches, six of which were U-Bix defences, and four one day matches. The centenary season was marked by a one day match against Wanganui, the association's most frequent opponents – fittingly the game ended in a tie. In preparation for their defence of the U-Bix Cup, Taranaki played in the Central Districts zonal competition to find their two zonal challengers. The team's form was inconsistent and did not augur well for the forthcoming challenges, losing to both the eventual zonal challengers, Hawkes Bay and Manawatu. The captain, Rodney Brown, was injured in the early part of the season and Paul Plumtree, son of the previous selector Peter Plumtree, was appointed captain for the early defences.

The first challenge was from Hamilton, who had been defeated in the only defence of the previous season. Again Taranaki proved superior, leading by 117 runs on the first innings with all the batsmen scoring runs, but the match became a person triumph for Glen Sulzburger scoring 107 and 60 not out with the bat and 6 wickets for 90 runs from 41.2 overs. Central Otago were next with Taranaki taking a 100 run first innings lead and only failing by two wickets to win outright. Plumtree played a captain's innings for 68, following on from his 44 and 55 against Hamilton, with the Taranaki bowlers David Mihaljevich and Tyler Kennedy proving accurate and effective. In Taranaki's second innings G.Soper achieved the outstanding figures of 8 for 93 with his left arm spin. The third defence was against Canterbury Country (the successor to North Canterbury) and Taranaki again had a substantial first innings lead of 157. Taranaki emphasised that Cup matches were all about occupancy of the crease, with Mark O'Neill scoring 67 and 42 not out and the promising young Opunake batsman Matthew Walker, in only his third game for Taranaki, scoring 108 in Taranaki's second innings.

The fourth defence was expected to be the real test, and so it proved. Manawatu had clearly outplayed Taranaki earlier in the season and they approached the match at Western Park with confidence. Batting first they scored only 154, with Glen Sulzberger capturing 8 for 61 from 30 overs. But Taranaki in reply could score only 102, with M.Bowling taking 6 for 35 from 27 overs. Manawatu had the Cup in their grasp but sought to clinch it with an outright victory. Sulzberger took 6 for 85 to collect 14 wickets for the match and Taranaki needed to score 244 to retain the Cup. In a display more outstanding than what he had revealed against Hamilton, Glen Sulzberger opened Taranaki's batting, and with Peter Leach, put on 151 for the first wicket with his personal contribution being 112. The Taranaki batting then faltered but with Plumtree and Mihaljevich to the fore the Cup was eventually retained by two wickets.

The fifth challenge for the season was from Hawkes Bay and the strain of continued defences every fortnight showed. Hawkes Bay dismissed Taranaki for 196 and when rain prevented further play the challengers were 69 for 1. The final (and sixth) challenge was from Northland and Taranaki reversed the result of 1989. Batting first the defenders reached 344 with Paul Hughes, the wicket-keeper, scoring his only century for Taranaki with 104. Then Northland, with five Shell Trophy players, were dismissed for 118 with Brett Coombe taking 5 for 21 with his left arm medium pace bowling.

And so ended a season where Taranaki revealed talent and determination that would rank the 1994-95 team with those other notable defenders – 1926-27, 1933-34, 1970-71, 1971-72, and 1972-73. Glen Sulzberger was the outstanding player and was to win future Shell Series selection because of his all round qualities. His seasonal figures of 873 runs and 44 wickets set new standards. He also received good support – five centuries being scored in the season with seven century partnerships. Unfortunately the 1995-96 season was not to be as successful – bad weather prevented adequate preparation for the Cup defence – now known as the Fuji Xerox because of a change in sponsor. Central Otago returned as the first challenger and outplayed Taranaki. The former Otago and Southland batsman, Richard Hoskin, had a fine batting double of 74 and 162 and Shayne O'Connor, the future New Zealand opening bowler, captured 4 wickets in each Taranaki innings.

Rodney Brown captained Central Districts that season with Glen Sulzberger and Matthew Walker also gaining regional selection. Walker was also chosen for the New Zealand Youth XI which toured Australia and England in 1996.

The 1996-97 season, with its programme of nine representative matchers and three one dayers, was a relatively successful one with Taranaki winning through the elimination matches to challenge Nelson for the Fuji Xerox Cup. At Trafalgar Park Nelson again proved too strong, though Glen Sulzberger, in what was to be his last game for Taranaki, displayed once more his all-round skills. Four centuries were scored in the season and there were eight century partnerships. Peter Ingram, a composed young opening batsman, scored one of the centuries and featured in four of the century partnerships.

Taranaki held first innings leads in five of the eight matches played in the 1997-98 season but there were not the individual batting successes of the previous season. Ingram and Regan West, son of former Taranaki player Ralph West, were selected in the New Zealand team for the under 19 World Cup tournament in South Africa.

The highlight of the 1998-99 season was a visit to the Central Districts area of a MCC team. They narrowly defeated Taranaki at Pukekura Park, with Rodney Brown again providing a fine batting display.

In this season and in 1999-2000 there was a steady reduction in the number of representative matches played, thus reducing the opportunities for adequate representative experience for the young players now appearing. At the same time there was a regular departure of the more prominent players from the province – Manawatu and Wellington being the beneficiaries. Since 1994 W.Wisneski (chosen for One Day Internationals in 2000), G.Sulzberger, M.Walker, P.Ingram and R.West had left Taranaki. Thus as the new century began Taranaki was faced with a major team re-building exercise.

Pukekura Park was still very much the public focus of Taranaki cricket. Over Labour Weekend 1994 North V South matches, both men and women's, were staged there. One day cricket had become firmly established as the public drawcard and back to back (or double header) Shell Cup matches were played at Pukekura Park to take advantage of the continuing strong public following in the province (by 2000 the public interest in Shell Trophy (3-4 day) games had fallen so low that the public were no longer being charged admission). But not only was one day cricket the vogue but even more so was day-night matches. The Taranaki Rugby Union had installed high quality lighting at Rugby Park New Plymouth, and so, in 1999 and 2000 Central Districts experimented with staging day-night matches there. A good pitch was prepared, the lighting was superior to Napier or Taupo but to the cricketing public Pukekura Park remained the home of cricket in Taranaki.

Facilities at Pukekura Park continued to improve – the District Council provided a second set of new mobile wicket covers, with adequate run off for rainwater, and assisted by a grant from the TSB Bank, the association erected modern sightcreens – compact and easily reset – at a cost of \$33,343.

At the premier club level Avis Old Boys, New Plymouth Marist United and Opunake High School Old Boys dominated the competition – Opunake won on three occasions and Avis Old Boys twice. In 1997 the final of the one day competition was played on Waitangi Day and this became an accepted part of the club cricket season. In 1997-98 the provincial senior competition was discontinued with those teams now playing in divisional 2nd grade.

One trend that caused concern to administrators was the increasingly disputative nature of club cricket – reports on misbehaviour increased and players and clubs were more challenging of authority. This did not help in retaining administrators.

The coaching scheme continued under Yarrows sponsorship, with the objective of gaining comprehensive provincial coverage being achieved by employing overseas players, engaged by local clubs, on a sub-contract basis. Ed Gilhooly, from Cheshire, managed the coaching scheme for three years. To ensure liaison between schools and clubs, and thus hopefully bring these younger cricketers into the club scheme, the association required clubs to take responsibility for cricket at the schools in their area.

At the national level there had been an administration merging of men and women's cricket in the early 1990's and so, in 1994, TCA took over the responsibility for women's cricket played in Taranaki.

In November 1994 the association's centenary dinner was held with over 300 attending the function held at the TSB stadium. Martin Donnelly came over from Sydney and it was a weekend of memories and stories.

In 1995 Neville Frampton who, as chairman and before that secretary, had been closely involved in Taranaki cricket since 1983, retired from office but a year later was elected President, a position he still holds. He succeeded Laurie Denton in that position, who himself had been a, if not the, key figure in Taranaki cricket since the early 1970's.

At the same time there was a general movement in sports administration throughout New Zealand to do away with the general committee structure and create a structure more akin to the business world, with committed members having specific areas of responsibility and action. In 1996 a new constitution was adopted with a chairman and a directorate of six members responsible for competition, planning, development, representative, women's, and sponsorship/promotion, with an administrator in place of the secretary. But even with the reduction of the committee size there was only infrequently an election for a director's position.

1997 saw the retirement from the executive of Ralph West, who held National Level III Coaching qualifications, and Brian Bellringer from his second term as secretary. He was succeeded by John Pickering, who had experience in the commercial and corporate world.

The capability of the new structure to focus on specific results was soon revealed in the area of sponsorship. Building on the strong base provided by Yarrows and DB, new sponsors from the rural sector of Taranaki were acquired – in manures and stock sales. Neil Sulzberger, father of Glen was the driving force in this expansion of sponsorship and, through it, of greatly increased revenue for Taranaki cricket. The 1998 season resulted in a net income of \$30,217, which enabled the association to reduce significantly the affiliation fees payable by clubs. Between 1994 and 1999 Taranaki cricket's net equity grew from \$41,462 to \$147,559 – an increase of \$106,097 – sums that

would be almost beyond the comprehension of earlier administrators. By 1999 the association had over \$86,000 in funds plus a new sightscreen at Pukekura Park.

The lack of adequate finances and ongoing regular sources of funds which had consistently thwarted earlier decades of achieving progress and promotion of cricket now no longer existed. The challenge was instead to rebuild Taranaki cricket at the representative level – developing once again experienced players who understood the patterns and pressure of representative play.

GLEN SULZBERGER

In the 1994-1995 U-Bix Cup defences he scored 444 runs including two centuries and captured 28 wickets with 14 of those in the Manawatu match. A graceful left-hand batsman and accurate off-spin bowler, he was subsequently to gain selection for Central Districts, New Zealand A and New Zealand's 1990 tour of Zimbabwe.



U-BIX CUP DEFENDERS, 1994 - 95



Standing: Brent Coombe, Peter Leach, Gareth West, Denis Mihaljevich, Mark Ebert, David Simpson
Middle Row: Thelma Luxton (Scorer), Gary Robertson (Coach), Paul Hughes, Matthew Walker, Mark O'Neill, Trevor Smith (Manager)
Front Row: Tyler Kennedy, Russell Dempster, Rodney Brown (Captain), Paul Plumtree (Vice-Captain), Glen Sulzberger

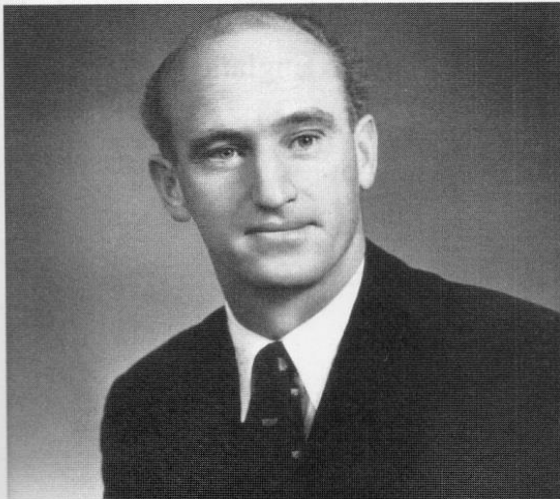
NEW ZEALAND REPRESENTATIVES



BERNARD MCCARTHY
1903



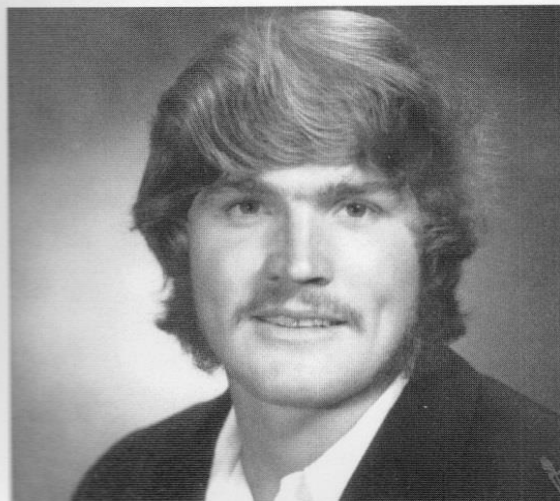
MARTIN DONNELLY
1937, 1939, 1949



LAWRIE MILLER
1953-1954



TED MEULI
1953



ALISTAR JORDAN
1973



GARY ROBERTSON
1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988,
1989, 1990