

ITM Cup season review

By Jack Callender

The 2014 ITM Cup showcased outstanding rugby and was full of surprises. Canterbury's run of 6 straight titles came to a crushing end when they were walloped 26 – 6 at the hands of finalists Tasman.

After a dour 9 all draw against Counties Manukau and a 26 – 23 loss to Hawkes Bay in Napier, Taranaki got their groove back and became the first province aside from the big five (Auckland, Canterbury, Otago, Waikato and Wellington) to win top division since finals were introduced in 1992.

Wellington became the first metro union to be relegated from the Premiership. In a season where crowds plummeted and injuries were frequent, the Lions managed just 1 win from 9 games. The sole win came against North Harbour 58 to 34 on a warm afternoon at the Caketin in front of just 2000 fans.

Some bright up and coming prospects were unveiled such as Seta Taimanivalu of Taranaki, Blake Gibson of Auckland and Dan Hollinshead of the Bay of Plenty Steamers. Also, the experienced old heads returned to their province. Most notably, Jason Shoemark, Matt Berquist, Marty Holah and Robbie Malneek defy the saying age has no barrier. Holah has played over 80 games for Waikato, while Tasman fullback Malneek has clocked up over 100 games combined for both Tasman and Nelson Bays.

Who could forget the debut of soon to be cult hero *Shannan Chase* from Hawkes Bay?

The winger, who hails from Otane but plays for the Havelock North club, scored a hat trick on debut in the Magpies first shield defence, a 41 – 0 drubbing of Otago. Fresh out of the freezing works, he became a cult hero with his dreadlocked hair and turn of pace.

His team would keep the shield for the summer after seeing off Otago, Bay of Plenty, Wellington and drawing 20 all with Southland.

The Turbos secured the Championship, beating Hawkes Bay 32 – 24 in front of a capacity crowd at FMG Stadium, otherwise known as the Boneyard.

From almost being culled from the competition 5 years ago, Tasman have completed a remarkable turnaround after finishing dead last 3

years ago. With Marty Banks steering the ship at first five combined with hard grafters Alex Ainley and Shane Christie in the forwards, the Makos made the final of the Premiership but came up short against a classy Taranaki outfit, going down 36 – 32.

Championship (2nd division)

Bay of Plenty 7th place

The Steamers struggled to fire this season after recruiting hardnosed flanker Hamish Gosling from Manawatu and a few Aucklanders (Teddy Stanaway, Leroy Van Dam and Siasosi Iongi) along with a Scottish Sevens rep (Byron McGuigan). However after 2013 captain Willie Ripia went to the capital, young Te Puke Sports first five Dan Hollinshead stepped up well. They were outclassed by superior teams with better depth but secured wins against North Harbour and Otago. Both these wins were at home. On a positive note, Dan Hollinshead will have a few years to become a leader in a Steamers team light on experience as he runs the cutter in future years. Hori Bop was the most loyal supporter, having hitchhiked as far as Invercargill to watch his beloved Steamers. Terry Leaming is a man with dedication.

Player of the Season: Johan Bardoul – The hardnosed flanker was aggressive at the breakdown and was one of the finds of the season. He has been rewarded with a Super Rugby contract at the Chiefs.

Otago 6th place

In head coach Tony Brown's last season in charge before working fulltime with the Highlanders, the blue and golds failed in their quest to make the top 4. Otago started promisingly with a win against Harbour at home with left wing Fa'asiu Fuatai getting a hat trick of tries. However consistency was the big issue. A win against Southland at Invercargill was followed by a loss to Manawatu. Their best performance of the season was against Waikato where they had a convincing 38 – 7 win. One more win would have snuck them into the top 4.

Player of the season: TJ Ioane – He keeps getting better on both attack and defence, outstanding at the breakdown, where he moves a few bodies out of the road

North Harbour 5th place

The men from the Shore can take heart from their big improvement. In 2013 they finished with the wooden spoon but it seems that this year, Head Coach Steve Jackson has instilled a bit of mongrel in his forward pack. Former Manawatu man Hayden Triggs returned from overseas to add a bit of steel at lock. Robbie Robinson was a useful acquisition at the back. Matt McGahan looked solid from 10. They caused a real shakeup when Canterbury was beaten in Albany 29 – 24. In fact, that day, Tevita Li scored a hat trick. He has clearly benefited from the exposure at the Junior World Championships held in Auckland earlier this year.

Player of the season: Greg Pleasants-Tate – After shifting from Bay of Plenty a few years ago, the man mountain has improved his work rate, physicality in the scrums. He made 86 successive tackles this season. A real up and coming prop who will be a strong scrummager for the Blues in 2015.

Southland 4th place (Semi-finalist, lost 23 – 18 to Manawatu)

After losing the McKenzie brothers and Robbie Robinson, you could have thought the Stags would struggle this season. However these backline losses were offset by a crucial gain in former Wellington first five Lima Sopoaga. Regulars Jamie Mackintosh, Elliot Dixon, Tim Boys and Josh Bekhuis had outstanding seasons and helped nudge the Southland into the semis.

Southland weren't quite the force at home id thought they would be. Although they beat Bay of Plenty and Northland in close, traditional Southland style (up the guts), they folded to Tasman, Otago and Counties-Manukau easily as no bonus points were picked up. Remarkably, their away form at least proved somewhat useful, with an important win against Canterbury proving crucial towards the back end of the season.

Player of the Season: Lima Sopoaga – Off the back of hardworking forwards, he kicked with aplomb, passed well and was calm under pressure, nailing a 41m penalty in Napier to almost secure the Ranfurly Shield for his team before victory was snatched away.

Northland 3rd place (Semi-finalist, lost 26 – 21 to Hawkes Bay)

Northland were another feel good story about the ITM Cup this season. Their willingness to throw the ball to lynchpin Pryor brothers Kara and Dan proved beneficial. These two hardgrafter

combined with the flying Fijian winger Jone Macilai-Tori saw them carry strongly all season with a combined 111 clean breaks (6th out of 14 teams). Matt Wright was superb at fullback and he had a ton of pace to set up tries. How Wright didn't get a Super Rugby contract is beyond me.

Jone Macilai is a star in the making and is eerily similar to the great Fijian wingers Rupeni Caucaunibuca and Joeli Vidiri. The way he runs, holds the ball, and uses his blistering speed to get round defenders is typical of Fijian rugby. Remarkably he was spotted at a Coral Coast Sevens tournament in Fiji, and Northland in 2013 came calling. The Crusaders with Macilai and Nemani Nadolo on the wings will see alarm bells ringing in the opposition.

Hawkes Bay – Finalists

A 6th straight final in the Championship (2nd div) ensured the same result in that they were close, but failed to win promotion. However their consolation is the Ranfurly Shield staying in the bay for the whole summer. Gareth Evans was the pick of a hardworking loose forward trio and Ihaia West has matured with age. His drop kick secured that shield retention in the 20 all draw with Southland. Shannan Chase, Mikey Vuicakau and top ITM Cup try scorer Ryan Tongia (10 tries) are all good quality wingers hungry for work. Richard 'Barracuda' Buckman carried on his good form with the Highlanders before injury struck, and Mark Abbot toiled hard as the leading lock.

Player of the season: A tough one but I will give it to Ihaia West purely on his running game, clean breaks and goal kicking under pressure.

Manawatu – Champions, promoted

34 years of pain has come to an end for the Jason O'Halloran coached side. Manawatu were the form team of the comp and unbeaten at fortress FMG Stadium otherwise known as the Boneyard.

Legendary hooker Rob Foreman (who only missed one game through injury since 2006) finally brought up his 100th game in the final. Cruelly he had to go off with injury.

Manawatu had their best season since 1980 back when Mark 'Cowboy' Shaw was roaming the rugby paddock. Kayne Hammington proved a useful halfback from Wellington as well as

the Tudreu brothers on the wing Newton and Nathan. Callum Gibbins, Antonio KiriKiri and Hieden Bidwell-Curtis formed a dynamic loose forward trio. But as the old saying goes, it all starts up front. Foreman, Canadian prop Hubert Buydens and Chris Eves formed a tough front row.

I don't want to talk this fellow up, but for me, Turbos player of the season Nehe Milner-Skudder could be the next Andre Taylor (the 2012 version). Milner Skudder produces a lethal step, eye for the gap (23 clean breaks this season) and scored 3 tries. He averages 7metres per run and carried the ball 128 times. He was indeed a vital cog in the slick green machine. Should be the starting fullback at the Hurricanes in 2015.

Manawatu were once looked upon as the weak link in the Hurricanes region. Back when Super 12 first started, there were barely any Manawatu players represented. The Hurricanes wouldn't select any because the Turbos were in the second division. Hardworking loosie Callum Gibbins, fullback Nehe Milner-Skudder, first five Otere Black and prop Chris Eves have been rewarded with Hurricanes contracts. Hamish Northcott has gone to the Blues whilst others have ended up at the Chiefs and Highlanders respectively.

Premiership (1st division) Wellington 7th place (relegated)

No one would have picked the 2013 finalists to be relegated. As a loyal Wellington supporter, this was a painful year.

It was a season that went from go to woah. Key players Ardie Savea, Jeff Toomaga-Allen and Riki Flutey were injured before the ITM Cup began. To make matters worse, the loss of Lima Sopoaga to Southland was a blow. This left the Lions short on experience all around the park.

There were some Wellington club rugby players that should have been picked in the NPC squad but missed the cut. Guys like snippy halfback Jack Taulapapa from Johnsonville who just missed the cut for the Sevens team way back in January. Taulapapa was just called into the Samoan squad recently. Another was dynamic Petone duo; number 8 Josh Hrstich and fullback Tamati Samuels. Pacy Wellington Axemen winger Tony Smith deserved a look in. I could go on, but I won't.

The only bright note from this dreadful provincial season is that we have an opportunity to hold on to bright young talent coming through the Jock Hobbs Memorial Trophy winning U19s as well as

college level. Keep an eye out for TJ Va'a and Malo Tuitama from the National Champion Scots College first fifteen; they could be the key to winning the Championship in 2015! Va'a is the son of former Samoan first five Earl Va'a and Tuitama is the nephew of former Lion and Hurricane Alapati Leiua. Others such as Henry Stowers, Chase Tiatia, Leni Apisai and Wesley Goosen all represented Wellington this season and came from the winning U19 team. Now they'll know what it takes to produce the goods at this level and will come back bigger, faster and stronger next year. Although the present looks gloomy, the future looks bright.

Player of the season: Brad Shields – The Lions captain was committed at the breakdown, tough and loyal to the cause. Never stopped trying and his experience will prove vital in the coming years.

Waikato 6th place

Waikato's season started and finished bright, but games in the middle proved their downfall. Thrashings by Taranaki, Otago, Auckland and Canterbury curtailed their season. Their best performance was back in round 1 where they tore Wellington apart. Winger Joe Webber scored a hat trick of tries, and when he's on form, Webber can be dangerous with ball in hand out wide. The other 2 wins were against near neighbours Bay of Plenty and Counties Manukau, both at Hamilton. Experience campaigners Marty Holah and Sean Hohneck keep battling away, chalking up more appearances while Damian McKenzie displayed talent at first five.

Player of the season: Damian McKenzie – The talented first five originally from Southland displays incredible maturity at first five. Although he's only 19, he started in most of Waikato's matches. He would often beat defenders with ease with a right foot step. In defenders beaten, McKenzie lies 4th on the list with 45.

Counties Manukau 5th place

Although the South Aucklanders regressed one spot, they were very unlucky not to make the semis. Losing the shield was only a minor blip as they swept to wins over Wellington, Auckland, Tasman and Southland. An outstanding backline was at the feet of Tana Umaga, with Tim Nanai-Williams, Frank Halai, Toni Pulu, Augie Pulu, Rey Lee-Lo and the now departed Bundee Aki often featuring and providing the team with the bulk of tries. The forwards performed well too with Jarrod Firth providing good grunt in the front row, Maama Vaipulu, Onosai Auva'a and Jimmy Tupou formed a dynamic trio at the back of the scrum.

Player of the Season: Augustine Pulu – A strong season was rewarded with an All Black call up. He made 8 clean breaks from the base of the ruck and contributed to Counties enterprising backline play with 12 offloads and 7 tries scored. Will be the Chiefs starting halfback with Tawera Kerr-Barlow out for a long time.

Auckland 4th place (Semi-finalist, lost 49 – 30 to Taranaki)

Auckland's season was a mixed bag. They started off poorly by losing to Canterbury. They got back on track with a win over Manawatu, got out of jail in a game of two halves against Wellington to win 31-30.

Eventually the Aucklanders found their mojo and with first five Gareth Anscombe running the cutter at ten in his final NPC season, he provided stable direction around the park. His kicking at goal was top notch with a 75% success rate. Peter Saili, Blake Gibson, Jack Whetton and Tom McCartney were the pick of the hard working forwards. Melani Nanai, Francis Saili and Lolagi Visinia provided attacking spark which came to the fore against the Northland Taniwha in their final game. The underrated former Hurricane Hadleigh Parkes had a solid season although he missed out on Super Rugby selection. Auckland pushed Taranaki in the semi at Yarrow Stadium but the home side went up a gear and Auckland ran out of steam to lose 49-30 in extra time.

Player of the Season: Blake Gibson – Gibson only came into the Auckland team a few rounds into the comp but got stuck in. In 9 games, he beat 9 defenders, but it was his defence that really set the tone. He made 56 out of 61 tackles, a 92% success rate which is exceptional for a loose forward.

Canterbury 3rd place (Semi-finalist, lost 26 – 6 to Tasman)

The Red and Blacks, who were coming off 6 titles in a row, started off with a hiss and a roar, pounding Auckland, Waikato, Wellington and Northland. Constant rotation of their team saw them slip up a few games. Losses to Southland, Tasman and North Harbour were the undoing of their season as they slipped from first to third in the standings.

They were crushed twice by Tasman, once at home (38-10) and blown away in the Nelson semi final which saw their dynasty come

to an end. Holes were exposed in Canterbury's once mighty defence which was built like a brick wall before Tasman came coming. Mitchell Drummond was a capable replacement for the tireless Willi Heinz at halfback, whilst Beauden Barrett's brother Scott has huge potential. Two Whitelocks (Adam and George) will be ending their Canterbury careers as they along with Tyler Bleyendaal will be heading to greener pastures.

Player of the Season – Nasi Manu: The heart and soul of this Canterbury team was dynamic from the back of the scrum during the season. He provided good go forward and gained plenty of metres with dynamic runs.

Tasman Finalists

The Makos have completed an amazing turnaround. From being last in the competition 3 years ago to becoming finalists is built on character and a special group of players. The hard grafters Quentin MacDonald, Ross Geldenhuys, Alex Ainley, Shane Christie and Liam Squire were outstanding, along with record breaking first five Marty Banks who scored 180 points this season. Kieron Fonotia, James Lowe and Robbie Malneek at the gas out wide to score plenty of tries between them. Jimmy Cowan and Billy Guyton shared the halfback duties, with Cowan providing plenty of experience, not to mention a bit of mongrel in the final!

They played classy rugby all season and under coach Kieran Keane, there was a hard edge about the forward pack this season. Despite falling short against a superb Taranaki outfit, the men from Marlborough and Nelson Bays can feel proud of their efforts in 2014.

Player of the Season: Shane Christie – Christie was outstanding this season, in fact he was probably the form openside flanker in the competition. His no nonsense, combative approach was hard to fault and he epitomised the great culture the Makos have created. He was a top tackler and played 795 minutes this season with 65 carries. A top bloke.

Taranaki ITM Premiership Champions

Glory days have come again for the Amber and Blacks. After stuttering to a 9 all draw against Counties, they only dropped 2 more games to Hawkes Bay in round 2 and Canterbury in the final

round. Taranaki provided the perfect blend of combative forwards and flashy backs. When the business end of the season came round, it was the Super Rugby players that stood up; Chris Smylie, Rhys Marshall, Charlie Ngatai, James Broadhurst, Blade Thomson and James Marshall. Flying Fijian Waisake Naholo was electric with ball in hand. He scored 9 tries, broke the line 21 times and formed the deadliest of combinations when Seta Tamanivalu lurked nearby.

Fantastic to see a full house at Yarrow Stadium. And what was pleasing also was to see 2 provinces that genuinely care about the great game of rugby, fight it out tooth and nail for provincial rugby supremacy. When was the last time a provincial rugby game attracted 21,000 excited spectators.

Player of the Season: Seta Tamanivalu – The find of the season by far. 54 defenders beaten, 7 tries, 845 metres, 22 offloads. These stats show that Tamanivalu played brilliant rugby. Defenders would be left in his wake often and he provided excellent go forward in the backline.

And finally my ITM Cup 15

- 15 Nehe Milner-Skudder (Manawatu)
- 14 Jone Macilai (Northland)
- 13 Seta Tamanivalu (Taranaki)
- 12 Charlie Ngatai (Taranaki)
- 11 Waisake Naholo (Taranaki)
- 10 Ihaia West (Hawkes Bay)
- 9 Augustine Pulu (Counties-Manukau)
- 8 Blade Thomson (Taranaki)
- 7 Shane Christie (Tasman)
- 6 Dan Pryor (Northland)
- 5 James Broadhurst (Taranaki)
- 4 Mark Abbot (Hawkes Bay)
- 3 Mitchell Graham (Taranaki)
- 2 Rhys Marshall (Taranaki)
- 1 Jarrod Firth (Counties Manukau)

Sources:

<http://itmcup.co.nz/stats>

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