

## Introducing Nick Sheppard

Nick Sheppard, CEO of Counties Manukau Rugby Football Union (CMRFU). Born and bred in Pukekohe, he taught PE for 8 years at St Kentigern College. He lectured at Manukau Institute of Technology, rising to head of the sports department. Nick's father and brother both played for Counties and he is passionate about the region and the Union. "Rugby is a wonderful vehicle to drive positive change...it gives kids something to be proud of, something to aspire to, something to connect to... all the wonderful values that are part of rugby, like hard work, accountability and integrity can be taken from the field and start to develop within themselves..."



With 270 teams playing rugby from Small Blacks to Presidents, grade Counties Manukau Rugby has again lifted its team numbers and the season is now in full swing. Despite the national decline in player numbers, CMRFU has broken the trend and grown our player numbers for a fourth straight year.

Grassroots rugby begins with the Small Blacks for children who are four and five years old. Such is the importance placed on the developing and nurturing of the game and the skills associated with it at the younger levels that CMRFU have two full time staff devoted to it. There are two Rugby Development Officers working within primary schools and junior rugby alongside the JMB to help promote the fun and safe aspects of the game at this level. They run a wide variety of courses including coaching and skills days and Rippa Rugby tournaments. The NZRU has identified that we need to educate parents and caregivers that rugby has changed and it is as safe as any other sport for young children to play. A big part of that campaign has been to send the message out to the public that the game at this level is focused on fun and participation. The skills of tackling are not taught until the players are quite a bit older. It is exciting to see the younger grades developing, having fun and being able to create unique opportunities for them.

Last year, with the support of our clubs and the NZRU, we restructured Secondary School Rugby to further development rugby from the ages of 13-19 years old. This year we have added grading to the Secondary School competition to provide a more fair and robust competition. It is fantastic to see Secondary Schools like Pukekohe High School First XV being given the opportunity to play the curtain raiser for a Chiefs Super 14 Match. I know the team got a real thrill out of the experience of playing under lights at Rugby Park - and beating St Peters on the night was tremendous.

We greatly value the wonderful contribution that clubs and schools put into our local rugby programmes - and see the work they do as integral to player growth, development and retention. Hundreds of volunteers each week create opportunities for thousands of young people to play our national game. As part of our development of Secondary School rugby a joint venture by the NZRU and CMRFU has seen NZ Sevens and Steelers player Chad Tuoro employed as the Youth Development Officer. Chad, a qualified school teacher will be focusing on developing sustainable school rugby models, managing the Rugby Administration in Schools Programme, recruiting and developing coaches for Secondary Schools and player talent identification and development. He then works with the local clubs in assisting the players to transition on into the club scene...once their school years are completed.

Maintaining a healthy Union is not only about player

recruitment, development and retention but also referee participation because clearly without the match officials there is no game. We are extremely fortunate to be in a very positive position with our referees. Last year we initiated a referee academy focusing on growing referee numbers and developing the match levels they can referee at. Every year we run a programme in the April school holidays called 'You Make the Call' for Secondary School students which is about promoting referee participation. This year once again saw a large number of keen teenagers attending the courses and these signs are encouraging as this year we expect to see quite a dramatic growth within the referee numbers. We are always on the look out for new referees so if anyone out there would like to become a referee contact our Referee Education Officer Kerry Petrie at the Union.

This year is a very crucial and exciting year for CMRFU. The upgrade of Growers Stadium has been vital to the return home of the Counties Manukau Steelers for the majority of their home games. We are grateful to the Franklin District Council and all the volunteers who have assisted in this process. Our first test of the new turf which now contains 500kg of new grass seed will be our pre season match against the Tasman Makos on July 20. This will be followed by one of the highlights of the rugby year which is the Counties Power Club Rugby Finals Day on the 26th July. The club rugby season has been a very intense, exciting one so the Finals Day guarantees to be a tightly fought contest. The week after club finals, is our first Air New Zealand Cup competition match against Auckland on Sunday August 3rd. We look forward to the great support from the public through strong match day attendances and we have fought hard to bring the game back to Growers as the public rightly wanted. So now it is imperative that we show NZRU through large crowd numbers at our Steelers games that letting us return to Growers Stadium was the right decision. For two years we have blamed the poor attendance on being away from home but now we have no excuses. We are looking forward to much improved performances on the field for our fans and playing in front of a large, supportive home crowd will definitely help this occur.

There are many aspects to Counties Manukau Rugby which are all extremely valuable to the greater prosperity of the Union and it is only through the sheer hard work and dedication of the CMJMB, schools, rugby clubs, volunteers, coaches and managers, administrators, players, parents, sponsors, supporters and CMRFU staff that make this union function. I would like to extend my thanks to all these contributors that make Counties Manukau one of New Zealand's fastest growing, talent producing, strongest unions in the country...and I look forward to seeing you all on the sidelines each Saturday.