

Pride on the Paddock

By Charles Cole (Source: *Christchurch Press*)

Christ's College and Christchurch Boys' High School meet once again in one of the great secondary school rugby derbys on June 12. CHARLES COLE backgrounds the emotive clash.

"My clearest schoolboy memory of the School-College match is of a try-scorer diving dramatically across the line - a massive Hollywood dive, his whole body landing with a belly-flop that would have broken his back had he not been in the prime of youth.

It was the culmination of a sustained movement of bodies, driving in a series of spurts towards the Kahu Rd end of the Christchurch Boys' High School grounds; held up briefly here and there by brave defenders, but, like a strong incoming tide, it diverted into the weak points, the ball being recycled and passed as the attackers approached the line.

There was a final flurry as the try-scorer received the ball and launched into his flamboyant flop over the line. He wore a black and white jersey, and I, wrapped in a blue-and-black scarf on the sideline, joined in the School scoffing: "He didn't have to do that!"

However, the College right wing was entitled to celebrate his moment. After all, of the several thousand people present, no-one else was scoring tries.

That try may just have broken the back of Boys' High hopes because his team went on to win: their first victory in the annual fixture in seven years and first away victory in 30 years. The immense confidence and celebration spread instantly to all the Christ's College supporters, who cheered and chanted in one black-and-white mass along one touchline. Facing them on the opposite touchline, among the blue-and-black supporters lined up as in a battle scene from *Braveheart*, I remember, for a brief second, having a little sinking feeling. Not only had our foes triumphed and won bragging rights for the following year, it seemed (and here the ecstatic cheering and co-ordinated chanting no doubt influenced me) College was the better school. Why were we so silly as to come dressed in blue and black rather

than black and white? But the sinking feeling went in a fraction of a second, and I was consoled with the thought that the result was an injustice, an aberration, and we would prove as much the following year.

We didn't. In fact, my years at school (1984-88) coincided with one of Boys' High's worst series of results since the fixture began in 1892 (four losses and one win). No other five-year period provides a worse record for School. Their slow start in the 1890s comes pretty close, as they lost seven of the first eight games, but these were spread over just four years (1892-95) and they redeemed themselves slightly with two nil-all draws in 1895 and their second win in 1896.

College was the more established of the two schools and had been around for 30 years before Boys' High opened in 1881. College was playing an annual game against Otago Boys' High as early as 1883 (this is the oldest secondary school rugby fixture in New Zealand). But you could not say, however, that College had 30 years more of rugby experience than School, because until 1881 much of its football was based upon the early vicious forms of rugby of the English public schools.

In the early years, School often had to draught in players from the Old Boys Club, and until the 1890s their first XV was matched with the College second XV, who they did not beat without Old Boys' support until 1889.

For a while they were viewed as an inferior breed by the pupils on the Christ's College Games Committee, as is shown by their 1896 resolution in response to a Boys' High request that matches be played home and away as school rather than club matches: "The idea of a match between an ordinary day school, and a school on the lines of Christ's College, being considered by the latter as a school match is absurd."

They rescinded this stance in 1899, but not before School had launched into their first run of consecutive victories (1897-99).

A longstanding rivalry had already become firmly established, and today the annual fixture is eagerly awaited.

The schools bring along their well- practised hakas, and, though the days are gone when almost every single pupil would turn up to watch on match day, the field is lined with hundreds of pupils dressed in their school colours: black and white versus blue and black.

The story behind the selection of the Boys' High colours is told in the 1898 school magazine by Tom Reese (who had been a first-year pupil, and later, the school's first senior monitor).

A few of the senior boys had proposed a black jersey with skull and crossbones, and this idea soon caught on. But at a vote the piratical emblem lost by 16 to 17. This may have been due to the influence of the chairman of the meeting, the school's second master, George Hogben, who pronounced that the colours chosen should be a credit to the school, to the boys, and to those who would follow them.

Reese continues the story: "Maroon, afterwards adopted by Canterbury College, was also thrown out. A block soon occurred, as colours after colours were proposed, only to be thrown out at the poll. The chairman himself made a suggestion, viz. blue and black, also mentioning, if I am not mistaken, that they were his old school colours. The suggestion was well received, and, after a discussion as to the shade of blue, a motion was carried by 17 to 16 that Royal Blue and Black be the colours . . . "

Then comes the most fascinating part of the story: "It may be interesting to my readers to know that blue and black jerseys were not obtainable for many months. This difficulty was soon got over, for College jerseys (black and white) could be soon transformed into the required hues."

Around the turn of last century, future All Blacks played for both schools, Frank Fryer and Toby Murray for College, and Bob Deans, Eric Harper and Mona Thomson for School. These last three later played for the All Black Originals on their famous tour of 1905-06.

By this time the School magazine was claiming their match with College was watched by the whole football public of Canterbury and attributed the high standard of play to their mutual strength: "There is no doubt that the football played by the Christchurch schools is far more scientific than that of

any other New Zealand schools, we are often beaten, and frequently see better forwards, but the passing of no team in New Zealand can compare with that of Christ's College and Christchurch Boys' High School."

In both 1919 and 1920, the School team contained five future All Blacks (a total of seven during the two years) including Bill Dalley, a great-uncle of Dan Carter.

With fellow old boy Jim Parker, Dalley toured with the Invincibles in 1924-25, but he was only 15 and weighed a little more than 45 kilograms when he played a brilliant game at halfback in the 1917 match against College. His belief that no lighter boy had since played in the School first XV could well have been correct (the growing lad put on 6kg in each of the next two years).

The Lyttelton Times reported that, "Much amusement was created by the School half, who was so small that he could slip under an outstretched arm."

More than 60 years later, Dalley remembered how he was nervous on arrival at the College ground: ". . . the nervousness did not last long . . . Although we were beaten by College [15-nil], who had some very big boys in their team at the time, I was picked up by High School boys after the game and carried shoulder-high back to school over a quarter of a mile away. Never will I forget those moments."

Up until this time School (then in Worcester St, just down from Christ's College) hosted its home games at its grounds in North Hagley Park, but because these could no longer accommodate all who wanted to attend, other venues were used.

In 1916, the match had been played at Lancaster Park to raise war funds (and because many club players were away on overseas service, there was little else to engage the public). The Show Grounds were used in 1918-19 and Lancaster Park, 1920-23, where up to 10,000 spectators attended, some employers giving their workers the afternoon off to watch.

However, the College headmaster Rev E C Crosse wasn't happy with these big, public matches, believing that the large, noisy crowd with its partisan barracking placed too much of a strain on the boys (especially, he noted, on the College boys, against who there was a certain class prejudice among the spectators).

In 1923 he sparked some controversy when he announced that the boys shouldn't be expected to provide such public entertainment and that the matches should be played on school grounds. Boys' High wanted to continue to host the fixture at Lancaster Park. When, after College had hosted the game in 1924, School again proposed to hold the 1925 match at Lancaster Park an impasse was reached so that no match was played at all for the first and only time in its history.

An agreement was reached so that in 1926 School hosted the match once more at Lancaster Park. But since that year, Boys' High moved to its present Straven Rd site and most subsequent games have been played alternately at the grounds of the two schools.

Until 1931, the schools played between one and three matches each year and almost all of these have been recorded in the match's history, even though one fixture was always regarded as the annual match. For the past 80 years, just the one annual match has been recorded each year.

In the running total of victories for each side, the honours were roughly even until World War II. Boys' High's domination of the fixture in the 1940s, 60s, 70s, 90s and 2000s means it now has more than 80 victories to College's 43 (nine matches have been drawn).

Should School win this year's match, it will achieve a record 12 consecutive wins. Last year the School XV equalled the record of 11 wins in a row that had been set in 1976 by a team that included current All Black coach Steve Hansen. It was the first of his two appearances in the match for School, however, he did not see much of the 24-6 victory as he left the field before half-time. He needed 42 stitches in his eye after it had come into accidental contact with Jock Hobbs' knee.

The following year he captained the team at centre (and had the services of future All Black Richard Loe) but had the misfortune to face a College team that included Hobbs, Robbie Deans, and Joe Leota, the latter scoring a try in their 13-nil victory.

Hansen recalls his was a very good side (it won all its other matches that year), but, as the School Magazine reported, College "proved impossible . . . On the day, College were simply better."

Hobbs (later All Black captain and NZRU chairman) played for College's first XV from 1975-77 as fullback, centre, and finally, in his last year, his preferred position of flanker.

He rated the 1977 victory as one of the most satisfying events in his time at college, and spoke about it when he returned to speak at a College assembly in 1984 - which just happened to be the year of College's next victory over School.

That Hollywood dive of 1984 heralded a revival of College's fortunes and it won eight out of the next 16 fixtures. More future All Blacks ran on to the school fields in this period.

Canterbury assistant coach Tabai Matson played in the match for College during 1989-91, experiencing two wins and one loss, along with two tries. The loss came in 1991 (12-16) when College was trying to complete its first winning streak of five matches.

The School team included Andrew Mehrtens and Crusaders assistant coach Daryl Gibson. Gibson, no slouch himself, still recalls Matson running right around him, and both players remember the intense atmosphere, the spine tingling feeling when running onto the field, surrounded by pupils from both schools.

Matson says back then, when they didn't compete in playoff games, this was their "grand final", far and away the most important match of their lives.

The College win in 2000 (19-8) holds special memories for ex-All Black lock James Ryan. He had been on the losing team in the previous two years

and on a sunny day at College's "Upper", in College's 150th year, faced a very good School team, which included Adam Thomson and Dan Carter.

The win, with a try to his name, and a mass school haka after the game, made it a memorable occasion for Ryan: "I hold it as close to my heart as my All Black debut."

That remains College's last victory in the fixture.

School has been dominant this century, not least with its record 73-nil victory in 2004. The team of that year included Owen Franks, Nasi Manu, Tim Bateman and Colin Slade.

School has had the advantage of many very good players - there are seven in the current Crusaders squad.

It takes special circumstances for the match to be moved away from either of the two school grounds, and this occurred in 1981 and 2006 when Rugby Park was used in honour of Boys' High's 100th and 125th anniversary celebrations.

The 1981 result was a respectful 9-all draw in front of the Governor-General and a crowd of 7000, but the treatment by some School old boys of the College mascot was not so respectful: it was retrieved after a sideline scuffle minus one leg and a quantity of straw.

In recent years, Rugby Park has also been used as a substitute venue for School's Straven Rd grounds since, unlike College, it cannot provide a secure, gated area, a measure that had become necessary for a fixture that was attracting small groups of intoxicated old boys.

The mutilation of mascots and a growing history of isolated sideline incidents had, by the mid-90s, been replaced by fights, and the presence of police and security guards.

Some years were trouble free, but others witnessed ejections and arrests of a few ex-students, and even a mass brawl after the game, along with a string of arrests in 2009.

The following year, Boys' High endorsed and supported a Christ's College initiative to eliminate all alcohol from the event. With the help of police and the breath testing of all spectators at the 2010 and 2011 fixtures, the event has been transformed and past tensions eliminated.

College headmaster Simon Leese says the schools will keep breath testing until the history of difficulties has been forgotten.

There will be breath testing at the entrance of the College grounds again this year, but once inside the gate spectators will see more than just another rugby game in the Press Cup competition. They will join thousands of other supporters and rugby lovers keen to witness the spectacle of this traditional rivalry in its 121st year.

The players will run on in traditional caps, hundreds of school boys will perform their haka in unison, and there will be the intense excitement of the game.

There may even be one or two of those memorable moments when a player dives joyfully over the try line."