All Blacks: World 7s Champs

by Ed Fagerty

Sydney, Australia
March 22/23, 1986

In an historic event, which brought together national sevens teams from all corners of the globe, the All Blacks of New Zealand won the first ever World Seven's Title by crushing favored Australia, 32-0 into the Championship match. Expertly organized by the New South Wales Rugby Union to celebrate the opening of their newest stadium at Concord Oval, the event attracted sixteen teams (Argentina, Australia, Canada, England, Fiji, France, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Tonga, U.S., Wales and Western Samoa) who delighted packed houses on both days (and over 30 million more via television) with their spectacular non-stop action.

The game of sevens owes its current international prominence to the efforts of the Hong Kong Rugby Union and their annual spring spectacular. Due to its exotic setting, superb organization and colorful field, the Hong Kong Sevens has become one of the most attractive events on the international rugby calendar. Nevertheless, in terms of competitive significance, the New South Wales Sevens has supplanted Hong Kong as the world's premier sevens event. Event organizer Ken Elphick insisted all participating teams are the national representatives of their countries with substantial rugby populations. Unlike Hong Kong, the organizers were at an advantage. With the favored rugby status to the Bome Countyes, allowing national level players from the United Kingdom to parade like wolves in sheep's clothing, under the banner of Crawford's Weh, Public School Wanderers, Irish Wallahs and Scottish Co-Optimists, while all other countries were required to wear their national colors. Unlike Hong Kong, there were no weak "opposeants" from Singapore, Brunei or Malaysia for sub-par national sides from the larger countries to build good won-loss records.

The gods smiled on rugby's first true World Championship in 163 years and provided brilliant sunshine with a high 78% on both days.

AUSTRALIA

Brazing speed, pinpoint passing and tough defense were ingredients for success in this event and Australia displayed all three in abundance as they swept undefeated through five preliminary matches.

The sixteen teams were divided into groups of four with each team playing every other team in its group and the top two advancing to the quarter-finals. In their pool matches Australia topped the Netherlands 18-0, crushed a by-passing Tonga 24-0, and then won a fiercely contested match over Spain 16-10.

In the quarter finals Australia disposed of Western Samoa 14-4 on tries by Cow, Callebrot and Poidievon and a Michael Lynam conversion.

Semi-Finals

This set up a match anticipated to be the semi-final against a very strong Welsh side. Wales reached the semi-finals with pool victories over the U.S. (18-0), eventual champions New Zealand (18-12), and Tonga (14-12).

In the quarter finals they beat France 12-8.

In the semi-final, however, Wales came crashing back to earth, their only score coming on the seventh try by the tremendous exciting flyhalf, Jonathan Davies. The Welshmen were under Australia's pressure and the 90+ hour; surging converted tries by Lynam, Williams and Ella (16-0) Australia simply outscored and outmuscled Wales in this game. Wallaby 88, Peter Lucas was particularly effective, laying on some bone-crushing hits.

In this match, the Australians also regularly violated one of the existing tenets of the game - they kicked to touch for position deep in their opponent's zone and they played kick and chase when one of their speed boys was in a position to get the touchdown.

NEW ZEALAND

Prelims

On the other side of the draw, New Zealand was considered one of the sleepers of the competition as this was the first time they had treated sevens as a fully competitive exercise. After their erratic pool play, however, many "experts" wrote them off as a serious threat.

They started off well enough, however, with a 22-0 pasting of Tonga. But in their second match, the All Blacks fell victim to the brilliance of Wales' Jonathon Davies whose three tries sent New Zealand to an 18-12 defeat. The All Blacks, however, rebounded well against the United States, beating an American team which just couldn't get untracked, 28-0.

Quarter Finals

All three teams, Australia and Wales progressed to the last four, while New Zealand was the game of the day with a result that was considered the game of the day.

Semi-Finals

In the semi-finals, New Zealand came back to face, with the Packman of Argentina, the slickest ball handlers in the competition. It was good to see Argentina back in the international sevens arena of intimidation to their plus. Whereas on Saturday, they played 6 men up and a sweeper back, on Sunday the New Zealanders played a pressure man-to-man game with all seven men up, not allowing the Kiwis any opportunity to unleash one of their free-form attacks.

Improvement

Before the competition began, New Zealand Coach, Bryce Roper, confided that the All Blacks had been behind Australia and Fiji when their country began sending full national sides to the Hong Kong Sevens in 1983. Due to internal competitions and greater awareness of sevens by the national selection panel, he felt the All Blacks had improved rapidly and could enter the world championships on a par with the other leading teams.

Commenting on the type of players needed for the game, Roper said: "Pure speed at all positions is crucial in sevens, and this is the fastest team in New Zealand has ever faced.

"At least one of the three forwards must be a very good No. 8. The scrum half is the vital key, while the fly half must have the ability to sum up the game like Mark Ella. The center and wing must have plenty of gas in the tank."

Roper added: "I've spent hours watching videos of Australia's sevens team to see the type of player needed for this game."

Semi-Finals

In the semi-final, New Zealand came face-to-face with the Packman of Argentina, the slickest ball handlers in the competition. It was good to see Argentina back in the international sevens arena...
after their exclusion from the Hong Kong Sevens due to the Falklands War. (So much for the separation of sport and politics.)

Argentina earned a spot in the semi-finals by virtue of pool victories over Japan (27-7), Western Samoa (18-0) and Romania (31-4), plus a quarter-final win over the feisty Spaniards (12-6).

After the All Blacks comprehensive win over Fiji, there was an awareness among the rugby cognoscenti that the New Zealanders had shifted gears. No one was surprised, therefore, when they took the measure of Argentina by a score of 22-4.

A press conference for old handling was nullified by the All Blacks' pressure defense, speed, size and fitness. All the Pumas could do was hang on for dear life. Coach Bryce Rope said that the growing stature of sevens "will create a new era in New Zealand rugby."

Rope feels that sevens has had a tremendous influence on New Zealand's recent backline play in the 15-man game. The tournament try scoring crown with seven apiece.

Bryce Rope

Following the game, coach Bryce Rope said that the growing stature of sevens "will create a new era in New Zealand rugby."

Rope feels that sevens has had a tremendous influence on New Zealand's recent backline play in the 15-man game. "I think it's a tremendous way to develop ball skills and get people thinking on their feet," said Rope.

He continued: "To win a rugby championship like this against the top sixteen teams in the world is a great thing for the players. These players will look back on sevens and credit much of their improvement to their involvement in it."

"Sevens is being introduced to secondary schools back home and this victory can't help but make sevens grow. People back home will be watching the All Black victory on television for weeks and weeks to come."

Alan Jones

Australian Coach Alan Jones was gracious in defeat stating outright that: "New Zealand were too big, too fast and too strong for us. He felt the Australian players were too as fit as they should have been at this time of the season and that they simply "ran out of gas."

France's Serge Blanco is considered by many to be the best rugby player in the world. His performance in Sydney enhanced that view.

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Eagle Captain, Blane Warhurst, indicates his team's preference before taking the field against the All Blacks. The Eagles lost this contest 28-6. (Photograph by Hagerty.)
U.S. Goes 0-4
In Sydney

The performance of the United States at the World Sevens Championship was disappointing. The U.S. was eliminated after pool losses to Wales (16-0), Tonga (18-4) and New Zealand (28-0). When assessing America’s performance, however, one must keep in mind that they were in what was unquestionably the toughest draw and that two of their losses came at the hands of the eventual champion (N.Z.) and a semi-finalist (Wales) who had beaten New Zealand in their pool match.

On Sunday, a match was arranged against Korea, and although the United States’ performance was much improved, they lost this one as well, 16-14.

Selection

Following the National All Star Sevens Championship in Orlando this past December, the decision was made to select two U.S. Seven sides. As the New South Wales Sevens was a new event and, therefore, an unknown quantity, the second side went to Sydney, while their first went to Hong Kong. In retrospect, considering the quality of the field in Sydney, this was a miscalculation. The most important lesson learned in Australia was that the talent pool of U.S. Seven players is not deep enough to support two teams. Although inexperienced (of the nine, only Titus and Warhurst had played at this level before), the U.S. side which went to Australia did not lack talent. This reporter has seen many of the U.S. players perform at the National Club and/or National All-Star Championships and felt that, if properly coordinated, they would be able to give a good account of themselves.

This view, however, was not shared by U.S. Sevens Coach Steve Gray, who was unhappy with selections and pessimistic about his team’s chances; a view he made no effort to conceal.

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Wales 18, U.S. 0

In their first match against Wales the Eagles had only opportunities but weren’t able to execute. The defense stood off too much and when they had possession, relinquished it by running into opposition. It was in this match that the U.S. and the assembled multitude were introduced to new Welsh phenomenon, Jonathan Davies, who ran for two long tries. Other Welsh scoring came on tries by Phillips and Mortarty and a conversion by Hedelin Bowen.

U.S. Wales
Dedeha| Pickering
Warhurst| Phillips
Titus| Mortarty
Saunders| Jones
Caunder| Davies
Jenkinson| Bowen
Peluso| Brown

Tonga 18, U.S. 4

An 18-4 loss to Tonga was no disgrace. The Tongans have been playing rugby for many years, take it very seriously, and the country’s best athletes are attracted to the game.

The game was a physical, hand-hitting affair in which the Tongans took advantage of their opportunities, while the U.S. couldn’t. All three of the Tongan tries were scored by Peta Fakava and then converted by Alalom Liavai.

The U.S. played a very stilted game, showing little aggression, and going backwards much of the time. Their only score came late in the game when Jenkinson made a break from Tonga’s 25 and passed to Brown for the try. The conversion by Steve Gray was no good.

U.S. Tonga
Dedeha| Tupe
Warhurst| Langi
Titus| Fita
Saunders| Liavai
Gray| Fakava
Jenkinson| Fakava
Brewington| Bauda

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New Zealand 28, U.S. 0

In their third match the Eagles had the misfortune of facing a talented and determined All Black side who were intent on avenging their loss to Wales and making their way into the quarter-finals.

During the early going the Eagles seemed relaxed and were playing their best rugby of the competition. They were awarded a penalty twenty yards from New Zealand's line, directly between the posts, but instead of taking an almost sure three points (plus getting the ball back on the kick-off), they elected to kick for the goal.

The Eagle attack was snuffed out and the All Blacks' Wayne Sheffield scored on a length of the field movement thirty seconds later (4-0). Before half-time Terry Wright crossed the line and then converted his own try (10-0).

The All Blacks opened their account in the second half when Terry Wright laid down a nifty grub kick and then outraged the Eagle defenders to touch down. Wright's conversion was good (16-0).

Tournament MVP, Franco Bonera, completed the All Black demolition job with two more tries, both of which he converted. This brought the final score line to 28-0.

N.Z. Delderfield Shefford Warburton Brooke Titus Brook-Cowden Paris Kirk Caulfield Borsca Peluso Green Jenkins Wright Warburton

Commenting on the Eagles' performance in Sydney, U.S. captain Blake Warburton stated: "The best rugby athletes in the world were here and the U.S. isn't deep enough to send two different teams to Sydney and Hong Kong to compete effectively. The U.S. must get its best athletes on the field. We've got to get good, young players like Kevin Higgins and Gary Harv involved in sevens. We've got to get them over to events like this to show them what high level, international rugby is all about."

When asked the difference between the rugby in Sydney and that which he had played in the States, Pete Delderfield noted: "The intensity of the game and quality of the players here is much higher. The atmosphere was great, totally serious and totally devoted to rugby.

"The pace here is so much faster and you play flat out for the entire game. It requires a much higher level of fitness than we're used to in the States. Also, you just can't make mistakes. If you lose the ball, you may never get it back."

TOURNAMENT NOTES

I had gone to Sydney with the intent of recording the activities of the championship teams and the Eagles. But to ignore the incredible array of talent on display at events such as the New South Wales and Hong Kong Sevens, was a mistake.

Sevens attracts rugby's stars, the fly-halves, the headline makers. And the world's best were all on display over these two action-packed days in Sydney. Anyone who has been to an international level sevens tournament will never forget the thrill of seeing a world-class, 10-try back the ball on an overlap, challenge his defender, pin back his ears and set sail for the line.

Players who made lasting impressions this weekend included Senevalai Tauava,

Laudaua

The grand old man of Fijian rugby, 31-year-old Senevalai Tauava, is an electrifying winger. His two tries against a talented French side demonstrated that he is still one of the best finishers in the game. His long, fluid stride and incredible speed brought to mind a well-tuned Ferrari accelerating flat out past more conventional machinery.

Blanco

Another who fits into this category is France's multi-talented fullback Serge Blanco. Considered by many to be the most talented player in the game today, his attacking brilliance and long runs made him stand out above the crowd at Sydney.

Jonathan Davies

Those who saw Jonathan Davies in Sydney now know why he is being compared to the legendary Welsh Rhys Ifans, Barry John and Phil Bennett.

Tied for the try-scoring title with seven in five games, the 23-year-old from Neath has good speed, a tremendous sidestep and the knack for finding a hole in opposing defenses. Many feel he is about to launch a new era in Welsh rugby.

Spain

Perhaps the greatest success story in Sydney was that of Spain which posted an impressive and totally deserved 26-6 victory over fifth seeded England in their opening pool match. The Spaniards, who had never played sevens before, then moved into the quarter-finals with a 12-6 victory over a very competitive Netherlands side. Forward Alberto Malo and playmaker Francisco Puertas, who scored six tries in the competition, were the stars of Spain's giant killer act.

Spain bowed out of the competition after a close 12-6 loss to Argentina in which the Spaniards gave a bruising lesson in defense.

Jonathan Davies of Wales scored seven tries to lead his team into the semi-finals. (Pixo-Hagerty)

England

After their loss to Spain, England's faint hopes of continuing into the quarter final round were

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Fiji's sensational Senivalat Lautau turns the corner against France and heads for the line. (Photo-Hagerty)

dashed when they were beaten by Australia, 24-6, in their second game. England was saved from total disgrace when they scored a try with two seconds remaining to beat the Netherlands 20-16.

To England's credit, it was great to see them and Wales in the competition. The two Home Countries added a tremendous amount to the appeal of the games.

In defense of their play, it must be said that England did not field its best side as those whose teams were still in John Player Cup contention were not considered for selection.

Canada

Canada, like the U.S., did not have an impressive showing in Sydney. Their only win, however, was marginally better than the 0-1 record posted by the Eighth Canuck. The host side managed a 10-10 draw with Korea, sandwiched between losses to Fiji 32-6 and France 28-0.

Canada's only scoring, in the match against Korea, came on two tries by Mike Clarkin and a conversion by Tom Wood.

Canada's most impressive participant was wing Spencer Robinson, the team's youngest (20) and smallest (5'5", 150 lbs) player. Robinson was a bundle of energy making a number of enterprise runs and defending all over the field.

The Canadian team, coached by Mike Lake of St. John's, Newfoundland, and captained by Robin Russel of Vancouver, had eight B.C. players and two from Ontario. Vancouver and Victoria each contributed four players to the national side while centre Mike Clarkin of Ottawa and wing Spencer Robinson of Toronto rounded out the Canadian side.

Scotland and Ireland

Missing

Although both England and Wales showed up wearing their national colors, Scotland and Ireland were conspicuous by their absence. Various reasons cited were the Five Nations Championship which ended the weekend before, the overcrowded international schedule, domestic commitments and too much pressure on top players.

Irish Rugby Union President Desmond McKibben recited these excuses to scattered boos at the tournament's Sunday banquet. It's hard for us to take McKibben at his word, however, because a week later, five Irish internationals including Trevor Ringland and Hugo MacNeill, took part in the annual Easter frolic in Bermuda.

Insiders informed us that the real reason Scotland and Ireland refused invitations, was the feeling on their part that the World Sevens Championship was "the first step on the road to professionalism."

Game Results:

Pool Games (March 22, 1986)

Australia 18, Netherlands 0
New Zealand 11, Tonga 0
Western Samoa 24, Romania 6
Fiji 31, Canada 0
England 6, Spain 24
Wales 18, U.S.A. 0
Argentina 27, Japan 0
France 16, Korea 16
Spain 12, Netherlands 6
U.S.A. 4, Tonga 18
Japan 6, Romania 12
Korea 10, Canada 10

Lunch Break

Australia 24, England 6
New Zealand 12, Wales 18
Western Samoa 9, Argentina 18
Fiji 14, France 12
England 20, Netherlands 16
Wales 18, Tonga 12
Argentina 21, Romania 4
France 28, Canada 0

New Zealand 14, U.S.A. 10
Western Samoa 10, Japan 6
Fiji 18, Korea 6

Quarter Finals (March 23, 1986)

Australia 14, Western Samoa 4
Wales 12, France 8
Argentina 12, Spain 6
New Zealand 16, Fiji 0

Similar Finale

Australia 18, Wales 6
New Zealand 24, Argentina 4

Final

New Zealand 32, Australia 0

The birds at Bondi Beach topped off a wonderful weekend in Sydney (Photo-Hagerty)