

Maori Rugby Tour — it will be the greatest

By Terry McLean

The longer one lasts in sportswriting, the more cautious one becomes about offering fateful, final forecasts. Even so, I haven't the least doubt that the tour to Wales and Spain of the New Zealand Maoris Rugby team in October and November will be the greatest, in terms of enjoyment, in the history of the game.

I offer three grounds for this forecast. In the first place, the Celts of Wales and the Maoris of New Zealand as the native peoples, the aboriginals, of their countries, share a history of ravishment of their land and, at times, expropriation of their rights by another people who may be identified as the English. Thus they share a common feeling, an understanding, a relationship which, as it becomes better known to hosts and guests of the tour, will powerfully affect their feelings toward each other. In the twinkling of an eye, the two parties will forge a lifelong friendship.

Secondly, both Maori and Welsh approach Rugby with an enthusiasm which amounts to a passion. I have said it before but it is worth saying again — the observation made to my father by the first Maori to hold the see of Aotearoa, Bishop Bennett, that "Rugby sublimated the warlike feelings of the Maori people". In simpler words, Rugby has always offered an outlet to the warrior-feelings of Maori men. As for the Welsh attitude to Rugby, all I can testify is that in many visits to Wales, meeting all sorts of people, I have never met one who didn't know about the game and its players, who didn't feel pride in the Red Dragons of the national team, who couldn't count, down the years, much better than any of us Kiwis can, the glorious feats of Welsh teams.

Thirdly, singing will be a basic factor of the greatest of all tours. Through personal experience, or television, or the radio, we have all heard of the singing by the crowd — and, very often, by the players — at the Arms Park of Cardiff, the great National Stadium. This goes on at all the grounds the Maoris will use. It is worst at Newport because that city, you see, is just across the Severn River, the border between England and Wales and so, by Welsh standards, it is not really Welsh, it is English; and everybody knows the English can't sing a note. It is best, these days, at Llanelli, at Straedy Park, because this in West Wales and the further west you go the further you penetrate into the real Wales — where, believe it or not, Welsh is spoken more often than English.

As for the singing, the musical instinct

of the Maori, I can offer a couple of examples. When the All Blacks were at Bathurst in New South Wales in 1962, Wilson Whineray as captain was trying to turn himself into a guitarist. In an off-moment, he put me to the thing, instructing me how to hold my left hand for the fingering. "Willie" soon despaired, took the guitar back and tried again. Along came "The Black Panther", the one and only Waka Nathan — and I must say I performed cartwheels of joy when I learned that the Rugby Union had appointed him manager of the team. Waka plucked the guitar from Whineray, sat down and started to strum. Out poured a splendid rhythm — and Waka as a musician wasn't in the class of Waka as a player. Whineray threw up his hands. "How can you," he asked, "compete with the Maori?"

Choral singing

As will be well remembered by older hands, the coach of the 1971 British

Lions, Welshman Carwyn James, was a quite outstanding musician and a most excellent singer. At Rotorua, the team and some of us journalists were sung to by a Maori choir at a lunch in the stately old building of the Government Gardens. The choral singing was fine. A soprano in the team, by no means a young woman, had a sensational voice, perfectly pitched. Carwyn was enraptured. To be sung to by such a choir and by such a voice was, he said, one of the memorable musical experiences of his life.

With luck, there will be such a choir and such a voice, perhaps many more of the same, in the supporters groups touring with the team. When the Welsh begin to sing at the Maoris and the Maoris, having got over their shyness at singing in public, begin to sing back, all hearts will melt as one. In good singing lies, I am sure, the golden road to friendship. I have another memory, of the first test between the Maoris and Fiji at Albert Park in Fiji in 1973. It had been a desperately hard game won by the Maoris by only 6 points to 4; and you had the right to feel that the Fijians might be feeling a bit sour when the two teams got to the after-match function. For a few minutes, the atmosphere was strained. Then someone, I am almost sure it was Jim Maniapoto, picked up a guitar and began to strum. In no time, all of the players and God knows how many others were off and away, singing their hearts out. Who cared — the game had been played and decided, now was the time for fellowship?

That, I am sure, is exactly what is going to happen in Wales. As and when it does, the impact upon players and sup-

