



Percy Erceg 1950, Coach 1982 Team

#### made coach

About the same time, one of the greatest of all Maori footballers, Waka Nathan, was made coach of the national Maori team. The conjunction of Couch and Nathan in the top jobs could not have been more significant, or successful. Couch, who ran shearing contracts among other concerns and who, as a Mormon, neither drank nor smoked, displayed a consistent tenacity in putting before councillors a sound and reasoned defence of the cause of Maori Rugby.

At the general election in 1975, he achieved the distinction, as a Maori, of winning the pakeha seat of Masterton. He was made Minister of Maori Affairs. As such, his strength on the council was improved. His view now carried considerable weight. Who could hope to tell a Cabinet Minister, whose status was more significant because he was representing pakehas, that Maoris as such were no longer worthy of a special place in New Zealand Rugby?



Ben Couch 1947-50, present Minister Maori Affairs

Beyond this, Nathan as man and player — and, as was to be proved, as coach — had a mystical appeal for all in Rugby, Maori and pakehas, for all in New Zealand, if it came to that. Twice, while touring in the British Isles with All Black teams, he had suffered a broken jaw. His humour unimpaired, he returned after each convalescence to demonstrate amazing, even ideal, qualities as a flying wing-forward, a fearsome flanker they called "The Black Panther".

In association with Couch, Nathan had charge of the 1973 Maori team which played in Western Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. Such was the fierceness of play in Western Samoa that the Prime Minister of the country had to go onto the field. The contests in the two tests in Fiji were strong. Tane Norton, the captain, who had played in Ian Kirkpatrick's All Blacks in the British Isles and France in 1972-73, the tour always remembered for the expulsion of Keith Murdoch, said the contests in the front row — and he was not talking of foul or dirty play — were the toughest, the most strenuous, he had ever encountered. The Maoris got home in both.

The tour was tremendously important. It restored the faith of the Maoris in their own players, their own style of Rugby. Couch in administration and Nathan in coaching continued to expand this faith. They were a great team, one of the great teams. Unbelievably, the Rugby Council did not catch on to the significance of Nathan's achievements. He had retired from playing only a few years before he became the Maoris' coach. But, as his record proved, he succeeded. He got through to the players. They respected his judgment, obeyed his will and were encouraged to think for themselves, to display their natural skills, their Maori skills.

Meanwhile, the Council continued to appoint to All Black selection committees and as coaches, men whose playing-days lay back in the 1950s. These men did not communicate as naturally as Nathan to the players they were coaching. The 1970s were not a good period in New Zealand Rugby at international level, not, at least, until the advent of a captain of exceptional qualities in Graham Mourie. Perhaps the appointment of men of similar qualifications to Nathan's, even the appointment of Nathan himself, would have averted many problems.

#### not all faults

Not all of the faults lay with the largely pakeha administration. In the early 1960s, at a time when Neil McPhail was convenor of the New Zealand selection committee and coach of all All Blacks, a Prince of Wales Cup match was played in Whangarei. A cloudburst descended on the field in the

second half. Men, women and children among the spectators were saturated. A representative Maori team was to be chosen after the game. McPhail was ex officio chairman of the selection committee. But when, having changed his sopping clothes at his own hotel, he caught up with the Maori selectors, they blithely told him they had already chosen their team. They laughed, as did many Maoris when they heard the story.

But it was a slim trick. It did not improve the standing of Maori Rugby at national council level. At that time, and for some years later, it was also a fact that tribalism was an unfortunate feature of Maori Rugby at administrative and selection levels. With good reason was it considered that not all Maori teams were chosen on merit. As this belief — it was more than a belief, it was a fact — spread through senior pakeha administrations, the standing of Maori Rugby was lessened. To be frank, the Maoris in Rugby were not always their own best friends.

But the attitude expressed by Jack Sullivan to George Nepia and which was shared by a good many at council and provincial union level was subtly changing. Enormous was the victory won when the South African Government acknowledged that Maoris would be welcomed if they were judged good enough, on playing merit, to win selection in the 1970 All Blacks who were to tour in South Africa. The pioneers were Sid Going, Henare Milner, and Blair Furlong; and Bryan Williams, part-Samoan and the sensational player of the tour was also a "coloured" man who would not previously have been allowed into an All Black team. Going went back to South Africa with the team in 1976, as did other Maoris in Terry Mitchell, Tane Norton, Bill Osborne, Kent Lambert and Billy Bush. Since that was the year in which Nepia and Sullivan had staged their quarrel, it might have seemed odd that Maori Rugby was to be phased out when 20 per cent of a touring All Black team were members of the race.

#### big tour

By means of sustained pressures, the cause of a "big" Maori tour was promoted. One suggestion was of the Pacific, to Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. Another was the Pacific Coast of North America, to British Columbia and California. Fortunate were the Maoris, fortunate was New Zealand, that a leading member of the Welsh Rugby Union, Ken Harris, was a powerful friend. As treasurer, he held a position of strength comparable with that held by the great Sir William Ramsay for so many years in the Rugby Football Union of England. Long before the public announcement, Harris said that the only country Wales could possibly invite to share in its union's centenary celebra-