

Maoridom's Mighty Warriors

By TERRY McLEAN

Even Solomon in all the glory of his infinite wisdom might be stretched, one imagines, to name the First XV of all of Maoridom's mighty warriors of Rugby. Since I do not possess the remotest touch of his qualifications and frequently am said to be the dumbest cove who has ever written about Rugby — but I still reckon I've seen more of the game that King Solomon ever managed — I must perforce just battle along. But it's a tricky job; just about as difficult, for example, as stopping Sid Going when he was in full cry, or persuading George Nepia to miss either a tackle or a catch of a high ball.

But the challenge is there. Who were the really great among Maori players? Who stood out? Who would be fit to rank among the elect of players produced by the race? I write this before the tour of Wales is completed; but, at time of writing, I would think only Stephen Pokere of Paul Quinn's team would qualify for consideration among the great players.

Quinn himself set a fine example of the kind of courage which distinguishes the best Maori players. Richard Dunn and Eddie Dunn moved well in combination — though I still tend to think Paul Blake (goalkicking apart) was or is the finer scrumhalf. Paul Tuoro made dramatic improvement, to the point where, if this were to be sustained, he could be figuring on the list of All Black possibles.

But oh, that handling! That want of decisiveness in the tackle — Nepia in the stands must have cringed in shame! That tendency to react to every knock as if it were a blow delivered in a roughhouse!

In efforts of this sort, the new Maoris were not rateable among the masters of old. But, without reaching too far for excuses, I would tend quite bitterly to complain the administration in New Zealand Rugby, of which Graham Mourie wrote quite bitterly in his autobiography in November, was at fault in failing to provide the Maoris with a couple of lead-up games at home, say against Canterbury, Wellington, Manawatu or Auckland, which would have acquainted them with some of their problems and compelled them to concentrate on their elimination.

I said it was a challenge to be asked to name a selection for Maoridom's mighty warriors. Let me, in this spirit, start with a challenge. There is no question of the immortality of Nepia. I will forever treasure the association we formed when between the two of us we composed his own autobiography, "I, George Nepia". (Our association



Before the Maori match at Swansea on the 1982 tour, George Nepia stepped onto the historic St Helen's ground to an ovation from the crowd. It was on that field as a youth of 19 that he played a major part in the 1924 All Black's 19-0 win over Wales. On the 1924 'Invincibles' tour, George Nepia played all 30 games.

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had in fact begun very much earlier when I was a primary schoolboy in Hastings and George was an established All Black. During a variety show staged for several nights at the Municipal Theatre, George in each show brought down the house with his singing of "Beneath the Maori Moon". Four of us, about the same age, failed to excite anything more than pity, or perhaps it was contempt, when we charged through a number whose title I have forgotten but one verse of which recited that "I called on my sweetheart, her name is Miss Brown/She was having a bath so she couldn't come down) I said 'Slip on something, Come down and be slick, So she slipped on the soap and she came mighty quick". Not, you might say, the stuff to have them queueing at the box-office, waiting to rush in to hear such stuff. But there it was, George and I had had an association a long time before the book; and I doubt that he would have any memory of the appearance of us kids.

No question, as I say, of the unassailable immortality of Nepia in Rugby. But what might have happened if another man with whom I was associated had not been a victim of one of Adolf Hitler's soldati during the Battle for Faenza in Italy in late 1944?

Mick Kenny, born in 1917, had begun to make his mark for Johnsonville and Wellington before he went off to war and became, as I also did, a member of the 22nd Infantry Battalion. In such Rugby as was possible during wartime — and a good deal of it was played, if on a rough-and-ready basis — he immediately proved to be a fullback of exceptional skills. He was tall and powerful. He had a punt almost as long as Nepia's. He had excellent anticipation. His tackle was decisive — no member of the Maori team in Wales remotely compared with him in this. There is no question that, had he been spared his serious wounding and