

**More than a Man's Game**  
**Women's and Rugby Union in New Zealand**

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Some of this material is drawn from my forthcoming chapter, "More than Male-Gazing. Reflections on Women's engagement with Rugby Union in New Zealand" in Rob Hess and Nikki Wedgwood (eds), *Women, Football and History*, Maribyrnong Press, Melbourne 2011. For copies, email [j.curtin@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:j.curtin@auckland.ac.nz)

My lecture today is drawn from a book project that examines women's and rugby union from 1860s to the current day, and their involvement as spectators, supporters, fans and players. The historical material I present here sits alongside other chapters that explore how second wave feminism, women's participation in the anti-apartheid movement, the alleged soccer mom phenomenon, and the institutionalisation of women's rugby, have had an impact on the game and the place of rugby in New Zealand.

Since our win in the 1987 Rugby World Cup, New Zealand rugby fans across the country have been waiting for a repeat performance. There appears to be an increasing anxiety amongst the collective "us", New Zealanders, around the possibility that we are being left behind on the world stage and that 1987 will become our version of England's 1966.

Each time New Zealand gets knocked out of the World Cup we ask ourselves whether the combination of professionalism, globalisation of the game, and the increasingly large amounts of money used to support it elsewhere, have irreparably damaged our capacity to be the best in the world again.

Now all our hopes are being placed on the 2011 World Cup that kicks off in just under six weeks – our fingers are crossed and we speak in whispers about the what if...

When we refer to this collective "we" at that national level, who do we think of? Do we as women feel excluded? Probably not I'd suggest. Those of us women in New Zealand who enjoy the game, imagine ourselves as part of the "us" that is urging on the All Blacks.

The NZRU and the IRB conceive of the rugby community broadly as well – women are present – almost forefront - if their brochures and tv ads have been anything to go by.

Air New Zealand, when sponsoring both the national provincial championship rugby competition and the All Black team ran a number of advertisements featuring women air crew who engage with rugby in a range of ways: as fans abusing the referee with gusto from the sideline, participating in a lustful gaze at several high profile players, calling the game from the couch, and pouring over rugby results in the newspaper.

But this media recognition of women as watchers of rugby is by no means universal. Other advertisers continue to appeal to the old-adage of rugby as watched by men of the land, men who are DIY experts, men who hunt stags and drink strong beer. There are still few women sports writers; there is only one female commentator on television, and there are no top level sideline officials. The six Rugby Ambassadors appointed to “sell” the RWC internationally, were unsurprisingly all men.

And while the playing of rugby by women has increased in popularity since the mid-1980s, the women’s game at the provincial or the national still gets little mainstream media coverage . So despite the fact that the (amateur) Black Ferns won a fourth Rugby World Cup on the 6<sup>th</sup> September 2010 you needed to have subscribed to the rugby channel on sky to have watched their win.

Acknowledgement of the presence of women in and around the ‘man’s’ game also remains on the margins of the histories dedicated to recording the rise of rugby union and its impact on the formation of New Zealand’s national identity.

Yet, as I demonstrate here, women have long since engaged with rugby union in ways that may well have assisted in its ascendancy and ultimate claiming of the title of New Zealand’s national game. Through readings of newspapers, magazines and over 400 club histories covering the period from the 1860s onwards a picture emerges: women from all walks of life supported the game of rugby as spectators, supporters and fans. They did so in a manner that was sometimes acceptable but at other times regarded as distinctly unwomanly and inappropriate. Often women’s presence was encouraged and deemed necessary to enable the game to flourish. And often their passion for the game was equal to their male counterparts.

However, because rugby histories were, for a long time, either populist or official in orientation, little attention has been given to women and the game. Populist histories have focused on great All Black teams, great men. Official histories are dedicated to recording in considerable detail game statistics, players, results of fixtures. Club histories, for the most part, have tended to mimic this model. Some comment on the social and local context of the development of their respective clubs and the importance of the game to their communities, but this is usually an aside. Most of the attention given to recording the win/loss records of their teams, and the generations of players of import to the club's successes. And because of their 'official' focus, women's contributions to the growth of the game are mentioned only in passing.

Since the 1980s there has emerged in New Zealand a more explicit recognition of the role of sport generally, and rugby in particular, in New Zealand social history. Here the works of Keith Sinclair and Jock Phillips are noteworthy – in different ways, both seek to trace the importance of sport, but especially rugby, to the nation's psyche and in the fostering of a shared understanding of what it meant to be a Pakeha male in New Zealand. This work has been significant in demanding we look more critically at the role of rugby in New Zealand society, and interrogate the mythical and hegemonic dimensions of the game.

Nevertheless, women's presence remains an aside in this work - Sinclair notes in passing, that there were probably women at early games of rugby but his tone is speculative rather than authoritative, while Phillips' focus on masculinity ensures an intense scrutiny of all things (Pakeha) male, rather than on the gendered relations that are produced by, and exist around, rugby.

The concurrent emergence of feminist scholarship led to a focus on gender and rugby, and has been important in its critical analysis of rugby as violent, oppressive and exclusive of women. In much of this work however, women are portrayed as 'victims' of, or in 'opposition' to the maleness of rugby union in its various manifestations, but seldom as actively (and positively) engaged with the game.

Today I offer a first step at revealing the extent to which women historically asserted themselves as supporters of rugby union, negotiating for themselves a space within which to watch and embrace the game in New Zealand. The first official game of rugby union, according to most histories, took place in Nelson in 1870. Charles Munro, son of Sir Charles

Munro, speaker of parliament, had fallen for the new sport while studying at Christ's College in London and after returning to New Zealand Munro organised the first "official" game following the set rules of Rugby Football.

However the foundations of support for rugby had been laid even before the creation of the Nelson football club in 1870. It is well documented that merchant and royal navy ships would dock and local lads would play against sailors; the Armed Constabulary would form teams against local railroad workers, civil engineers played local club teams, banks and lawyers would play all-comers, while Pakeha would line up against Māori. And it was a game that was popular in both rural and urban settings. In 1888 an Auckland-based rugby historian, W.W Robinson, noted that while it was difficult to obtain details of the rise of rugby union in Auckland he placed his own earliest recollection of football in Auckland as 1868. In this year, he recalls seeing in the Auckland Domain "a crowd of all sorts, sizes, ages and sexes punting a small black football." This is possibly the first reference to girls playing rugby in New Zealand.

From the 1870s onwards, rugby (along with other sports), became more organised with the advent of local clubs and regional administrations, inter-provincial competitions, referees associations and the establishment of the National Rugby Football Union (in 1892). This impulse to officiate and nationally administer rugby union was important to the growth of the game, but the local and social dimensions of rugby as a game remained intact – and it is at this level we see, very clearly, the presence of women.

While not in any way expected to play rugby, women were encouraged to participate as spectators. In 1847 at a festival in Keri Keri in the north of New Zealand, and attended by the Governor, football featured as part of the programme - ladies were in attendance and were reported to have enjoyed the entertainment. Such festivals became commonplace in many communities, always featuring rugby games of some sort. Alongside these, organised rugby matches increased in number over time, and the presence of the 'fair sex' was noted with regularity when reports of the game appeared in the local press. Nor was it uncommon to discuss the proportion of women at games: amongst a crowd of 13,000 at a Dunedin versus Auckland game in 1875, 'the ladies being better represented than on any previous occasion this season'. In 1888, when the English team played Dunedin the "match was greatly anticipated. One hour before the game kicked off, the stand was packed chiefly by ladies. The Englishmen remarked that they had 'never seen so many ladies at a football match before.'

Newspapers advertised that entry for ladies was free at many of the more organised games (a conscious decision by rugby unions once they were established), and where seating was available this was often reserved for women spectators. In Wanganui in 1886, the large attendance of women prompted the local newspaper to urge for the erection of a few seats for the accommodation of the ladies: it ‘would be only a proper recognition of the interest they evidently take in the game. To walk over to the ground, and then stand during the whole time of a match is more than most ladies care to undergo’.

However, in the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the free entry of women became more hotly contested by local rugby unions. In Christchurch the question of demanding an admission fee for ladies at Lancaster Park was considered because, ‘on Saturday last, out of six hundred and forty ladies who were present, five hundred came unattended and were provided with tea’. This suggests that women may have been attending rugby matches independently of their men folk – with their lady friends.

Just as the early feminists argued that women’s presence in politics might civilise the tone of politics, so too was there a sense, or hope, that women’s attendance at rugby matches would have a civilising influence on the behaviour of their male counterparts. One Dunedin report claimed that the presence of women spectators had ensured there was no swearing in the stands and no smoking; both admirable outcomes, attributable to the fairer sex.

While women were often labelled the fair sex in reports of game attendance, their support for rugby at times appeared anything but fair weather. In 1871, a Wellington newspaper commented that ‘there was already a numerous assemblage on the ground, amongst whom we had the pleasure of observing a fair sprinkling of ladies, who had mustered sufficient courage to face the contingency of another peppering of hail.’ And photographs taken in the early 1900s reveal a large number of women at wet games, with umbrellas aloft and boots ensconced in mud.

I suggest there are three reasons why women came to embrace the game of rugby union as a spectacle initially, and ultimately as the national sport. The first revolves around the place rugby matches had come to hold in the social life of many towns and communities. At this time New Zealand was still in settlement mode and while the process of urbanisation was in full swing, there existed a limited range of social and cultural activities in the main centres

and the rural towns. For example the small rural town of Gladstone, northwest of Wellington was described by one local historian as a ‘very pretty but very quiet place, and it is seldom that anything occurs to relieve the monotony of existence there’. Spontaneous rugby matches in the 1870s between local settlers and local Māori were considered entertaining relief – on one occasion it was noted that ‘the locality being well chosen and the ground in good order, and as the day was remarkably fine and warm the ladies of both races came to the front in good style.’

In many communities, local rugby matches would be followed by a dinner or a ball where the presence of ladies was both welcomed and acknowledged formally. With the advent of inter-provincial matches, similar social events would follow the game, events that included women. A standard three cheers for the opposition teams would be followed by a similar cheer for the ladies present. After one such toast at a Dunedin versus Auckland match the Captain of the Auckland team responded by noting that the Dunedin ladies had shown a good example to all the ladies of the other Provinces.’ Moreover, ‘even the Auckland ladies did not patronise football as they did here’.

In some country areas, the rugby club and the social activities attached to it were often the highlight of a community’s social calendar – particularly the club’s hosting of the Annual Ball – which was almost always organised by the ‘ladies of the club with much time given to its arrangement’.

At this time, outdoor recreation activities were becoming increasingly popular and so rugby as a spectacle was embraced as a social event. Christabel, in the *New Zealand Free Lance* noted that ‘football is the general topic of conversation everywhere, and at all times. Even we women, who have only the vaguest notion of what a ‘force-down’ or ‘throw-in’ may mean, are looking forward with great pleasure to the big match.’ What the social sections of newspapers and magazines also highlight in this period is that many of the more ‘genteel’ ladies across the country frequented football matches to be ‘seen’: weekly gossip columns regularly included a summary of who was at the game and what they were wearing.

A second reason for women’s presence is related to this reference of ‘eager watching’, or male gazing. Reporters sometimes noted with relish the degree to which the ladies enjoyed the spectacle of the game. Again it is in the society columns where the motive of male gazing

is most often mentioned. One notes, ‘Young ladies, looking at their best, can’t reach the football ground soon enough, lest the match should have started, and some clever piece of play on the part of their future life partners might escape their eager eyes.’

Finally, it is likely that many women had an independent interest in or passion for the game itself that manifested itself in a variety of ways. Dressing in team colours was not uncommon amongst women supporters. Alongside this, women supported the game as fundraisers for clubs, and returned soliders, as wives and mothers of players, and in Māori communities it was not unknown for Māori women elders (kuia), to bless the rugby fields. Other Māori women are recorded as donating land to the local club to ensure the men had their own permanent place to train and play. Indeed, Māori women’s support for rugby is a key feature of the growth of the game.

Unsurprisingly, the war years of 1914-1918 saw a considerable decline in men’s rugby activities but this, as with women’s labour market participation during periods of male-shortage, offered women opportunities to step into the breach in sports as well as paid work. One such woman was Stella Wright who took over coaching the school boys’ team. While this kind of engagement usually sat well within the boundaries of ‘appropriate’ womanly behaviour, club histories and some newspaper reports suggest that a good number of women even in these early times were eager and noisy fans. At local and social games there is evidence that women supporters were not afraid to indulge in unruly or boisterous behaviour on the sidelines and the umbrella proved to be the weapon of choice for a number of women fans to assault rival spectators or to prevent the opposition winger from scoring a try. Club histories also include anecdotal stories of women fighting opposition players on the sidelines. And, in Hokitika, two women were arrested for threatening the referee and pulling his hair after a match. Indeed the first official assault on a referee is recorded as occurring in 1899 in Thames - the perpetrator a woman spectator,

There are numerous other examples of women supporters’ challenging what was deemed socially acceptable behaviour at the time. One player was handed a pair of ladies silk underwear allegedly provided by a female spectator after his own were torn in a tackle. And it was not unknown, albeit unbecoming, for women to participate in the gambling that was commonplace at matches. In the early 1900s, a Māori team from Horowhenua went to

Taranaki and ‘a certain lady with a wad of money tied to a stick waved it around calling for someone to bet the Horowhenua team would not win’.

However, not all women found satisfaction in the role of passive spectator or sideline fan. As early as the 1870s, women began to take part in more active forms of recreation and sport. Not in competitive form but for the physical exercise and freedom, and to make them fit fine women worthy of fit fine husbands. At this time, early feminists were seeking more rights for women in all spheres of life: education, including physical education on the curriculum, the right to decent paid work, right to vote, and dress reform.

Alongside this, we know that the life of middle class women in new Zealand did not reflect the equivalent life in Britain - there was less access to home help and for farming women, hard physical labour was not uncommon. While this made women time-poor in terms of the consumption of leisure, it also meant women’s roles in New Zealand society were less strictly defined by Victorian norms – the reality of life demanded some flexibility and adaptation.

However, the image of a “new woman” that had appeared did not challenge women’s place in the domestic sphere but it did portray women as having the right to personal, political and physical freedom including playing sport. Clearly some sports were more acceptable than others: tennis, cycling, swimming and golf were deemed sufficiently appropriate and unthreatening to the overarching image of woman as feminine and aesthetically pleasing.

However, the establishment and cultivation of team sports for women, particularly contact sports like rugby football was less successful. But there was at least one documented attempt to challenge traditional sensibilities on the issue – which I want to illuminate more here.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> June 1891, Mrs Nita Webbe placed advertisements in several of the major newspapers around the country seeking women candidates for a football team – interested women could apply, with parental consent, and if selected, Mrs Webbe would pay their costs to travel to Auckland and train with the other ladies. Her plan was to gather together 30 young women in Auckland and have them learn to play the game of rugby football. The women would be divided into two teams of fifteen and after several weeks of training and practice, would set off on a tour of the Australian colonies and then returning to play a series of matches in the major centres around New Zealand.

Not surprisingly, MrsWebbe's efforts to encourage women to take part in rugby were greeted with disgust and dismay by many in the local press, and the associated media storm lasted several months. Male and female commentators scoffed at the idea and insisted that if women were allowed to play such a rough and dangerous game, they would destroy their dignity and endanger their health. Nevertheless, this idea of privately-funded rugby tours as an entrepreneurial exercise was not new to New Zealand rugby. In 1888 the Natives tour of the UK and Australia was organised and funded by two gentlemen not associated with the New Zealand Union.

The Union did, however, endorse and support the tour, although it was limited in its financial success for the exercise. Nevertheless they did conceive of a rugby tour of mostly Māori players to be a worthy spectacle and/or form of entertainment. It may well have been that Nita Webbe thought the same about women's football.

The tour did not go ahead – reports in newspapers in mid-July give no definitive reason as to why it did not. It appears an initial game was to take place in Potters Paddock on the 27<sup>th</sup> June, but no I have found no published report (as yet). In 1919, a rugby historian did note that: it came to naught, and one trial at Rugby satisfied the Auckland ladies that a milder form of amusement would suit them better.

The lady footballers of 1891 may not have prompted a trend towards women officially playing rugby, but it is worth recognising the radical nature of the proposal. And we know from photographic evidence that the failure of the 1891 team did not close down women's desire to play the game. Several club histories include photos of women players, but with little or no analysis of their role in the club. But by the mid-1980s, women's rugby emerges as a real and growing force. Women begin organising themselves at club level, and while the NZRFU supports the game from the early 1990s onwards, it is largely left to provinces to take up and run with promotion of the code for women. Christchurch and Auckland, along with Otago and Manawatu were the leaders in this regard. And club histories show that by the early 1990s there are an increasing number of women playing and competing in interclub competitions.

In 1993, 22 of the 27 unions included women's rugby in some form. This varied from isolated representative games to full scale competition play and intensive interprovincial representative itineraries. Many of these unions were promoting internal coaching programmes to grow the numbers of women playing. There are now 14,000 women playing organised rugby in New Zealand.

The formalisation of the women's game culminated in New Zealand's appearance in the inaugural women's rugby world cup in 1991 in Wales. The Black Ferns did not make the final that year, nor at the second world cup in 1994, but their presence and support for an international competition was critical in institutionalising a world cup for women. In 1998, the Black Ferns hold over the title of the world's best began, with a win against the USA 44-12, and they have gone on to hold the cup at every world cup since.

Few of you have probably watched a game of women's rugby; it is seldom televised, and if it is you usually need to be a subscriber to the Rugby Channel (a sky sports channel largely pitched to the 45+ male rugby obsessive). But you will get a chance on 3<sup>rd</sup> September when Sky Sport will televise the women's NPC final which is being played as the curtain raiser to the men's ITM cup final.

In 1990 John Nauright, a NZ sports historian suggested there were several key questions about rugby that still needed answers including what role have women played in rugby, and what does their exclusion tell us about nz society? This lecture has begun to answer the first part of this question and, in doing so, has highlighted that to claim women were excluded from rugby is not the complete story. Rather, this potted examination of women's engagement with New Zealand rugby in its infancy demonstrates that women have played multiple roles as spectators, supporters, fans and aspirational players. They have resisted exclusion, continuously. Yes, their involvement in rugby at these early years remained at the level of the informal, in the social sphere, and as rugby became more formalised, women became less visible and less noteworthy to historians. Nevertheless, women's support was considered necessary to grow the game in these early years, and was clearly important in helping to cement rugby as New Zealand's national game. And no doubt it will continue to do so.