



SAVE THE TURBOS

If the Turbos are to be saved, the community has a month to do it, writes **Peter Lampp**.

THE Manawatu community is getting behind its rugby team as a decision by the New Zealand Rugby (NZRU) Union on whether it should be axed from the top division looms.

While the Manawatu Turbos have been competitive on the field, drawing large home crowds and generating excitement in the province, their future hinges on the state of the union's books. A decision is expected by the end of October.

If Manawatu can go to the NZRU at season's end and not hold its hand out for money, it has a chance of surviving as a first-division province. But with the Manawatu Rugby Union's \$454,502 deficit from last season hanging like a lead weight, it's going to be a close call.

John Knowles returned to Manawatu this year as chief executive in a life-saving role because of the parlous financial state of the union. His job over the next month will be almost totally devoted to balancing the books.

"We have to close our financial gap," Mr Knowles said. "To make sure we want to stay in this competition we have to be showing good finance by October 31. It will be hard."

That's why he and his staff have been out on the streets door-knocking businesses for donations as little as \$100, using the personal touch.

"There can be no promise of a return for this contribution as it is essential that the union does not carry further liabilities into 2010," Mr Knowles said. "We see the return as being one of support for the community, based on the feel-good factor generated from the Turbos' performance. Keeping our own players in the province is important to us all."

Saving the Turbos has become a community project, more vital in the long term than staging World Cup matches in Palmerston North in 2011.

Mr Knowles is now tapping on new shoulders rather than hammering away at the big sponsors who have kept the Turbos afloat for four seasons.

The Turbos have shown this season they are competitive enough to play in the Air New Zealand Cup competition. "They might have had only three wins from nine games but they have been put away only once, by another endangered union, Tasman. The Turbos collected bonus points for finishing within seven points in four other matches. But they



Photo: WARWICK SMITH

THE EXPERTS

Rugby royalty have their say on the fate of the Manawatu Turbos.

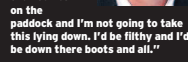
Sir Colin Meads, former All Black: "It's terribly sad; Manawatu have been playing pretty good rugby. There are going to be a lot of problems if they put four teams down. There will be some hard words said to the NZRU."



Gary Knight, Manawatu's former All Black prop: "Places like Auckland, if they are down the bottom, should get their chop."

Those big Super 14 places have got unfair money and will keep plucking players because they have got the money."

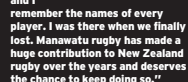
Hamish McKay, TV3 sportscaster: "It would be an absolute insanity if the Turbos were gone. They have proved themselves on the pitch and I'm not going to take this lying down. I'd be filthy and I'd be down their boots and all."



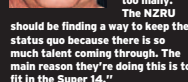
Sir Brian Lochore, former All Black coach: "The positivity of all teams from one to 14 has been absolutely brilliant. They've been well coached and have played for the unions they represent and that's what it's all about."

David Kirk, former All Black: "I watched every game I could during the (Manawatu) Ranfurly Shield era and I remember the names of every player. I was there when we finally lost. Manawatu rugby has made a huge contribution to New Zealand rugby over the years and deserves the chance to keep doing so."

Peter Thorburn, former All Black selector: "If two teams went down it would probably be too many. The NZRU should be finding a way to keep the status quo because there is so much talent coming through. The main reason they're doing this is to fit in the Super 14."



Michael Cummings, NZRU headquarter editor: "I think we'll see a lot more water under the bridge before it happens."



'Pinetree' opposed to competition chop

By Peter Lampp
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ALL BLACKS great Sir Colin Meads can't see any sense in chopping what has turned out to be New Zealand's most interesting competition.

In the fourth year of the Air New Zealand Cup, the lesser teams have come right, and all have become competitive, he said.

"Now they want to chop it all out again," Sir Colin said from his Te Kuiti home. Cities like Palmerston North are getting huge crowds to games and the fans are loving it, he said.

He was at FGM Stadium on August 20 when Manawatu beat Otago and revelled in the atmosphere.

"Teams have come on this year. Northland, Tasman and Manawatu are playing pretty good rugby," he said. His feeling is that the "big boys" are dictating the reduction in teams from 14 to 10. And he's heard the announcement from the New Zealand Rugby Union that all 14 unions are in favour of the cut being made.

"To me that's bullshit. I think we'll see a lot more water under the bridge before it happens."

"I wouldn't go past there being court action." He'd prefer to see 14 teams retained and the competition costs cut.

Former All Black selector Peter Thorburn said the NZRU has millions of dollars in reserves and some of that should be used for the good of the game.

"I believe it is their obligation to find funding for it, for the asset that is this competition."

But he wonders if the national body has a real intention of doing what's good for the game. By his reckoning, there are close to 50 players in the threatened teams - Manawatu, Tasman, Northland and Counties-Manukau - who are good enough to be playing premier rugby. And a good proportion of them should be on the verge of Super 14, he said.

"The second-tier competition won't provide a competition for these guys to learn quicker than they are now. They won't be playing tough teams."

Former All Black selector, Earle Kirton, has been impressed at how the former division-two provinces have stepped up and provided a greater pool of players. He says it's just a matter of getting the organisation and the finances right.

Manawatu Standard

A word from the editor . . .

THIS season, rugby has rediscovered what makes our national game great - and it found it in provinces like Manawatu.

Today, the *Manawatu Standard* launches a campaign to keep the Manawatu Turbos in the Air New Zealand Cup in the face of a national rugby union determined to axe four teams from the competition. No teams should be dropped, but certainly not teams like Manawatu that are the sole reason the national provincial competition has become meaningful for the first time in a long time.

This region has been buzzing with the excitement generated by a team comprised almost entirely of home-grown players and the "big guns" of domestic rugby. Fans of all ages have been pouring into FGM Stadium for home matches, shops have been decorating their cars and the game just when it has started beating again is baffling. The Turbos have spent the last few seasons nurturing local talent, building local pride and support,



Michael Cummings

and that long-term vision of a competitive side with a passionate following has been realised this year. The NZRU should be holding Manawatu up as a model for how to strengthen the game, not thinking about casting it aside as some kind of throw-back to a bygone era.

It is clear the financial state of the Manawatu Rugby Union will be key in determining its future. It is ironic that just as Manawatu is bringing top tier organisations that are bankable both on and off the field, it might have the rug pulled out from beneath it.

As a community, we should do all we can to prevent that happening. As Manawatu Rugby Union chief executive John Knowles writes in today's paper, if the competition format is changed at the end of October, it will not be revisited for a number of years. This is our only chance to fight for something that is of great value to the region's people, its spirit and, ultimately, its identity.

Mr Knowles and his team are fighting desperately to keep the Turbos in the Air New Zealand Cup, and the *Standard* is proud to support them and help pull the entire community in behind their cause. We have a voice and we must make sure the NZRU hears it. We have one month to save the Turbos.

HAVE YOUR SAY

The *Manawatu Standard* is taking a "Save the Turbos" petition to the New Zealand Rugby Union. The petition can be signed wherever Turbos tickets are sold: the ISite in the Square, The Regent on Broadway, and the Convention Centre. It can also be signed at the *Standard's* front counter on the Square. The newspaper's editor, Michael Cummings, will take the petition to the NZRU's headquarters in Wellington before it makes a decision on the future of the Air New Zealand Cup at the end of next month.



No second chance to save Manawatu rugby

Former Sport Manawatu chairman **Steve Lee**, a former senior rugby player and long-time Manawatu supporter, weighs into the debate about saving the Turbos' place in the Air NZ Cup.

This is it - there will be no second chances. If that arrogant bunch of blazer-wearing buffoons we call the New Zealand Rugby Union get their way, expertly manipulating the board for their own ends, we will be gone.

And let's not fool ourselves - if we get consigned to the scrapheap, to the competition the NZRU ludicrously call the first division, top rugby in this union is history.

It seems the NZRU are prepared to lose \$40 million (they'll cough up \$13 million and the taxpayers will pay the rest) to have the 2011 Rugby World Cup in New Zealand apparently for "brand value and exposure to the world". But they are not prepared to sustain some interim losses in the NPC, vastly more important to the game's development. And they conveniently forget it was their reluctance to enforce a salary cap that is the major contributor to where unions find themselves now.

Since that inane decision was made - apparently by the unions themselves, they'll have you believe - the goalposts have moved considerably. The competition has become vastly more popular and the TV ratings are much improved.

There is a genuine passion for this competition, nowhere more so than in Manawatu where we get to watch our home-grown talent compete against the best.

That the NZRU haven't even deigned to review their decision under a barrage of discontent throughout the country and a markedly changed environment since the initial decision was arrived at, reeks of the same arrogance Steve Tew has displayed since the start of his tenure.

A half decent business constantly reviews

its decisions against changed market conditions.

Forget the promotion-relegation carrot - it has taken us four or so years to build a competitive union on and off the field - and this year we appear to have a team that has players with genuine ability at this level, a world-class coaching team, a capable and realistic administrator in John Knowles and enthusiastic, supportive sponsors like the Higgins Group.

With an ounce of luck we could even be in the top part of the ladder right now. Those essential pillars will come crumbling down if we are relegated, despite the best intentions of loyal players like Aaron Cruden stating his desire to stay.

We've been in the wilderness long enough to know the seriousness of the situation. As for promotion-relegation, you need only look at English football where clubs go bankrupt regularly.

Promotion-relegation is a flawed system in professional sport today.

Why aren't our councils more involved? They argue they put all their resources into facilities like the Arena and don't fund sports teams! Hey guys, let's think outside the square this time - we are about to be taken off the map yet again! We are prepared to spend thousands of dollars on ill-fated branding exercises for this region and yet when we have a successful brand sitting under our collective noses, putting Manawatu in the media for more than a quarter of the year, every year, we ignore the opportunity.

The Turbos have engendered more pride and passion in this region (and for Manawatu expats around the country) than anything either council has ever come up with and we're about to idly watch it slip away. Wake up councillors, it's your time to act!

Do not underestimate the regional pride this team is creating. And let's not forget the economic benefits the Turbos bring to the city.

About 10 per cent of our population goes to the home games and a huge number



Steve Lee

watch the games from their living room each week - that's more of a mandate than you get for most other nonsense you debate in chambers. Our supporters are considered the most passionate of the competition.

Oh to have councils with the same passion and drive to make things happen!

Politically, our only friends

in this fight are the other unions who face relegation. Even our Hurricanes buddies will be quietly happy to see us take the chop, thus ensuring we will once again feed their unions with our players.

The Manawatu Rugby Union and their board are in a lonely place at the moment and while I'm sure they will be trying to lobby the decision-makers as best they can, they will be only too aware of the politics and the barriers they face.

The overwhelming self-interest prevalent in the corridors of the NZRU is unpalatable, particularly this year, and none more so than that of the five Super 14 unions that seem to have a stranglehold on everything at national level.

And if all else fails, one only hopes that the Manawatu Rugby Union has the legal fraternity at the ready to challenge the NZRU, as Northland did last year. The NZRU may have made the MRU sign a contract that they would not legally challenge relegation, but no doubt it was signed under duress and for that reason may not be binding.

And they promised the first division will be a "meaningful competition" or else they wouldn't proceed.

Well, Earth to NZRU, the mooted first division will be about as meaningful as a pimple on Tew's bum! And isn't there some employment law we should investigate as well? By making this decision, aren't the NZRU effectively making 60-odd players redundant or at least slashing their salaries.

Go to the games, sponsor the MRU, lobby anyone you know involved in rugby at a national level, sign a petition. Let's leave no stone unturned, It really is our last chance!