



Red, white, blue and black

Rugby is the winner on the day when the Kiwis meet the Yanks in the annual Washington match.
WORDS AND PICTURES BY MELANIE BURFORD

Even in the shadow of the terrorist attacks on the US., there is still time for rugby. On November 11, two months to the day since the atrocities of New York and Washington - 25 men in black gather on a field alongside the Potomac River in Washington DC. They have traveled from Florida, Tennessee, Richmond, New York, for one game. They have never played together before.

It's an unseasonably warm day, the ground rock-solid and dusty. Not too good for any sport, but, in the US., good enough for rugby. Spectators gather with chairs, jackets and six-packs. Small children run with dogs, throwing footballs and crying 'touchdown'. Beside the river, the New Zealand Ambassador's team

warm up, representing their country, some for the first time against an American Side, the All-Star team from the Potomac Rugby Union.

"You only get this feeling once a year." says captain Muzz Wilton-Jones from Hawke's Bay. "It's a connection with your fellow countryman. You know you can count on the player next to you. You don't have to say anything, you just know. September 11 has brought everyone closer, even the Kiwis."

Since the Inaugural game in 1997, the NZ Embassy in Washington DC has sponsored the New Zealand Ambassador's Shield Rugby Match, hosted by the Potomac Rugby Union. "We're promoting New Zealand by

emphasising what we do best - rugby," says Jason Frost who conceived the idea in 1997 with fellow rugby player Bert Todd and then Ambassador John Wood. "We're undefeated in five years. and we're getting bigger and better as the years go by."

A boy holds the American flag before the start of the game, and the players stand quietly in remembrance for Memorial Day and September 11. The crowd sings "The Star Spangled Banner". Then the kiwis perform the Haka. "Rugby is as close as you can get to trench warfare," says Wayne Howle of Palmerston North. "If you have to go to war, you'd want to be with the boys you know."



The match is to be the last for Jim Bolger, New Zealand Ambassador in Washington – an added pressure to the players. “It is really an honor and a privilege to play for the ambassador,” says Tom Parsons, an ex-Counties prop. “He’s been prime minister, he’s a kiwi, a farmer, he’s played rugby. You couldn’t have asked for a higher honour.”

Bolger spends time with the players, joking, shaking hands and encouraging their efforts at half time. “It’s an evolving team drawn from the four winds of America,” he says. “They fly in for one match, to play a game of rugby. They put black jerseys on and there’s that inherent pride representing their country. What is

more symbolic than a team in men in black?”

Victorious, the kiwis pull off their shirts and perform a final Haka to the cheering crowd. At the after-match function at the New Zealand Embassy, none of the players remember the score.

Clockwise from left: The New Zealand Ambassador’s team, with Captain Muzz Wilton-Jones (centre), hold a minute’s silence; David Lolo (left) and Dax Schaunke playing the game on hard, dusty ground; Irishman Pete McGrath (left) shares a post-match drink with kiwis Wilton-Jones, Scott Frasier and Pete Melwood.