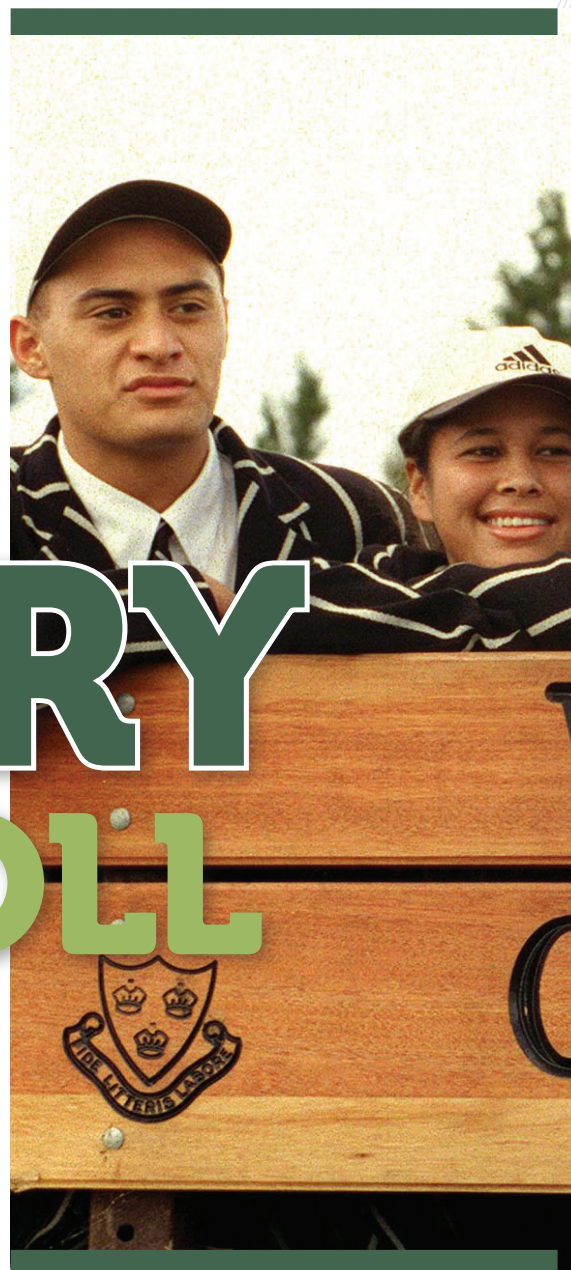


# RICH HISTORY SMALL ROLL

One of New Zealand's most celebrated rugby schools reaches a significant milestone on October 26-27. **Campbell Burnes** explores the rugby history of Wesley College.



The dining hall of a boarding school may seem like a functional place, a space to ingest, imbibe and then shoot through.

That may be true in some schools, but not at Wesley College. Walk into the spacious dining hall and lift your eyes slightly. The walls are adorned with rugby jerseys, gifted back to the school from proud old boys who have gone on to bigger things on the international stage.

Those walls signal that Wesley is, unmistakably, a rugby school. It is also New Zealand's oldest registered school, established in 1844, just four years after the Treaty of Waitangi was signed and some 26 years before rugby started in this land.

The 2019 Wesley First XV captain is Thor Manase. He is polite, well-spoken, and acutely aware of the history of his

school, and not just in the rugby sense.

"Every time we go to the dining hall, the boys will be looking up at the jerseys and thinking 'One day, I will present my jersey back to the school'," says Manase. "You don't see that often (elsewhere), old boys giving back like here."

So you will find at least one of Jonah Lomu's All Blacks jerseys, one of Sekope Kepu's Wallaby jerseys, among many others, and photos of some great Wesley teams since the 1980s. It shows that all these Wesleyans loved their time here and had good experiences from which to draw both inside and outside of rugby.

You cannot escape the rugby history. The years of Wesley's five national Top 4 titles are embroidered on the current First XV's jerseys, while the names of those who have gone on to great things in the game are highlighted in the

changing room. The boys run straight out onto the main field embracing that legacy, not weighed down by it.

I'm taken on a guided tour of the school by deputy principal and First XV coach Chris Bean. He's an old boy and played First XV in the 1980s, so Wesley rugby is in his blood. His first year on the teaching staff, 1993, just happened to be Lomu's senior year. Lomu's feats in school athletics, where he still holds a clutch of records, and on the rugby field as an unstoppable force, mainly at No 8, are still recalled with reverence.

"We were blessed with the talent of Jonah, because he was just sensational as a schoolboy," says Bean. "I do remember he was put back at fullback for one game against Rotorua BHS. No word of a lie, they kicked to him five times and he scored five times. Everyone



Wesley College's rugby name is synonymous with the late, great Jonah Lomu.



**"We were blessed with the talent of Jonah, because he was just sensational as a schoolboy." – Wesley First XV coach Chris Bean**

connects to him and knows what he's about."

While the big fella is sadly no longer with us, his name lives on in tangible form with Jonah Lomu Drive as one

of the nearby streets as part of the redevelopment adjacent to the school.

Little is known of Wesley's early rugby days, and indeed the school was situated in the inner Auckland area of Grafton and then the suburb of Three Kings for much of its early existence until its 1922 shift to the current site in Paerata, 10 minutes out of Pukekohe.

There is a strong Methodist character running through Wesley. Religion and prayer are central to school life. The roll sits at around 370, including girls now, and around 70 percent of students are boarders. There are seven boys' teams and one girls' team. The current principal is Brian Evans, former Black Ferns coach. It has never had a big roll, so its achievements through the 1980s and '90s are astonishing.

Often king of Counties, Wesley won

the Moascar Cup three times (the first in 1971) and lost the 1989 Top 4 final down the road in Pukekohe. But over the next 15 years the First XV won no less than five Top 4 titles, including a shared championship in 2004. Don't forget six Condors Sevens titles over the years. The boys are encouraged to express themselves in the abbreviated version of the game.

Close rivalries with the likes of St Stephen's College (not far away in Bombay), Hato Petera College, Church College, Te Aute College and Western Heights HS formed the basis of Wesley's traditional fixtures. Pukekohe High School was often strong in that period. Sadly, two of those schools have shut the doors, while the rugby programmes at Te Aute and Western Heights have taken a hit in recent times.



## WESLEY'S TOP 4 FINALS

**1989:** Lost to Kelston Boys' High School

**1990:** Beat Gisborne Boys' High School

**1993:** Beat St Paul's Collegiate

**1997:** Beat Palmerston North Boys' High School

**2001:** Beat Rotorua Boys' High School

**2004:** Drew with Christchurch Boys' High School (shared)

**2011:** Lost to Kelston Boys' High School

Bean attributes much of the early national success of Wesley rugby to former principal Chris Grinter, now at the helm of Rotorua BHS, and who was Wesley's First XV coach at the start of its golden era of rugby. Bean played under Grinter.

"We know the type of character he is, very strong and passionate and very good rugby knowledge. He took us to another level of success and that has transferred to Rotorua, which is a top rugby school. We always had talent here, boys who were big, but we just lacked rugby detail and he put that framework in place," says Bean.

Amanaki Palavi succeeded Grinter and guided Wesley to two national titles. Bean has seen the team continue to be a giant in Counties Manukau, though Manurewa High School provided stern competition in more recent times. The latter now, however, plays in the North Harbour 1A competition, while Wesley is into its fourth season in the Central North Island (CNI) comp.



Even before Lomu's heyday, Wesley was seen as a heavyweight. There was a famous story of the Wesley front row weighing more than the All Blacks' Nos 1-2-3 in 1990. That was big news then. Now you would not have to search too far to find First XV front rows bigger than that of the All Blacks.

So how has Wesley managed to punch above its weight so well in the last 30-odd years, with such a small roll?

"I'm a strong believer in the best 22 versus the best 22. If you have a small roll and they are the best 22, you get the best out of them," says Bean. "That gives the boys and the coaching staff the drive to be successful."

That is not to say that depth is unimportant. Far from it. The Second

XV, coached by David Faitala, who was previously at the helm of the First XV, plays in the Auckland competition, as do all the other sides. The Auckland 1A, unfortunately for Wesley, has always been a closed shop, but there is little doubt it would be competitive there.

It's a shame too that Wesley never gets to face off against Manurewa HS these days to decide the kings of the province's schoolboy rugby. They've gone their separate ways. The only way the two would meet is if they took a similar Top 4 qualification route, but Manurewa has recently opted for the co-ed path, while Wesley is firm on the need to go through the boys' path.

The Chiefs' Top 4 qualification pathway is hellishly difficult, surely the toughest in New Zealand. Wesley





Wesley's 12 All Blacks are: Doug Rollerson, Jonah Lomu, Rhys Duggan, Casey Laulala, Sitiveni Sivivatu, Stephen Donald, Charles Piutau, Frank Halai, Malakai Fekitoa, Augustine Pulu, Nepo Laulala and the latest, Karl Tu'inukuafe.

A stack of Wesleyans have represented Pacific Island nations, including Waisake Sotutu (Fiji), Seilala Mapusua (Samoa) and Hale T-Pole (Tonga). Uini Atonio (France) and Sekope Kepu (Australia) have gone further afield for their rugby.

rugby talent from south Auckland and the Pacific Islands on rugby scholarships, as some schools have done.

"We've been blessed that a lot of students who roll into the school just happen to be very good at rugby. For example, Malakai Fekitoa came in on a hardship scholarship after his father passed away in Tonga. People find it hard to believe," says Bean.

The First XV is now in a rebuilding phase and is on the cusp of the CNI semifinals after some close defeats. But



Casey Laulala is one of 12 All Blacks out of Wesley College.



2019 captain Thor Manase with Wesley's No 1 field as backdrop.

**"You are not the only one wearing the jersey number. There's a lot of history behind it."**  
**– Wesley First XV captain Thor Manase**

reached the Chiefs final in 2018, but fell to Hamilton BHS. The likes of Rotorua BHS and New Plymouth BHS are also vying for that berth.

"It's nice that if some of the boys don't get to go all the way in the New Zealand environment, they get to play for their families' country of origin," says Bean.

As befitting a rugby culture that is based mostly on Pasifika talent, Wesley tends to play expansive footy. You would have seen that in the 73-0 June shutout against an admittedly much weaker Rathkeale College. Wesley did not drop out of that game mentally, which pleased Bean.

"I think in the past we were a more forward-oriented side, which laid the foundation for the backs to be expressive. These days it's fast-paced and a lot more thinking has to go on, so you have to work with the team to have what fits best," says Bean.

Do not be mistaken into thinking that Wesley just brings in clutches of prime

Manase and his team will still say their prayers and sing their hymns before the game, think about this team's rich history and draw inspiration from it.

"Mr Bean always gives us the talk about who wore the jersey before you. You are not the only one wearing the jersey number. There's a lot of history behind it," says Manase.

"Karl (Tu'inukuafe) is the latest Wesleyan to be an All Black, so that gives us hope that we can crack it." **RN**

There is much for Wesley to be proud of when it holds its 175th jubilee celebrations over Labour Weekend. Even more so for all those Wesleyans who are into their rugby.