

HONG KONG'S RUGBY VISION

THE HONG KONG RUGBY SEVENS IS BY FAR THE MOST IMPORTANT RUGBY EVENT IN ASIA. NEVER MIND THE HANGOVER. BY JASON DASEY

FOR more than three decades, the annual Hong Kong Sevens have ensured that Rugby has put on a colourful and jovial face, from the chicken suit-wearing fans watching in the South Stand of the National Stadium, to the post-match revelries in the lively nightclubs of the nearby Lan Kwai Fong district.

But now, after hosting ANZ Hong Kong 2008 Bledisloe Cup in November, rugby in the territory is getting serious.

A match featuring New Zealand and Australia – the number one and number three ranked nations – lifted a city that is already the unofficial capital of rugby in Asia to a new level of global exposure.

“It has been a steep learning curve,” admits Allan Payne, Executive Director of the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union (HKRU). “But we would like to think that here will be other games (like this) to follow this in the future.”

With a near-sellout crowd of 39,682 and a reported US\$10 million in revenue to be shared, the benefits for the All Blacks and Wallabies were significant, as they look to spice up a jaded calendar and explore new frontiers. Already, future off-shore internationals in the United States, the UK and Japan have been discussed.

And while the financial rewards weren't so attractive for the Hong Kong hosts – it is believed they made only a modest profit – the first ever meeting between the southern hemisphere's biggest local rivals on neutral soil apart from the 1991 World Cup semi-final in Dublin has boosted awareness of rugby on a soccer-loving island.

“Tickets sales were strong and the impact is significant,” Payne said. “The Bledisloe Cup

adds a fresh impetus to all our efforts.”

New Zealand had already retained the trophy after winning two matches out of three on either side of the Tasman Sea during the season. Both camps bristled at suggestions that a fourth game on Asian soil was a dead rubber or glorified exhibition game.

The match may not have had the intensity of the Bledisloe Cup decider in Brisbane six weeks earlier but was keenly contested as the All Blacks came from 14-6 behind to run out 19-14 winners, giving them a 3-1 overall victory in the 2008 series.

A greasy pitch caused by earlier rain showers – and an unseasonably warm and humid evening – saw the players struggle, at times, to adapt to the conditions. The local PA announcer who had his own struggles with the pronunciation of unfamiliar names – especially New Zealand's Polynesian stars – and at one point mixed up the teams, added to the slightly surreal atmosphere.

But, make no mistake, this was a significant moment in rugby history with legends of the game, including former national captains, John Eales, Sean Fitzpatrick, Tim Horan and Gavin Hastings, mingling with business and cultural identities, including Australian rocker, Jimmy Barnes and New Zealand actor Sam Neill.

In the week leading up to the Saturday kick off, both squads did their part in lifting the profile of the event by promoting rugby and exploring Hong Kong. The Wallabies were more outgoing in their efforts than the somewhat introspective All Blacks and even spent several hours posing for photographs on a junk in Victoria Harbour.

Although the decision to play the game

in Hong Kong was more economic than altruistic and meant a convenient stop-over on the way to different European tours, both Australia and New Zealand know that a more diverse rugby world will also benefit the game's established nations.

Historically, rugby has faced numerous challenges in Hong Kong: from a lack of playing fields in one of the world's greatest concrete jungles, to the studious and business-focused nature of young Hong Kongers. Some protective parents are also reluctant to allow their children to play an apparently brutal game that could see slightly-built Chinese crushed by much bigger Caucasians.

But local administrators have worked hard, especially over the last 20 years, to portray rugby as a sport that is not only fun and skilful to play but can open doors in the business world as well.

The Rugby English Action Learning programme, introduced in 2007, combines immersion in a new sport with the development of language skills. While most Cantonese-speaking locals learn basic English at school, they often lack confidence and practice when it comes to conversation beyond the most rudimentary of levels.

Robbie McRobbie, Community Rugby Manager of the HKRU, says rugby is trying to portray itself as a value-added sport, through its educational initiatives.

“For the majority of local Hong Kongers, their only knowledge of rugby is in relation to the Sevens... consequently they associate the sport with fun and entertainment which isn't a bad start,” he said.

“But that knowledge is growing thanks to

our grassroots development programmes – last year we introduced over 6,000 local primary school kids to rugby through a Philips sponsored school visit programme and we have over 3,000 registered mini-rugby players at 17 clubs participating regularly in the sport.”

While rugby may once have had a reputation as an elite expatriate game, McRobbie adds that the HKRU is reaching out to youngsters at the other end of the spectrum, working with the Hong Kong Police’s Crime Prevention Office to make the sport an alternative to less savoury activities.

“Hopefully we can be regarded at the forefront of affirmative action in society, working with at-risk youths, the disadvantaged and providing an opportunity and hope for those who are struggling,” he said.

One of the locals who caught the rugby bug a long time ago is 19-year-old prop Alex Ng, the only one of four professional players in Hong Kong who was born on the island. Ng fell in love with the sport while attending high school in Scotland.

“I enjoy the physical contact, teamwork and the social side of rugby,” he said. “And I feel very proud that a Bledisloe Cup game was played outside of New Zealand and Australia for the first time in 75 years and especially here in Hong Kong.”

While Ng is paid only a modest salary as a professional player, he does have the potential to find himself a contract in the more lucrative Japanese league where he could earn upwards of US\$100,000 per year.

As a playing nation, Hong Kong tends to punch above its weight and is the number two ranked Asian side in Sevens and number three in the 15-man version behind Japan and Korea. And the Hong Kong squad has already earned its place in the 2009 Rugby World Cup Sevens in Dubai.

On the field Hong Kong may never be able to compete with the likes of New Zealand and Australia, but watching them up close at least showed the locals – players and administrators alike – what they might aspire to in the future.

It was another taste of a genuine, world-class sporting event during a year that the island also hosted the equestrian events of the Beijing Olympic Games in August and the Hong Kong Sevens in March.

With Japan strong favourites to be awarded the hosting rights to the 2015 Rugby World Cup, Hong Kong is hopeful of staging a few games during the tournament. A decision is expected by the International Rugby Board next year.

In the meantime, local Rugby officials will keep trying to broaden the narrow sporting perspective of Hong Kongers. Their well-known love of the English Premier League goes hand-in-hand with their appetite for gambling and runs far deeper than any passing interest in the round-ball game.

So could Rugby ever become a major sport in a post-handover Hong Kong? That may be a tough ask, says McRobbie, even though the sport is certainly here to stay.

“I guess it depends on what you mean by ‘major’ – I don’t think numbers-wise we will ever compete with basketball and soccer – both of which are played here on cement courts – but I do think we can embed ourselves in the community,” he said.

And if Rugby is able to break into the local consciousness, everyone will remember that first evening of November 2008 when the haka and Advance Australia Fair echoed through the National Stadium in So Kon Po. ■

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