

## **HAWKESBURY-BLUE MOUNTAINS HOME IN TIGHT ENCOUNTER**

The annual H-BM versus The Rest of Australia fixture at Hawkesbury Showgrounds on Sunday 14 August 2005 was a close match, the home side getting home in the dying minutes with a try in the corner by full back Patagonia, and a brilliant conversion from the sideline.

Both sides brought out their big guns for this crucial fixture, obviously keen to get plenty of game time for their top players in the lead-up to the October Grand Final in Bendigo. It was probably the most talented line-up to ever appear at Hawkesbury.

All the portents were there for a thrilling match. The ground was in excellent order thanks to Murray Spriggs and his team, and a brilliant winter's day saw the temperature reach 21 degrees under a cloudless sky. Match day sponsor International Animal Health Products could be proud to be associated with a fixture of this high a standard.

The association had appointed experienced big match referee Wendy Billington, and her assistant Andrew Brown provided advice at crucial times, especially at the offside line. It was a physical encounter; the importance of the match and pre-match hype combining with players' nerves. All in all, however, the officials kept a lid on the tensions, and Don Culey and Danyel Evans patrolled the sidelines effectively, a few rucks getting out of hand but nothing warranting a red card.

The visitors started strongly. The Rest's outside centre ElySION scored several times in the suri stanza and, by the break, they had established a clear lead thanks to Texas Ranger's Supreme ribbon. Pacofino and Birrong had also starred in the early exchanges, with Shogun and Porthos in good form. Only Keiana kept HBM in the contest, landing a field goal in the Adult Suri session.

The first half had plenty of action, but injury time saw it extended to just after noon adding to the tension.

The Rest maintained the pressure as soon as the second half opened. From the back row, Pacofino had been in everything: winning at ruck and maul, kicking field goals with both feet (sometimes simultaneously) and entertaining the big crowd with great running. Pacofino Lavinia and Lillyfield Kedaar scored early, and HBM seemed doomed: further tries to Oasis Warlord and Pacofino Marius and it looked like a runaway for the visitors.

The HBM fightback started with smart work by forward Wandeen Alice dodging a last ditch tackle by Poet's Corner to score in the Intermediates, with Forestglen there in support for the pass that wasn't needed. Chachani added the conversion with Calyzako, and HBM looked to make it a real contest.

Keiana tried hard for HBM, but just failed to catch Adori on the right wing, before HBM's star forward Patagonia Celtic Triumph scored his first try, a 40 metre effort that left usually outstanding defenders Illawarra, Yass Valley and Alpacapartners in his wake. Then Gunnamatta and Westwood, HBM's hard-working centres, both crossed in handy positions with Coquette and Tiffany, even though ElySION was back on the scoreboard between them.

The crunch came in the final quarter. Heavyweight visiting forward Ambersun (with Warrior and Ultimo) romped through for a try against the toughest defence of the day, but earned a mild rebuke from referee Billington for scoring too often.

Then HBM finished the match all over the visitors: Alleena Icon's try tied the match up as extra time approached. In such an uncompromising match it wasn't surprising that injuries hindered some players at crucial times: Keiana Lodge (jaw), Blaydon (knee) and others (age) requiring attention, and referee Billington later handed out yellow cards to several players, suggesting some additional work on handling technique was needed.

In a race against the setting sun, and with match commentator John Hay whipping the crowd to fever pitch, just seconds remained as HBM's man-of-the-match Celtic Triumph scored the winning try. To get through a defensive line as strong as that showed he had maintained the

brilliant form that made him a standout since last year's Grand Final, for he has won man-of-the-match at Castle Hill, Sydney, Hawkesbury and Bathurst since last November.

It was a deserved win for a home side that had prepared well for the match. Coaches Chris Taylor and Alicia Anderson had them in fine fettle and trainers Jeanne Brown, Jane Taylor, Noel Waller, Pam Thomas and Lorraine Cooper had played important roles in the win. Cheryl Uren and Arthur Roffey patrolled the interchange bench with a subtle mix of authority and helpfulness.

With controversy off the field, and important decisions to soon be made about the game's future generally, it was inspiring to see the keen action on the field of play. The players focused on the game at hand and gave their all, showing that it's the game itself that counts.

And now it's on to Liverpool and Kariong for the last lead up matches to the Grand Final, where the form suggests a great contest. Jolimont Warrior is a proven big match player and has disclosed form at all the away grounds, and there are some as yet unshown youngsters from that stable.

There are also reliable reports of new young stars from the west, and that finals specialists like Shanbrooke, Benleigh and Cambridge have strong squads, but they'll have to be at top form as rising star Celtic Triumph has now shown he can mix it with the best.

There is additional local interest for HBM with the appointment of referee Julie Bird, fresh from officiating overseas, to the big match in Bendigo.