

Colonial rugby - Hong Kong in the Early Sixties

Creating the Sevens

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Sir John Keswick had instructed me to “see the old Empire” on the way. So early in 1958 I arrived in The Crown Colony of Hong Kong, first class on the MV Victoria; heady stuff for a 22 year old! I was joining Hongkong Land Co. and they housed me in their central Gloucester Hotel.

The ‘British Empire’ was still in existence, at least in some colonial minds. Hong Kong was a relatively quiet territory, coping with the effects of the changing political arrangements on the mainland. China had cut itself off from the world and the Great Leap Forward was vigorously underway.

The population of Hong Kong had grown to an unprecedented 2.5 million people, many living in hillside poverty. The territory was isolated in every sense and the economy was generally weak.

The Japanese occupation was a recent memory and still a topic of conversation. Nevertheless, local rugby man Jerry Forsgate, had taken a Colony side to Japan only a few years earlier in one of the first efforts to start rebuilding international relations. Hong Kong had not yet developed a tourist industry, was a somewhat mysterious destination and certainly was not a place you would visit casually.

The rugger enthusiast manager of the Gloucester Hotel, Vernon Roberts, introduced me that first weekend, around the Football Club bar and my social life was immediately underway. Rugby and cricket involvement were essential to colonial elite.

1958/59 season

Local games

Rugby had been played in Hong Kong since the eighteen eighties but was still just essentially local. There were more than a dozen teams dominated by the Football Club, Army, RAF, Navy and the Police, but we just played each other. Apart from the stalwarts, we had Green Howards, Whitfield Wanderers, Druids, Hybrids, Wayfoong (Hong Kong Bank), RAF Little Saiwan, Gurkhas and others periodically.

HKRFU had been formally incorporate just a few years earlier but had no significance or indeed aspirations outside Asia.

Sevens was however already an annual Hong Kong tradition with a three day tournament in March for the Blarney Stone Shield at the Football Club stadium. That year, Club was beaten out in the final by the RAF, and as customary this was followed by a choral evening in the packed bar. The end of season was marked by an annual boozy steak and kidney dinner upstairs at the Club.

1959/60 season

Commonwealth Brigade

A popular Aussie, the short but tough 'Dig' Digby-Bennet had been elected Club skipper. Tokkie Smith arrived and turned out for the Club, quickly becoming a leader on account of his enormous enthusiasm for the game. He had played at Hamilton RFC in Cape Town and brought South African tactics and drive to our game. He was always deadly serious about the game and winning.

An RAF Touring side from Singapore came and beat our Combined Services in the last game of the year.

We eagerly awaited the arrival in port of the New Zealand frigates Otago and Taranaki. When they tied up, the first down the gang plank was their rigger squad on a training run. This was serious stuff and our only window on international rugby. These New Zealand naval and military connections would much later bring us our big breakthrough: The All Blacks!

A passive war had been raging between Malaysia and Indonesia bringing the Aussie and New Zealand military into the Far East. Their rugby teams contained selected players from All Blacks, Wallabies, and Military and University teams. When they came this raised our standard (and aggression) of play.

More important for us, it put us on the map and Hong Kong became somewhere to visit. However, that was the extent of our 'international' involvement. Let's face it, in those days travel was restricted, and Hong Kong was pretty remote.

Then we reached a turning point. The grand closing event of the 1959/60 season made us realise there was a tough, big international rugby world out there!

This was the tour to Hong Kong of the Commonwealth Brigade from Malaysia. Both the Australian and New Zealand military were serving in Malaya and this was their joint selection. The team contained several All Blacks and various Australia Army and NZ Army players.

Players selected for the Colony team from the Club were Digby-Bennet ; McTavish; Scruby ; Williams; Penman and myself, D'Eathe. Not yet Tokkie Smith or Trevor Bedford who were later regulars. Our second row was then dominated by the very tall Army men, Winn (Colony captain) and Muntz.

The Band and Drums of the Cheshire Regiment set the military scene. Governor Sir Robert Black, a Scottish rugby enthusiast, had the teams formally introduced. Then on to the extremely physical game which we lost 8-3. 'It degenerated into a near brawl' cried the press, pretty accurately.

We played most of the second half with 13 men. Duncan McTavish had to retire injured early and our outside half Chapman was kicked in the head on the ground and taken to hospital. Kim Robertson took a lot of heavy tackles at scrum half. But we had put Hong Kong on the rugby map at least Down Under.

Soon after, in April we had the usual raucous closing dinner at the Club, still licking our wounds! Tokkie Smith appears for the first time in the Football Club team photograph, together with his new pals David Newbigging, Les Williams, Brett Penman, Denny Johnston, Dig Bennet, Duncan McTavish etc.

1960/61 season

New Zealand Regiment

On 6 July (Dig) Digby-Bennet was re-elected Football Club captain. Tokkie Smith had already made his mark and was elected vice captain. There was a long argument about admitting non-Europeans as members ; popular player Bill Leong was still trying to get in officially.

We were surprised in November when the local Navy team showed strength by defeating the Combined Civilians 9-3. So, when in mid November the Royal Navy had enough ships in the China Sea to send a Far East Fleet team, the Colony took them on and we won 11-5.

That season we saw an increasing ease of travel and developing rugby interaction within Far East, but as yet no HKRFU contacts outside the region.

The Colony lost 9-0 to a strong Singapore Military Services touring side in the first Asian international game that year. Then we had a visit in February by the Saigon RC team from Vietnam (still French at that point) which surprised everyone by stretching the Club in a 6-3 hard game. Saigon then only lost 16-11 to the President's representative side.

Hong Kong lost 10-8 to the strong visiting New Zealand Regiment from Malaysia. This was my third game playing for the Colony.

Once again, the local three-day Blarney Stone Sevens March tournament was played. The much vaunted and trained Club First Seven, smooth and fast, were knocked out in the first round by faster but novice Recreo Club side. But the lowly fourth slower team Club Dragons, Bedford, Berrecloth, D'Eathe, Hanson-Abbot, Macaulay, Williams, and Wilkins, won the Shield.

Aggressive forward possession, defensive play, very hard tackling, good place kicking and persistently working the line. This produced a series of jeered and dull but *winning* games! The Dragons were vigorously booed all three days of contest.

The Rugby Union was pleased to host the all-Chinese, Taiwan RC in March and we were again almost upset by the tough, fast, smaller players which the Club only beat 10-3. Then it was the usual season's end, steak and kidney, stories and inebriated speeches, sing along in the bar and on to the Wanchai bars.

1961/62 season

Still just Asia

I missed most of the season being away from Hong Kong on business and leave. That season teams from the HKRFU and HKFC went on tour. The Colony lost to Saigon 6-3 but beat the small Penang club 44-6. Facing tougher competition, the HKFC lost to Cercle Sportif Sigonnais, to Bangkok and Bangkok Universities. Their excuse was that they were too well entertained. Indignantly they protested that there were different people at the lavish, boozy parties and next day on the field... poor dears!

But repeated concussions finally beat me and I was demoted from player to a desk job. On 24 March 1962, Ken Moore went on leave and literally dumped all the HKRFU files on my desk. Thus, I became HKRFU Hon. Secretary for 1962 to 1965.

The HKRFU in June 1962 elected Norman Clarke president, George Wright-Nooth, Police Commissioner, chairman, Duncan McTavish as treasurer and me, formally as honorary secretary. We debated membership fees of HK\$100 for life memberships or \$15 annually, but decided that was too expensive!

We wanted to increase our international exposure and promote more tours. I was instructed to contact all rugger clubs in the Far East to drum up international tours e.g. Singapore Cricket Club, the Taiwan Americans; Taiwan Universities; the Okinawa Americans; Philippines RU, Bangkok RU, Penang All Blues, Saigon RU.etc. I should especially push for teams from outside Asia, most likely from Australia and New Zealand, where we had so many military friends.

Then, big news, we heard that Paris University Club was planning to tour Japan. During August, I exchanged frantic cables with Pierre Beteille PUC manager and finally convinced them to come to Hong Kong in October after their Japanese tour. They also agreed to play the Colony. Immediately, Brett Penman, Brian Licence and Brian Welch were appointed selectors.

1962/1963 season

Paris University Club, PUC France

Our big breakthrough had arrived with our first major touring side from Europe.

The game would be before our season got going, so training and trials had to start early in September. Then the massive Typhoon Wanda hit, causing widespread devastation and killing over 50 people. We carried on through the heavy rain and managed to hold several trials before the end of the month. We were taking this PUC visit very seriously.

My new pen pal (en Francais) Pierre Beteille, PUC manager and a French cap, arrived unexpectedly to iron out the tour details. He told us they would field up to 8 internationals including non-Frenchman, E Thompson who had 8 caps for Scotland.

The PUC tour 2/4 October 1962 was a great success and enormous fun. They were a wild bunch at the end of a strenuous tour. Their custom at every public event was for at least one team member to get up on the table and perform a complete 'sexy' French strip accompanied by 'Hi-digga-zumba'. At a large Chinese restaurant dinner, the proprietor got very agitated and shouted he was calling the police. "I am the police" said our chairman, Police Commissioner Wright-Nooth, singing along enthusiastically.

Governor Black however provided dignity in the opening ceremonies. The PUC game against the Colony, was a very hard fought, physical 6-6 draw and was followed by a noisy dinner in the clubhouse. Kim Robertson was captain, which was great, considering his tragic death soon after.

From a business point of view, Duncan McTavish and I negotiated a hard deal on tickets with the Football Club to cover our costs. We agreed a steep HK \$10, \$5, \$3, and \$1.20 for tickets plus programme proceeds, bringing in a total of HK\$ 5,500 net to HKRFU. Would HKRFU ever beat that?

Emboldened by having at last entertained a touring group from Europe our committee made an ambitious attempt to convince the England RFU touring side to stop in Hong Kong on their way to Australia in Easter 1963. This effort was to no avail but at least they did consider it. We were on the map!

We were however back to 'local' Asian tours when the Far East Fleet put a team together for a Colony game in January 1963. HMNZS Taranaki arrived and wanted so badly to play the Colony. Since they had not yet beaten the Club, this was rejected. On 4 January they almost made their point by tying 6-6 with the Club. One small New Zealand frigate.

January 1963 brought another important international contact; the visit by Frizzles.

H R 'Frizzles' Frisby, was the President of Surrey RFU and a member of the England RFU board. His introduction was by Tommy Harley, a respected referee, through Jardine Insurance. The Referees Association held a fine dinner for Frizzles at the Vancouver Club on 16 January. Kim Robertson welcomed him as Colony skipper. I have a treasured picture of Kim shaking Frizzles hand but looked bruised and battered and wearing dark glasses. He had taken some very hard knocks particularly in the Blarney Stone Sevens (one on my conscience, from me, when he was representing The Bank) , and against PUC when he was hospitalized

Of course, we had serious committee gatherings with Frizzles and made our case for more stop-overs by international teams in Hong Kong, which was the point of his visit.

Frizzles became a personal friend, with whom I later kept up with in London. Already an old guy, his career had been in City of London insurance. As an apprentice his job had been to run out and fold down the steps on the horse drawn carriages and to assist the clients to alight. He had seen rugby develop from a minor sport. To put it into perspective, as a young man he would have known people who attended the first ever rugby test games in the 1870s. Fascinating fellow over a few beers.

We went through a terrible short period when four regular players died in accidents. First, Club and Colony winger Jack Kelly was killed when he drove his sports car off an overpass. Then, just a few weeks after the Frisby dinner, colony captain Kim Robertson was gone. He died on 13 February following a fall from his Bank residence window after a party on the NZ frigate Taranaki.

After Kim's funeral we all sat in a bar commiserating, including police player Bill Riach. Just a month later on 26 March, we were at his funeral, when he had crashed after celebrating his engagement. Another car accident felled Cpl. Campbell who played for the RAF. These incidents were all alcohol related; we sure did put it back!

The RFU committee decided to capitalize on the Frisby visit. We had not given up on an England visit and were now corresponding with President Gadney of England RFU, no less. At least we were operating at that level, but still with no luck. As a consolation prize he offered us a visit by Mickey Steele-Bodger celebrity and rugby writer but later we in fact got the famous Vivian Jenkins.

By 1963 a war that had broken out in Sarawak and South East Asia, prevented military teams from leaving that area so we didn't even have 'local ' Asian tours for a while.

In March we heard from Frizzles that he had arranged that Tom Morrison, Chair of NZRFU and board member Charlie Saxton, would come to Hong Kong to discuss a possible visit by the All Blacks! We of course entertained them royally. They confirmed a stopover was possible in October but no game because they were concerned about possible injuries. Tom gave us each an All Blacks tie which I still have but have never had the courage to wear!

At short notice in March 1963 we learned of the imminent arrival of the Taipei University Star side. This was their all -chinese player Universities Selection. Due to political differences between Taiwan and the Mainland and to Hong Kong sensitivity, they had elected just to turn up. It sure helped us to have the Police Commissioner as chairman.

We were on the dock to meet them from the SS Szechuen, on 6 April 1963. They paraded off in line behind the Nationalist flag to flashing light bulbs! A welcoming photo shows us backed by the touring team posing and waving their banners but showing us with fixed, worried smiles.

We rushed to find grounds for training and to set up fixtures. First, a game with Club Dragons to try them out. Playing all their reserves they beat the Dragons 19-9 on an hard Happy Valley pitch. So, on 9 April we put out the full Club team which struggled to hold them to a 3-3 tied game.

Why did we have no Chinese teams in Hong Kong, we asked ourselves? Good question. It took until the 1990s for HKRFU to attract local Chinese players. But we did already have Bill Leong playing scrum half for the Club.

International business was still conducted by cable and a mid-April a flurry of exchanges set up a Japanese tour to Hong Kong for September 1963. Stewart Ross was elected captain of Club for 1963/64 season finally replacing Tokkie Smith. On 6 May, G A Brown now President of NZRFU dropped in for a short visit to again discuss the now likely All Blacks visit.

In June, Vernon Roberts was elected HKRFU chairman replacing George Wright-Nooth, Duncan McTavish was treasurer, I was still secretary and Tokkie Smith was the Football Club representative. We finally amended the HKRFU constitution after years of debate.

That HKRFU annual meeting, for once, had a big attendance. The reason was the appearance of Vivian Jenkins, Welsh cap and renowned Sunday Times journalist, on his way back from covering the England Australian tour, (as our consolation prize for not getting England.) After reporting on the tour games, he added we were probably wise not to be playing a game against the All Blacks! However, he assured us he would ' try to persuade rugby authorities in Britain to allow their touring sides to play in Hong Kong.'

1963/64 season

All Blacks, New Zealand

The National Thailand team opened our season with games against the Police, Club and the Colony.

My old pal Brett Penman was now chairman of the Football Club which made it easier to negotiate another big-dollar deal for the HKRFU use of the Football Club stadium for the All Blacks training session.

The All Black visit took place 15-16 October 1963, on their way to the UK. We put them up at the recently opened magnificent Mandarin Hotel, on a special deal through Vernon Roberts at Hongkong Land of course. One of the Hongs lent us a launch to ferry them impressively straight from their early morning Kai Tak arrival to The Mandarin.

We planned an all New Zealand evening. On 15 October evening, the President's XV (14) took on HKNZS Otago (9) Then the All Blacks conducted their public training session, kicked, played touch and mainly had a relaxing time to the delight of a large crowd. This was followed by a big night in the Football Club bar but with the visitors whisked off early back to the Mandarin. Plus, this time we had made the princely sum of over HK \$3,000 for the HKRFU. We saw the All Blacks off the next afternoon

A quick visit, but HKRFU was clearly now on the world rugby map and Hong Kong itself was becoming recognized as a fun place to visit. The opening of the Hilton, the Mandarin and other hotels and facilities was slowly beginning to make Hong Kong a major international tourist attraction. The airline industry was expanding and cheaper seats were becoming available.

The HKRFU AGM rolled around again. The same slate of officers were elected and the young Glen Docherty joined the group representing the Football Club. The Club was invited to tour Thailand in the 1964/65 season and added Malaysia. I was on the tour committee with Smith, McTavish, Docherty, Aitkin, Johnston and met for the first time in July 1964. We needed to raise a seemingly impossible HK \$25,000.

There was again a stormy meeting 21 August at the Club over the issue of admitting non-Caucasian members. The crusty, colonial and racist Colonel Dowbiggin finally retreated. He stormed out down the stairs shouting and brandishing his walking stick. When he had gone, the meeting was finally successful in getting scrum half Bill Leong admitted as a Chinese member, permitting him to buy the first round back at the bar!

1964-65 season

Canterbury University, New Zealand

The Football Club tour to Thailand and Malaysia with Denny Johnston as skipper, took place 4-13 December. I went along as a functionary. The first game saw Thailand win 19-12 in a packed and noisy stadium. Then on to Kuala Lumpur for a three point loss in drizzle and mud to Selangor State. We then travelled to stay at the Malacca Army base and lost again by a few points to powerful New Zealand Regiment. In Singapore the Club lost by only 3 points to Combined Services. Finally we managed a victory against Singapore Civilians by 30 points.

Back in Hong Kong I learned we had yet another touring team coming from outside Asia!

At the beginning of January 1965, the New Zealand Canterbury University team arrived. Being on a limited budget, they had requested home hosting and we gave a welcoming reception at the Yacht Club. They had played 6 games in Japan and only lost one. We arranged a lunch at the Cricket Club, bus tours etc. They soundly beat the Presidents Selection at the Football Club. Then on 9 January they beat the Colony side 11-6 in a great game.

They were all kindly invited to the Bank mess 'Christmas' party on the Peak that evening, causing consternation and much fun by inviting their bar girl friends from Wanchai. Most of them then disappeared off back to Wanchai and it was an enormous effort to find them for the special early morning launch we arranged to their Kai Tak flight.

There was plenty of visiting military rugby activity, but they administered that themselves. HMNZS Otago finally beat the Club 13-3 on 3 February after five seasons of trying. Early in March HMS Eagle arrived and lost narrowly to the Club. We hastily cobbled together a Combined Civilians team which lost to the visiting Far East Air Force. At the end of the month of course The Blarney Stone Sevens ended the season.

Tokkie Smith made a come-back and was reelected Football Club captain for the 1965/66 season and Bill Leong, at long last a member, became the Football Club rugby section Hon Secretary. Bill had been scrum half on the Thailand/ Malaysia Tour but was now converting to refereeing. Vernon Roberts and I continued looking after the HKRFU matters.

1965/66 season

Worldwide connections

Our touring side left for Japan at the end of September 1965. It had taken years of correspondence with Japanese manager Shiggy Komo and business trips to Japan to set it all up. But I was personally off on a long around world trip until February 1966.

In January, Frizzles invited me to the England v Wales game and dinner. Then to liquid meals with John Tallent, Chairman of England RFU and others to discuss the idea of an England team Hong Kong stop-over. One memorable boozy lunch was with Frizzles who was the 'Oldest Living Member' at The George and Vulture in the City.

Back in Hong Kong the next big event was welcoming Japanese and Taiwanese teams to Hong Kong for the Rugby Festival to be held 2-12 March as part of British Week. The trade event, attended by Princess Margaret and Tony in March attracted much fanfare and we provided a Souvenir Rugby Programme. On 2 March the Club beat the Japanese Acorns (Combined Universities) 18-0, followed by a win against Cheng Kong Taipei XV. The Japanese beat the Police, and the Army thrashed their rivals the Navy.

Vernon Roberts, was by now General Manager of Hongkong Land. He threw a lavish party around the pool for all the visiting teams at his Shouson Hill Mansion. He served up the pints of Scotch and Water the visitors loved.

The March 1966 meeting was my last Football Club AGM and they kindly presented me with my prized goodbye tankard. I had decided it was time to move on and see more of the world.

But we still had one more duty. Bill Ramsay, (' for heaven's sake drop the Sir William nonsense') an England RFU luminary decided to visit Hong Kong. I met Bill and his wife Lady Nora ('whatever you do, remember the Lady') at Kai Tak and took them to their suite at the Mandarin. A bottle and half of scotch and rugby yarns before dinner, set us up for a smart affair later hosted by Vernon Roberts.

Bill wanted to meet 'the lads' so we ordered up about 20 players the next day for a bar lunch at the Hong Kong Club ; Smith, Docherty, Johnston, Leong, Ross, Bedford, Aitken, etc Then a more formal evening was planned at the Roberts' Shouson Hill Mansion. A serious typhoon blew up, but against all advice the Ramsays insisted on going. After that he was 'Typhoon' Ramsay, and it became Bill's big Hong Kong rugby visit story back in London. He met the committee of course and discussed Hong Kong's growing rugby significance.

Finally, 22 July 1966 was my last HKRFU annual meeting. Vernon Roberts continued as chairman, Ridge Riley became secretary and Jack Johnston of Police took over from Duncan McTavish as treasurer. And I was awarded another brimming prized tankard!

Jumping forward to the early summer of 1979, I was on a return trip to Hong Kong, drinking again with my pal Tokkie Smith. He enthused about the enormous international success of the totally non racist Hong Kong Sevens which he had started three years earlier and still managed. He laughed about now being called Mr. Rugby and he was on top of the world. A few months later he stormed out in resignation!

Then way later, in March 2012, my wife Lane and I were again in Hong Kong. We discovered the continuing intrigue and mystery around Tokkie's still unexplained resignation. More puzzling, his 1983 disgrace and expelling from Hong Kong Rugby and the Colony. Then his dramatic early death in South Africa in 1985.

His major part in founding the Sevens appeared to have been essentially airbrushed from history. When I was advised locally not to cause trouble by enquiring, naturally I became intrigued.

Over the following couple of years of research, many friends from those bygone rugby years added to the evidence. Slowly the fascinating story of Tokkie's life, totally committed to rugby, emerged. Hong Kong Rugby Sevens star Chris Wynne-Potts had suffered the same fate as Tokkie in 1983, being expelled from the Colony Team and hounded out of the Hong Kong Police. From South Africa and then in London he rounded out the entire saga.

"Tokkie Smith and the Colour of Rugby. Creating the Hong Kong Sevens," completes the story. It can be referenced at www.tokkiesmith.com and easily acquired from Amazon Kindle, illustrated by 130 pictures from those grand old Colonial Rugby days.

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