

Reporting the war on the rugby field

SPORTS reporting has had an unfortunate profile recently, but a distinctly linguistic question comes from Diane Holmes of Napier, who writes to ask why TV and radio sports reporters say that "teams will 'square off' or 'face off' when they next play each other".

Face off is tautological. If the teams are going to face off, they are going to confront each other in a game. If they are going to square off, they will be settling conclusively, so it's likely to be a final match.

In a recent letter to *The Dominion Post*, Emma Roache makes the point that rugby reporters use militaristic language such as "brothers in arms", "sporting wars", and "knocking the stuffing out of each other". Her concern is that these clichés glamorise violence, which is a subject that could well fill other columns along with this one.

How general is this type of reporting? It's general. In the *Sunday Star-Times* the headline to Marc Hinton's report of the game between the All Blacks and England read, "Nonu and Smith rip England to shreds", and on the same page Phil Gifford refers to "the troops on the ground" and tells us, "When Nonu ran at wee Charlie Hodgson, the only hope Hodgson had of hurting Nonu would have been to send him a letter and hope the envelope gave Nonu a paper cut."

What is the sub-text here? In the same issue Greg Ford claims, "The All Blacks made mince-meat of the old foe England in Auckland last night."

Later in the column, he writes, "They steam-rolled the All Blacks forwards."

In *The Dominion Post*, Sam Worthington tells us that, "You get the sense that the confrontational



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Springboks pack now smells blood", followed by the after-match review by Greg Ford, which confirms that was the case: "The Boks smelt blood at half-time and why not?"

A similar trend is found in the rugby magazines. Dave Campbell, editorial director of *Rugby News*,

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tells us that the Men in Black played to "slowly, methodically, squeeze the life out of their more experienced opponents".

In the same issue DJ Cameron commented, "the accent was on trench warfare in the slush rather than galloping around a firm field like startled stags".

In *NZ Rugby World*, the New Zealand Army seeks recruits through the image of the rugby field as a battle ground, with the imperative, "Win a challenge with the NZ Army on your kind of battlefield".

Terms such as "aggressive", "battle", and "carve up" get a frequent airing in rugby reporting. "Packs" and "camps" are synonyms for teams.

It seems that a keen passion for the game and the extremes of

elation and despair are behind much of the content of rugby reports in particular, and these extremes account for the hyperbole that we frequently experience in sports reporting in general. Rugby, when it's a success, is "magic" and there's "glory", and the players "know no fear", being "brave", "golden", "heroic", "legendary", and "staunch".

Phil Gifford maintained after a recent defeat (*Sunday Star-Times*): "The All Blacks played with huge courage, without being quite able to disprove the bumper-sticker wisdom that age and cunning will always get the better of youth and enthusiasm."

But is local amateur rugby and its reporting tarred with the same "warrior" brush? In *The Dominion Post's* Long Weekend, Karl du Fresne gave a one-page refreshingly affable report on local rugby, suggesting that "the gap between amateur and professional rugby is never more apparent than on, and off, the field at a country football match".

The Wairarapa-Bush Rugby Football Union chairman is reported as saying "it's about sport. 'Footy' is the social glue that holds many rural communities together".

This is reiterated in a two-page article by Dave Campbell in *Rugby News* about the local East Coast Whareama Rugby Club where he maintains that old-fashioned values, mateship, and a focus on hospitality have made it a popular club with visitors from far and wide. Not a militaristic image anywhere. They seem to square off without a battle in the country.

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