‘The Greatest of All Games’

The Shape of Rugby in World War I New Zealand, 1914-1919

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The outbreak of World War One had significant consequences for the playing of both rugby union and rugby league within New Zealand. Although public opinion initially encouraged sporting participation, this dramatically changed as the war progressed. As recruitment needs became paramount, sport in general, and rugby in particular, came under attack for diverting the attention of eligible men from their true duty – enlistment. Although there were slight variations in the way the two codes reacted to this criticism, generally administrators curtailed their games and deflected negative public attention by eagerly assisting with recruiting. The introduction of conscription in August 1916 marked the beginning of a decline in public debate surrounding the game and the gradual resumption of rugby within the country. Between 1914 and 1918 both codes continued play in some form or other and attempted to assist the war effort and assuage public criticism through supporting recruitment, promoting fundraising and contributing to the development and training of young players.

When war erupted in August 1914 rugby was a game of central importance in New Zealand. Although a precise date is impossible to ascertain, historians have generally agreed that rugby football was first played in New Zealand in the 1870s. Over the next two decades a number of provincial unions were formed, including Wellington (1879), Otago (1881), Auckland (1883) and Hawkes Bay (1884). Club and provincial rivalries served to strengthen the playing of the game and as early as 1882 the Grey River Argus referred to rugby football as the ‘national game’. Ten years later a national body, the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU), was formed to manage rugby within the country, but not without contest. The imperial origins of the game encouraged competition between New Zealand and Britain and in 1905 a New Zealand national team, which became known as the All Blacks on their return, toured the ‘Mother country’. Rugby became an intrinsic part of New Zealand’s national identity (within an imperial context) and promulgated the myth of an egalitarian society whilst at the same time providing a strong connection to Britain and the Empire.

3 For more information on resistance to the formation of a national body, see Len Richardson, ‘The Invention of a National Game: The Struggle for Control’, History Now 1, no. 1 (June 1995): 1-8.
In 1907, however, the union game was threatened by the emergence of the rival code of rugby league. The competing game originated in the 1895 divide of English sportsmen. Rugby football players from the North had demanded compensation for ‘broken time’ – payment in lieu of time taken off work in order to, or as a result of, play. The idea of payment for play was, Southern clubs argued, fundamentally against the principles of amateurism. League was immediately branded as a ‘professional’ sport and union officials maintained players competed not for the love of the game, but for the love of money. By 1907 the league game had spread to New South Wales and journeyed on through to New Zealand. Attempts by the New Zealand union to prevent the introduction of league were unsuccessful and the game became established within the country, although competition remained tense between the two codes.\(^5\)

In more recent times rugby has increasingly become the focus of historical analysis in New Zealand. The importance of rugby as the ‘national game’ became central and the connection between rugby and manliness was also a topic of vital significance. Jock Phillips, in his seminal work *A Man’s Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male – A History*, detailed how a ‘male mythology’ arose from the 1905 tour, and resulted in a defining view of Pakeha men as physically strong rugby players.\(^6\) In the main, however, club histories dominated written works on New Zealand rugby. These histories detailed fluctuations in the game over time although most of the records provided little or no information on the history of the club during World War One.\(^7\) This work and the strong overseas literature on the connections between sport and war, particularly in Australia, provide the basis of the historical background for this article.\(^8\) Although the history of rugby during World War One has traditionally been ignored in the New Zealand literature, this article redresses this neglect. In doing so it argues that the war resulted in occasional support for, and significant public antipathy towards, the ‘national game’, which in turn prompted changes to play in order to assuage public criticism.

When war looked certain, many sporting bodies drew on the historical connection between sport and war, suggesting that the rugby field was an important training ground for war. The sport was seen as inculcating manly values such as civility, restraint, strength, discipline, courage and physical fitness. Appropriate physical and moral attributes as well as standards of fair play and teamwork were vital in the making of a good citizen, and therefore a

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\(^6\) Phillips, *A Man’s Country*? 118-119. See also Ryan (ed.), *Tackling Rugby Myths* as an example of a recent work examining the centrality of rugby in New Zealand society.


good soldier, and were reinforced by New Zealand’s imperial education system.\(^9\) This viewpoint was, however, only one side of the spectrum, and throughout the war would be challenged by opposing beliefs.

The debate over the appropriateness of playing sport during World War One was highly complex. The views of administrators and players of rugby were often in opposition to public attitudes and the public’s (sometimes divided) view of rugby changed over the war years. At the outset of war continuing to play rugby was seen by both those involved in sport and members of the public, as a way to maintain the normality of life. Many clubs advanced the rationale that continuing with sport would sustain social cohesion and morale, promote physical fitness and preserve aspects of a pre-war society for troops to come home to. A more cynical view would suggest that many players were simply keen to continue playing until the end of the season; after all, the majority of games had already taken place.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 had an immediate effect on the playing of rugby in New Zealand. A fixture proposed to take place in Wellington between the Green and Golds (of Victoria College) and Sydney University was immediately cancelled due to the war, as were all other inter-university games. Despite this, the Green and Golds continued with club fixtures when war was declared and senior, junior and third grade matches were played until the end of the season. The continuance of club games was clearly tied to the belief that the war would be short. *Spike*, the Victoria College student journal, initially expected matches to recommence as usual in 1915.\(^10\)

As the 1914 season progressed, however, play became less feasible due to the absence of players and spectators. According to the *New Zealand Times*,

sport is now to all intents and purposes a dead letter as far as Wellington is concerned. Senior rugby players have enlisted in the expeditionary force and the partisan shouts from the ‘bankers’, urging on their favourites to greater efforts will not much longer be heard on our football grounds this season.\(^11\)

The initial impact of war on rugby in New Zealand was felt primarily through the enlistment of players and this impact was to shape rugby as the war progressed. As club members were increasingly called to the colours, rugby lost its key players (sometimes forever). At the conclusion of the 1914 season in Dannevirke, for instance, ‘the “Old Boys” and “Excelsior” teams volunteered and were sent to camp en masse’.\(^12\) The enlistment of rugby players caused

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\(^10\) Victoria College later became Victoria University of Wellington. *The Spike or Victoria College Review*, no. 26, October 1914, 46-47.


\(^12\) *Evening Post*, 14 May 1915, 4.
disruption to the normal continuance of the game. Due to the large number of
volunteers from the Wellington club, for example, the senior championship
honours of 1914 between Athletic and Wellington had to be declared a draw. 13

As public attention was increasingly drawn towards the importance of
recruitment, rugby became the focus of debate. Although rugby players were
initially admired for enthusiastically fulfilling their duty, many members of the
public soon felt it was necessary to apply greater pressure on sportsmen to
enlist. Thus opponents of continuing sport in wartime argued that sport
hindered recruitment and that it would be unpatriotic to continue with rugby
while other citizens of the country made sacrifices (both on the battlefield and
the home front). 14 On the other hand, for many administrators, players and
some sections of the public, continuing to play rugby remained essential in
maintaining social cohesion and morale. Whether or not it was a sincere belief
or a publicly accepted and convenient rationale, sporting bodies argued that it
was a national duty of those at home to continue ‘sport as usual’, thereby
producing and training soldiers of the future.

The debate over sport became increasingly vociferous during 1915 and
agitation against sporting organisations and the continuance of sport became
widespread. 15 Rugby, as the ‘national game’, became the obvious and principal
target for public debate. For some, the feats of New Zealand soldiers at
Gallipoli after April 1915 stood as a reminder of the importance of continuing
rugby. ‘Touchline’, for instance, explained that:

[when news came through of those famous charges up the Gaba
Tepe hills, with the undeniable fact that there were rugby footballers
at the head of those rushes, the conviction was borne home on me
that the game should be played as long as there were players to take
part in it, simply and solely because the rugby field is a fine training
ground for the future soldier. 16

Yet, for others, a consequence of war would be the cessation of unpatriotic
activities. According to ‘Rifleman’ it was essential that rugby be stopped as,

it must be obvious that there are hundreds of men evading their duty
to their country. Football officials, and those aiding or abetting them,
cannot be termed true patriots if they encourage able-bodied young

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13 Evening Post, 10 February 1915, 8.
14 New Zealand Herald, 19 August 1914, 9. Whether or not sport actually hindered recruitment is uncertain. Without doubt the restrictions placed on sport later in the war made it highly unlikely but at this early stage it is almost impossible to tell.
15 Rugby was not the only target of this criticism; other sports also came under attack. Cricket, for example, was criticised for keeping eligible men from their duty and opponents utilised statistics to advance this argument. For instance, by January 1915 only one out of eighty-eight senior players in Christchurch was at the front and only eleven out of five hundred district players had volunteered. The Press, 19 January 1915, 7. Yet in The Press, 20 January 1915, 7, it was pointed out that the figures quoted were misleading. Rather there were four hundred players in the district level, more than twenty of whom were over forty and over 180 were younger than twenty-one years old, and many of those who were within the eligible age range were married or had business or financial reasons for remaining behind.
16 New Zealand Free Lance, 8 October 1915, 20.
men to kick an inflated bladder about the turf while our Empire is engaged in such a life and death struggle…

Prominent members of the public attacked rugby players for an alleged unwillingness to enlist and the game itself was criticised for distracting eligible men from recognising their duty to their country.

The reaction of the rugby codes to this criticism varied. For many administrators stopping rugby would be incompatible with the aims of the war. M.J. Sheahan, Chairman of the Auckland Rugby Union, argued that the continuance of rugby was essential for the maintenance of health and morale. He suggested that:

[i]t would be a great mistake to cease football…. The playing of football would not adversely affect recruiting, but would rather stimulate it, and it would be in the best interests of everybody to keep the young fellows engaged during the winter months. It might be found necessary to curtail the interprovincial matches owing to the provinces being weakened by the absence of so many prominent players; but club football should certainly be kept going.

Many other union officials agreed with these sentiments. According to F.T. Evans, President of the Canterbury Rugby Union (CRU), continuing with the game would encourage physical fitness and rugby players were highly likely to enlist. The New Zealand union therefore decided to carry out club competitions as usual, however, teams and the public showed little interest and the club suffered financial problems. In order to rectify these circumstances, Mr Evans suggested a footballers’ battalion be formed to work with the Citizens’ Defence Corps, thereby showing that rugby players were directly involved in preparing and training for the war.

In Auckland the beginnings of this idea had already been implemented and teams spent every second Sunday in drill instead of playing the game. Participating in drill was a way rugby players could be seen as actively contributing to the war effort and in part assuaged public criticism of continuing to play. In June 1915 Canterbury also introduced the scheme and teams participated in drill every fourth Saturday. Proponents argued that knowledge of military basics would act as a recruiting stimulus. J.J. Dougall, Commandant of the Citizens’ Defence Corps, congratulated the union and called on other sportsmen to contribute in a similar manner.

In order to deflect public criticism of the game, rugby officials also became actively involved in coordinating with the military. Mr Hale, Chairman of the Wellington Rugby Union, detailed that rugby administrators would meet

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17 Evening Post, 6 May 1915, 4.
18 Evening Post, 5 February 1915, 2.
19 The Press, 22 March 1916, 5. A scarcity of players and a lack of spectators also haunted other regions, see for example, New Zealand Free Lance, 19 May 1915, 19; New Zealand Free Lance, 26 May 1915, 19.
20 The Press, 2 June 1915, 8.
21 Ibid., 8.
with military officials before each season during wartime. These meetings would arrange rugby fixtures according to military interests and discard ‘the dates required for camp or parade purposes’. Consequently, war had a direct impact on the number, and dates, of rugby competitions.

For members of the Auckland Rugby League the continuance of the game was also a way to encourage physical skills and maintain aspects of normality during the tumultuous years of war. The league suggested that by continuing with sport, more men would be inculcated with military values and would be ready to fulfil their duty. The President, A.M. Myers, however, recognised that if sportsmen evaded enlistment, agitation for the cessation of sport would be realised.

In order to deflect negative public attention rugby administrators and players (from both codes) became fervent recruiters of eligible men for the war effort. Rugby players at the front publicised the connection between sport and war. According to Kohi T. Hemana, of the New Zealand Maori contingent at Gallipoli, war was ‘just like football’. Major B. Jordan, previously a Canterbury representative player, wrote to the CRU and called for ‘lots more footballers’ who ‘might very well be with us taking part in this, the greatest of all games’. The Union made public Jordan’s suggestion that players and spectators who had not yet enlisted were letting down their comrades. These calls evidently had some impact and for the men at the front, ‘it thrilled us when practically the whole of the Christchurch Football Club and the Old Boys’ Football Club offered their services’.

Clubs were exceedingly proud when their players volunteered and fully utilised high enlistment numbers as an argument for the continuance of rugby. Canterbury University Rugby Club, for instance, was forced to withdraw their senior team because of high enlistments; a situation they proposed ‘redounds to the credit of the university’.

According to the NZRFU ten thousand players had enlisted by the end of the 1915 season. For Victoria College’s Green and Golds, war resulted in the enlistment of more than half their players and contributed to substantial changes to game requirements. Invoking the rationale of keeping the game continuing for those at the front, and as preparation for those at home, the club introduced lower weight and age limits. The enlistment of players also saw a reduction in the number of teams entered in competitions as well as the curtailment of the representative programme and the suspension of Ranfurly Shield matches. For Auckland’s North Shore club the effect of war was

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22 Evening Post, 10 February 1915, 8.
23 New Zealand Herald, 8 April 1915, 9.
24 The Press, 14 October 1915, 3.
25 The Press, 13 August 1915, 8.
26 The Press, 4 October 1915, 5.
27 Dominion, 12 June 1915, 6.
28 New Zealand Free Lance, 8 October 1915, 20.
29 The Spike or Victoria College Review, no. 27, June 1915, 87.
30 Ibid, 88; John Anderson, Victoria University of Wellington Rugby Football Club: The Story of the Green and Golds, 1902-1987 (Wellington: Wellington Rugby Football Club, 1988), 15. The Ranfurly Shield was donated by the Governor of New Zealand, the Earl of Ranfurly, to the New Zealand Rugby Union in 1902. Since then the shield has been contested on a challenge system between regional unions.
keenly felt when the club could only raise one team compared to two for the previous season.\textsuperscript{31}

Public agitation for the cessation of rugby remained strong throughout 1915. In order to answer and reduce this criticism both codes introduced a number of restrictions, although league’s response was somewhat more controversial. For the 1915 season the NZRFU curtailed inter-provincial matches and abandoned all overseas tours.\textsuperscript{32} In Otago, all inter-provincial matches were cancelled and the sport in general was restricted due to the high enlistment of players.\textsuperscript{33} Additional regulations abandoned inter-island matches due to the ‘exceptional circumstances’ of war.\textsuperscript{34}

League’s response to war, on the other hand, became contentious for many members of the public. The major focus of public criticism rested on the fact that for the majority of the 1915 season, league teams continued with, or gave the impression of, play as usual. A Christchurch league team, for instance, visited Greymouth, Blackball and Hokitika with the intention of establishing the game on the West Coast of the South Island.\textsuperscript{35} League’s blatant continuance of rugby, and hence the time and resources put into play by eligible men, gave the impression that the code worked against the war effort. Reinforcing this idea was the fact that many of league’s players were drawn from the working class, a group which generally displayed less enthusiasm for the war as a whole.

League also initially intended to continue overseas tours during wartime. In 1915 discussion regarding a tour to New South Wales began and the proposed tour became the focus of vast public debate. In order to dispel condemnation of the code, league undertook a number of steps that it hoped would make the tour acceptable. For instance, the dates of play were planned to honour the King and the Prince of Wales and it was suggested that a percentage of the profits would be donated to the Allies.\textsuperscript{36} James Carlaw, President of league’s national body, the New Zealand Rugby Football League (NZRFL), ‘advocated that the New Zealand League’s share of the profits be handed over to the New Zealand Belgian Fund’ thereby showing the game was not for money but for the game itself.\textsuperscript{37} A number of local branches, however,

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\item \textsuperscript{31} Ernest L. Eyre, ‘The History of the North Shore Rugby Football Club’, undated, MS-Papers-1110, Manuscripts and Archives, Alexander Turnbull Library (hereafter ATL.), Wellington, 100.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Evening Post, 10 February 1915, 8. Although no international games were played between teams from New Zealand and teams from overseas countries, there were some service games overseas, especially in 1917. Reports of these games were communicated to the New Zealand population at home and served a number of useful purposes. As well as fostering comradeship and providing a break from combat, service games also assisted with the maintenance of morale on the home front. Relatives and friends of men at the front were reassured when they heard their boys could continue sporting activities during the turbulent times of war. See Ian McGibbon (ed), The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2000), 506.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Evening Post, 10 February 1915, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Evening Post, 14 May 1915, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{35} The Press, 5 April 1916, 4. Despite this continuance, officials felt it necessary to justify the matches. The President of Canterbury Rugby Football League, Dr Thacker, explained ‘members realised that it was in fulfilment of a long made promise that they had sent a team, during wartime, to the West Coast’. See The Press, 10 April 1916, 10.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Evening Post, 1 May 1915, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Evening Post, 29 April 1915, 10.
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disagreed with the proposed tour. Auckland League, for instance, ‘unanimously resolved that in view of the present crisis and the depletion of the representatives from the ranks the time was not opportune to send a team to Australia’.38 Eventually the pressures of public agitation and the opinion of various administrators led to the abandonment of the fixture.39 The cancellation of the tour was league’s attempt to demonstrate they were behind the war effort and was followed by the introduction of restrictions on the continuance of play. For instance, the NZRFL ruled that unless competing clubs donated money to a ‘patriotic purpose’, cup matches would not take place during the season.40

Donating money to patriotic funds was an important task for New Zealanders during the war and many rugby administrators and players were encouraged to fundraise for the country’s effort. Raising money became an important means of deflecting public criticism of rugby. The NZRFU, for instance, attempted to do their bit by providing the coronation robes for Wellington’s Queen Carnival and local unions, such as the Wellington College Old Boys club, also agreed to make donations to the cause.41 Organised by the New Zealand Patriotic Society, the Queen Carnival ran for over a month and raised money by charging the public for the right to vote for their favourite female contestant. Each woman involved in the contest represented a particular region or group of society. Nurse Everitt, for instance, was the sports candidate for the Carnival. According to ‘Touchline’, the enthusiasm of the female collectors for the Carnival was astounding; they trooped on to the field at half-time, and for 10 minutes entertained and amused the crowd by their efforts at kicking the Rugby ball about’.42 The union went as far as suspending all games on 5 June so that players could participate in the Carnival and raise money for wounded soldiers.43

Both union and league participated in raising money for the war effort in a number of ways. On 3 July 1915 teams from both codes took part in a Grand Combined Patriotic Sports Carnival in aid of the Auckland Hospital Ship Fund and War Relief Association.44 A number of benefit matches were also played throughout the war. A three-day inter-collegiate tournament at Athletic Park donated profits to patriotic funds and a benefit match for the Belgian Children’s Relief Fund was held at Epsom Show Grounds on 15 July 1915.45
Although fundraising became a chief activity of patriotic citizens as a result of the war, in rugby circles the central effect of war was the recruitment of eligible players. The importance of encouraging recruiting and enlistment was strong. Men in uniform, for instance, were granted free admittance to Lancaster Park and revered as the ultimate ideal of manliness. Pat Harris, a member of the 1897 New Zealand team to tour Australia, was one such exemplar. ‘Old Pat’ had enlisted as part of the tenth reinforcements and it was believed his rugby experience would assist him at the front.

The enlistment of well-known players was held up as an ideal, which the men of the Dominion should emulate. Of the eighteen members in the 1913 New Zealand rugby team to visit Australia, fourteen members had enlisted and the remaining four were reputedly likely to join them. Overall, club administrators were intensely satisfied with the contribution of rugby players. The Federal League Football Club, for instance, published a roll of honour. Out of eighty members, fifty-one had enlisted, thirty-eight were on active service and six were wounded.

The return of wounded men and increasing casualty lists from mid-1915 on had a significant impact on the debate surrounding the continuation of rugby. As news of wounded sons or killed husbands reached home, communities grappled with new feelings of sorrow and grief. Questions were raised as to the propriety of continuing to play rugby; as men lost their lives at the front their counterparts at home were continuing, frivolously, with sport. This concern was a strong contributing factor to a number of restrictions placed on play during 1916. Union, for example, continued the abandonment of international games and for the first time placed an official embargo on all inter-provincial team visits. The most visible change in play, however, was union’s turn towards focusing on younger players and excluding players over military age. In early 1916 the NZRFU introduced proposals for the curtailment of rugby and proposed that play in the first grade would be restricted to those aged under 20 years on 1 January 1916 and play in the second grade restricted to those less than 16 years on 1 January 1916. In addition, ‘all D.C.L. Shield (senior), Junior Flag, President’s Cup, fourth and fifth grade matches’ were suspended for the season. Not only did these restrictions lessen public disapproval (as rugby would no longer hinder recruitment by absorbing eligible men) but they also served to ensure that rugby could continue as older players left for the front. Most clubs acknowledged that the proposals would encourage younger players (even at the cost of some older players) and reluctantly agreed to them. Both Wellington

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46 The Press, 31 May 1916, 2.
47 New Zealand Free Lance, 7 January 1916, 17.
48 New Zealand Free Lance, 4 February 1916, 18.
49 The Press, 2 April 1916, 10.
50 The Press, 5 April 1916, 4.
51 The Press, 24 February 1916, 7.
52 The Press, 16 March 1916, 9; The Press, 22 March 1916, 6.
and Canterbury unions, for instance, resolved to ‘encourage’ and ‘assist’ schoolboy rugby throughout the war.\textsuperscript{53}

Union’s introduction of an age limit served to draw attention to the disparate efforts of the two codes. According to the \textit{New Zealand Free Lance},

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[i]t seems hardly fair, apart from the ethics of the football code, that a body which is endeavouring to assist the country in times of grave national peril, should lose players to another body, the officials of which apparently do not consider that recruiting should concern them.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Yet, even for league, the importance of working toward the war effort became paramount. In 1916 the national body, obviously reeling from the public agitation of the year before, drew ‘attention to the fact that the league did not undertake tours of any description during the past season, on account of the war’.\textsuperscript{55} Increasingly, war meant that teams from both codes faced complications in raising enough players. For the Green and Golds the majority of the previous year’s team had enlisted and it was only possible to enter one team in competitions. Auckland’s North Shore Club, on the other hand, was forced to close when not even a school team could be raised.\textsuperscript{56}

Prior to the introduction of conscription in August 1916, the primary effect of war was to generate public agitation over the enlistment of rugby players. Once conscription was in force, however, public opinion shifted back towards the initial view of continuing sport for the benefit of troops overseas as well as the military training it instilled in the men and boys left behind. Opinions within the sporting administration clearly argued that it was a national duty of those at home to play for those on the front. A. Sinclair, at the Otago Rugby Union meeting in April 1917, suggested that men at the front wanted sport to continue during wartime.\textsuperscript{57} Official policy also recognised the importance of continuation and when the Otago University Club resolved not to enter any rugby teams for the 1917 season, the rugby union:

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passed a resolution to the effect that, as University has a larger complement of players than any other club, it was neglecting its duty to those footballers who had gone to the front by not assisting the Union to keep Rugby alive.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

The progression of the war and the introduction of conscription therefore drew attention to the importance of continuing with sport and the debate over

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{53} Veysey, \textit{A Century of Rugby}, 17; \textit{The Press}, 24 February 1916, 7.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{New Zealand Free Lance}, 1 June 1916, 21. The reference to the ‘ethics of the football code’ reveals the antagony felt towards league, the professional game, from union, the ‘ideal’ amateur game.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Press}, 6 May 1916, 12.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{The Spike or Victoria College Review}, no. 31, June 1917, 57-58; Eyre, ‘The History of the North Shore’, 100-101. The North Shore Club did not reopen again until 1921.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{The Press}, 3 April 1917, 4.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{The Press}, 3 May 1916, 3.
\end{footnotes}
whether rugby hindered enlistment abated. In addition, the return of New Zealand soldiers from the front generated awareness of the need to change the rules of the codes. According to the English rules in place during wartime, professionals and amateurs were allowed to play together. Yet, New Zealand rules forbade any professional player from participating in rugby union. Union therefore argued that the men who had served the country should be reinstated to the union code, thereby preventing an exodus to league. In October 1917, for instance, at a union meeting in Wellington, delegates argued that although the NZRFU should maintain,

> the fundamental principles of amateurism… the time has arrived when the [NZRFU] should have vested in it the powers to formulate such additional rules concerning professionalism as shall be more in keeping with local requirements.\(^59\)

Generally, the amnesty to be applied to players was left to the discretion of the provincial branches.\(^60\)

The return of men during 1917 and 1918 also saw competitions become open, and age restrictions removed.\(^61\) Inter-university matches recommenced in 1918 and the Green and Golds played a fixture against Canterbury University as well as entering teams in senior and third grade competitions.\(^62\) Ultimately, many clubs felt vindicated in their battle to keep the game continuing during wartime. According to the Wellington Football Club’s 1918 Annual Report,

> this record [of the club’s wartime service] taken in conjunction with the equally fine response from other sports bodies, is a matter for congratulation and is ample reply to those misguided people who, if they had had their way, would have stopped all sport during the continuance of the war.\(^63\)

1918 therefore marked the beginning of a return to regular competition and by 1919 most clubs had regained their previous positions. The Green and Golds, for instance, had four teams, compared to two the season before and one the season before that.\(^64\) The college team was also planning more inter-university fixtures and a tour from Australia in 1919.\(^65\) Ranfurly Shield matches were reinstated in 1919, although it was not until August 1921 that New Zealand

\(^{59}\) _The Press_, 8 October 1917, 3.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 3; Annual General Meeting Minute Book, Wellington College Old Boys Rugby Football Club; Paul Neazor, _Ponsonby Rugby Club: Passion and Pride_ (Auckland: Celebrity Books, 1999), 73.

\(^{61}\) Swan and Jackson, _Wellington’s Rugby History_, 66.

\(^{62}\) _The Spike or Victoria College Review_, no. 33, June 1918, 43; _The Spike or Victoria College Review_, no. 34, October 1918, 54.

\(^{63}\) Veysey, _A Century of Rugby_, 19.

\(^{64}\) _The Spike or Victoria College Review_, no. 35, June 1919, 44-45.

\(^{65}\) _The Spike or Victoria College Review_, no. 36, October 1919, 47.
played her first post-war international match, winning thirteen to five against South Africa.  

World War One clearly had a significant effect upon the playing of rugby in New Zealand. Its impact was extensive and enduring and the commemoration of rugby players who enlisted or died demonstrates this. Citizens within New Zealand clearly recognised the important contribution made by their rugby players and many sporting bodies paid tribute to the sportsmen who had served. In addition to this, individual sportsmen were often recognised and their courageous actions acknowledged. Dave Gallaher, for instance, captain of the 1905 All Black team to tour England, was a well-known and popular rugby player who died at Flanders on 4 October 1917. Even the public memory of his fighting skills was related to his rugby prowess, Gallaher was a man who ‘led by example from the front – he was a forward’. War obviously generated a widespread desire to remember these sportsmen and officials proposed memorialising the sacrifice of players. The Chairman of the CRU, for instance, suggested a memorial at Lancaster Park for rugby footballers who had died in the war. 

The playing of rugby in World War One New Zealand was the subject of intense debate. Initially, war prompted most New Zealanders to encourage the continuation of the game in order to maintain the normality of life and to inculcate young men with appropriate values. Yet, as the realities of the war effort reached New Zealand, public agitation for the cessation of rugby became dominant. Although league initially delayed changing play, it eventually capitulated to public pressure and both codes attempted to lessen public opposition to continuation. In the endeavour to dispel condemnation of their games the two codes highlighted the high level of enlistment among their players. In addition to this, both codes instituted changes to the normal continuance of the game as a result of the war, and international, inter-island and Ranfurly Shield matches were restricted or suspended for the duration. The two codes also curtailed and restricted the playing of other games and introduced changes to the rules of the game itself. The high number of players who enlisted meant clubs faced difficulty in sustaining membership and resulted in changes to age and weight requirements. The impact of war on rugby in New Zealand is clearly visible in 1916 when men eligible for military service were excluded from rugby union and clubs shifted towards developing the skills of younger players. With the introduction of conscription in August

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1916 and the return of soldiers from the front, public agitation for the abeyance of rugby lessened and the game gradually began to regain its prior strength.

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