

## **An Unexpected COVID-19 Gift**

Ralph J. Bathurst

Associate Editor

As this extra-ordinary year draws to a close and a new one beckons us into the unknown, we have much to ponder. The COVID-19 pandemic has been traumatic and devastating as it spread with a similar intensity and reach as the fires on the West Coast of the United States of America. Despite the destruction, COVID has also bestowed an unexpected gift, especially to the citizens of my country, Aotearoa New Zealand.

And the gift?

Rugby.

It's back!

Let me explain. Here, rugby is followed with the fervour of religious devotion, and the national side, the All Blacks, is consistently the best team in the world. No doubt my northern hemisphere colleagues will beg to differ but winning the Rugby World Cup on three occasions (the William Web Ellis trophy) is just one testament to the enduring greatness of this side.

I mention this, because although a rugby ball is thrown and kicked on fields, paddocks and beaches across the nation, it has been slowly dying. Apostates complain that the sport had lost its 'spirit' and had become boring and predictable. The round ball game, which we call "soccer", is played by more young people than rugby, and in my locale, Auckland's North Shore, rugby clubs have been struggling to raise the game's profile among teenagers. This is significant because Auckland, as the largest city in the country, is also one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. New migrants from non-rugby-playing nations do not understand the game and they see its rough physicality as barbaric.

When COVID-19 hit, like other countries, Aotearoa New Zealand shut down. All group activities stopped with the only places permitted to operate being supermarkets and pharmacies. The nation closed from 23 March to 27 April, and then gradually began to open as the number of active COVID cases declined.

At the time I wondered about the future of rugby. In the best of times, clubs were reporting straitened financial circumstances and without a paying public attending matches, the emptying coffers signalled the end of the game.

On 8 June the country returned to Alert Level 1, which meant that social distancing restrictions could be lifted, and people could gather in large numbers again. And gather we did!

During the lock-down, rugby went through a silent revolution. The 'Super' competition of franchised professional teams from Argentina, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa was

abandoned. Its replacement was a revised competition among the five local teams running under a new title 'Super Rugby Aotearoa'.

Two notable things happened. Firstly, released from the tedium of playing offshore teams of lesser quality, the rugby played in the 2020 competition was sublime, with commentators reporting that this was the best rugby they had seen in many years. Secondly, people turned out in their droves to watch games. For example, the Auckland Blues played to a packed Eden Park with its 50,000-seat capacity. In previous years the Blues could barely attract a quorum of followers and consistently performed below expectations, ending year-on-year near the bottom of the table. They had lost the affections of everyone but their most dedicated followers, with many Aucklanders supporting any side *except* the Blues. For this team to play in front of packed stadiums was astonishing.

What does this unexpected and welcome gift of COVID-19 to rugby in Aotearoa New Zealand say to the rest of the world?

Perhaps it is too obvious, but it is worth noting, that people hunger to be together. When robbed of the opportunities to gather to watch live sport, attend concerts or go to the theatre, we look back with longing to the human connections that these events offered. They become more precious in their absence, and when they return, we welcome them like long-lost friends.

On the educational front things are similar. Students prefer to meet in person. Although zoom has provided a necessary interim platform, teaching and learning occur best in the messiness of the physical classroom. We now know with greater certainty, that turning up is superior to switching on; that the actual is better than the virtual; and that the body is the centre of the action.

The digital revolution has changed the ways we access information and communicate with each other. Yet, despite the increasing sophistication of software and smart phone apps, the device cannot supplant the body.

Making and appreciating art, whether a painting or symphony, is done best in the presence of others. So too with organizing. No matter the reach of digital devices into the business world, meeting and working in person are still better. If live performance outsmarts passive simulation, then being present to each other works better than meeting via a pixelated computer screen and limited bandwidths.

What does this say to us as readers of this journal? Aesthetics is about the body as sensate, present in, and responsive to, the environment in time and space. Our work at *Organizational Aesthetics* will continue to promote scholarship that affirms this basic humanity through engagement with art and artful organizing.

The Auckland Blues went from cellar-dwellers to runners-up in the 2020 Aotearoa Super Rugby competition. No one would have predicted this 12 months ago.

The All Blacks have begun their international season against the Australian Wallabies, and the public reaffirmed their faith in the game by turning out *en masse* to participate in the spectacle.

Rugby is experiencing a renewal. How, then, might we use the gift of COVID-19 to remake *our* world?