

## SPORTSMANSHIP

By Tony Johnson

It's my favorite time of the year .... NFL, NCAA and IHSA football seasons! After six months of coaching football indoors with the Pirates, I'm ready to enjoy the cool evenings and bright afternoons outside.

But in the land Down Under, the football season is just coming to an end. During my three year stint in Australia with Caterpillar, I was exposed to a very different kind of "football" .... Rugby Union.

Played at club, professional and international levels, the sport of rugby union is where American football originated (our football is referred to as "gridiron" in Australia). A rough and tumble game, the Australian's sport some of the best players in the world.

Each year, the Australian National team (known as the Wallabies) plays a series against it's arch rival, the New Zealand All Blacks, in an event called the Bledisloe Cup. These games of national pride often draw crowds of over 100,000 people in various cities across Australia and New Zealand. The media coverage and hype around the games is similar to that of the Super Bowl.

It was a Bledisloe Cup game in 1997 where I witnessed one of the most inspiring shows of sportsmanship that I've ever seen. Let me explain ...

The atmosphere of the game at the Melbourne Cricket Ground was electric to say the least. The intensity of the players could be felt from the very start as both lineups stood arm in arm and sang their respective national anthems.

Then, the All Blacks lined up straight across from the Wallabies and began a combination chant, dance known as the "Haka". A tradition carried down for many years, the "Haka" is native tribal chant from the New Zealand Maori tribes. The chant was often done before rival tribes went to war .... And the basic message of the chant and movements is one of strength and determination.

From that point on, the two teams played 80 minutes of what is probably the roughest sport played in the world. With minimal padding, non stop action and national pride on the line, the players give it their all.

Now, with such pre-game antics and physical contact, you'd think that there would have been many fights. Although there may have been an occasional pushing match, the game was played with a unique courtesy and respect for each other.

But it was what happened at the end of the game that made a lasting impression with me.

In this particular game, the All Blacks got the best of the Wallabies with a 33-18 victory. The two teams met at mid field to begin the trophy ceremony. First up was the Australian captain who proceeded to congratulate the All Black team for their fine effort and hard fought victory. All the time, the Australian team members stayed at mid field and applauded each comment.

The All Black captain took the stage and proceeded to make similar complimentary comments about their competitors. After it was all over, the Australian team proceeded to form a human tunnel and clapped as the All Black team headed off the field.

Can you imagine that? Wouldn't it be an awesome spectacle if that would happen at the end of the Super Bowl?

The sight and experience of this show of sportsmanship has lived with me every since ... and I relate the experience to students in the Treasure Life message. I challenge students to practice good sportsmanship in anything they do and to respect their competition.

Remember, "Treasure Life ... Everyday!"



Quote to remember:

"I challenge them to one day be that professional athlete at the end of a major event who stays on the field at the end of a losing effort to respect, honor and congratulate their winning counterparts."

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"Treasure Life" is a positive life message created by Caterpillar manager and Peoria Pirates coach, Tony Johnson. The program encourages students to be "pirates" by filling their "treasure" chests each day with some of life's most valuable traits, values and experiences. The "Treasure Life" program has been recognized as one of the Arena Football League's best community relations program.