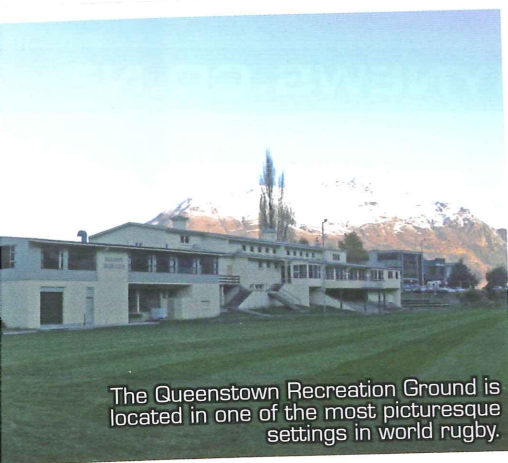




Photo: Mountain Scene

RUGBY IN PARADISE

It would take a lot of convincing to get Dave Campbell to believe there is a more spectacular location in world rugby than Wakatipu's home base of Queenstown.



The Queenstown Recreation Ground is located in one of the most picturesque settings in world rugby.

They're not joking when they say Queenstown is the adventure capital of the world. The energy you feel as you're wandering the streets amongst a virtual league of nations is literally palpable. But delve beneath the tourist Mecca's flashy exterior and there are normal people doing normal things, including playing some very handy rugby. Enter the Wakatipu Rugby Club. Formed as an amalgamation of clubs in 1953 after Glenorky, Queenstown, Arrowtown and Country (Remarkables) all experienced significant player loss, Wakatipu has grown to become one of the powerhouses of Otago Country rugby. Neighbouring Arrowtown left the merger after being brought back to life in the late 1980s. Not surprisingly, Wakatipu's closest geographical

rival is also its fiercest, with fixtures against Arrowtown always having an extra edge. Suffice to say the post-match celebrations after Wakatipu's 42-7 drubbing of the Bulls in July – making up for a narrow White Horse Cup loss two months earlier – would have lasted long into the night. For the uninitiated, the White Horse Cup is the Ranfurly Shield of Otago Country rugby. In fact, comparatively speaking, it's probably bigger. You wouldn't find more stunning surroundings for a rugby club than Wakatipu's home base of Queenstown. Nestled at the base of the town's famous gondola, the picturesque Queenstown Recreation Ground is probably best known for hosting the national sevens tournament each year. And yes, the club gets a slice of that action through running a bar and supplying all of the teams with local liaison officers – just to name a couple of things. Feeling somewhat awestruck by the scenery,

as always, on the drive over from Dunedin (though not to the point of shedding tears like Anton Oliver), I arrive to find president Damien O'Connell and life member Bryan 'BC' Douglas deep in rugby conversation inside the clubroom lounge. These are what you call rugby men down to their bootlaces.

An active player in the club's second team, the Wanderers, O'Connell has been involved with Wakatipu rugby since he left school, though he did have a couple of years overseas. Douglas, a club member since the late 1960s, says it's the hard work of forward-thinking people like O'Connell that keeps Wakatipu amongst the cream of the local rugby crop. The younger man gives a smile that suggests his senior colleague is understating his own contribution in typical self-effacing style. (O'Connell had no hesitation whatsoever in nominating Douglas as Wakatipu Club Legend when this feature was first organised.) "Thankfully, there are a lot of passionate people involved who do stick their hands up," says O'Connell, whose father and six brothers also played for the club. Wakatipu is currently running two senior teams (the premiers narrowly lost their semifinal to Upper Clutha a few weeks back), four high school sides in the local Under 14, 15 and 18 competitions, and 140 players in the junior grades. Due to the transient nature of so many people living in Queenstown, not to mention skyrocketing house prices, the make-up of the

club has changed dramatically over time. "In the old days the players were all born and bred, but now they're a lot more transient," says Douglas.

Player turnover is huge. The 2008 seniors lost 20 players from the previous year's squad, while the Wanderers used a whopping 75 players in the same season.

However, there is optimism that the club won't struggle for numbers in future years. Having taken over the high school component of the local rugby programme this year, O'Connell is hopeful Wakatipu will be able to retain the majority of players who go through the system. "We've taken the high school rugby over to try and drive it so we can get those 18-year-olds who are leaving school still playing rugby. Hopefully in the next three or four years those players will keep coming through the system."

No piece on Wakatipu would be complete without telling the story of how the clubrooms were built – completely freehold – in 1976. No less than \$21,000 – a good chunk of change in those days – of the building funds was raised through the involvement of club members and their families as extras in the television series *Hunter's Gold*. Each person was paid \$14 every time they were required for work, and the money built up in no time.

Although there haven't been any All Blacks out of Wakatipu, Lin Colling had a year with the club before being "offered the world" by Pirates (Dunedin) coach Charlie Saxton.

"Saxton told him he'd make him an All Black!" laughs Douglas. Indeed, Colling became an All Black out of the South Dunedin club a few years later.

Former Otago and Highlanders loose forward Kelvin Middleton played all his junior rugby for Wakatipu and is now back with the club as the premier side's technical advisor.

GREATEST MOMENT

Wakatipu has won its share of silverware over the years, but the stretch of games from 2004-05 when the side remained undefeated – winning back to back Otago Country titles (which included South Otago clubs) as well as retaining the White Horse Cup – would definitely take some beating.

"We travelled down to Kaitangata and all those sorts of places – three hour bus trips. That was a really special time for the club," says O'Connell.

Having lost the Otago Country finals to Maniototo and Crescent in 2002 and 2003 respectively, Wakatipu bounced back to thump the latter 26-10 in the 2004 final. The following year arch-rivals Arrowtown were soundly beaten 26-6 as the men from Queenstown romped to a second consecutive championship victory.

CLUB LEGEND

BRYAN 'BC' DOUGLAS



Technically speaking, Bryan 'BC' Douglas has scaled back his involvement with Wakatipu since stepping down from the committee six or seven years ago, but that doesn't mean this life member isn't still the first point of contact for some matters.

"Even the other night when someone was having a problem with the lights, 'BC' was the first person they called," says Damien O'Connell.

Having started out with the club in the late 1960s, Douglas crafted a record as a coach of some repute after leading the Under 20 side, along with Max Robbins, to a championship victory in 1979 – something the club hadn't done for 20 years.

"That was a lot of fun," says Douglas. "They were good kids and a lot of them stayed with the club and went through the grades." He avoided "big time" coaching, instead moving into the administrative ranks as club captain after his success with the Under 20s. Although he says he tried to purposely distance himself after stepping down from his official roles within the club, it's clear that Wakatipu's sky blue colours will always flow through this quintessential rugby man's veins.

"People just don't realise what country kids, and adults, have to do for their rugby. One of my grandkids who's in the Under 14s had to go to Balclutha (251km) to play a game. That's over three hours away. But you won't hear anyone moaning about it."