

The golden age

By Don Service

The 60s and 70s were a golden era in Auckland as far as overseas visitors were concerned, especially after the opening of Newmarket Park in 1964.

Clubs from Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and Germany would come here during their mid-winter break with British clubs coming around May and June during their break between seasons.

The highlight of the many games in 1967 was the appearance of Manchester United at Carlaw Park. Played on a fine Sunday afternoon with no counter-attractions, and mercifully no live TV coverage, it drew a crowd of 26,000.

For one who first watched soccer in Auckland during the worst of the war years when the match of the day often had only 200-300 spectators, it was a real thrill to stand in Carlaw Park Lane as game time approached and see a long, wide, almost solid mass of people advancing continuously on the turnstiles.

The reigning first division champions won 8-1, although Auckland fought back well after being down 5-0 at half time.

Stars such as Nobby Stiles, Bobby Charlton and Alex Stepney were there but the main attraction was George Best, who scored only two goals, but laid on several others.

The editor of the weekly programme waxed lyrical. Best "weaved a magic spell of football fantasy... can rip a defence apart with a sparkling solo burst of such artistry, intricacy and speed..."

In their other game on tour Manchester United beat New Zealand 11-0 at English Park, Christchurch – New Zealand's worst disaster apart from the

thrashings by the English Amateurs in 1937; 12-0 at Carisbrook and 12-1 at Athletic Park, Wellington.

But I guess in a list of New Zealand games these might be left out on the grounds that they were not full internationals.

Other overseas visitors in 1967; Sparta Prague 12 Auckland 1 in January, but Auckland made a great comeback to draw with another Czech team, Slavia Prague, 2-2 in December. Slavia beat Canterbury 7-2.

Scotland, with most of their best players not touring, beat Auckland 4-0, and New Zealand Under 23s at Wellington 7-2.

Auckland also found time to visit New Caledonia for two draws and a loss.

In 1968 the most colorful visitors were Dallas Tornado. The match programme tells the story:

"Soccer came to the USA on a major league professional basis in 1967... the 12-member clubs each imported a foreign first division team intact... for the short season from May to July." Dallas imported Dundee United.

Then young men, average age 20, mainly recruited in Europe, began training for Tornado and were sent on a 47-game world tour from September to February before the home league competition began on April 1.

Before reaching New Zealand in late January they had won six, lost 19, and drawn eight games and played before 610,000 spectators.

They drew with Canterbury 2-2 and were beaten 3-2 by Auckland in a

particularly exciting game.

It was said that Dallas wanted to take 18-year-old Brian Turner along with them for the rest of the tour. The programme had some prophetic words: "talented youngster who could develop into one of the best players produced in this country.". Turner eventually played 102 games for New Zealand. Steve Sumner played 105.

When Auckland Province played the second English FA XI to come here in 1969 at Carlaw Park, Ken Armstrong, the former Chelsea and England player who coached the locals, had some down-to-earth things to say in the programme.

"My main concern will be to see just how big is the gap between the teams in skills performance... the majority of the FA XI are youngsters on the verge of international honours... This does not mean they will be any the easier to play against. On the contrary, each will be a harder and more difficult opponent to contain.

"As an ex-professional defender myself, I preferred to cope with a ball player of the Jimmy Hagan, Wilf Mannion or Len Shackleton type, rather than the tough, direct, no-frills performer of the Raich Carter or Peter Doherty type, who once they got a shoulder in front of you with the ball on the furthest foot it was near impossible to stop them... at least against a dribbler there is usually a second chance of recovery.

"Along with you, I look forward to a

very interesting and enjoyable afternoon's football, but as selector-coach on the sideline I doubt I will be enjoying it all that much!!!"

Ken's fears proved well founded. George Eastham (Stoke, ex-Arsenal and England) scored twice in the first five minutes and the visitors won 8-1. They also beat Central Central Districts 2-1 or 3-2 at Wellington or Palmerston North (I haven't got a record of this game).

The previous year (1968) Central Districts had beaten Cardiff City 3-2 at Wellington, although Cardiff won the only test 3-0 at Newmarket and beat Auckland by the same score at Newmarket.

The next representative selection from England, in 1978, was this time officially labelled England B.

Again, they were far too strong in the three "tests", but what a great feat by Christchurch United (Trans Tours United that year) to actually draw 2-2 with these powerful visitors, in the first tour game at QEII Park.

The visitors had hardly stepped off the plane and United's goals were both from penalties taken Ian Park, but coach Terry Conley had this to say: "People have said – not many mind you – that United was a bit lucky to get a draw. Perhaps it was, but when a team of part-timers gives the might of an English international team a two goal start and fights back to draw 2-2, I say 'to hell with the question of luck'. If we had any, we deserve it."

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