

# Rugby league masters prove age is just a number

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*Pikiao masters rugby league players John Frank Lemmon (left) and Ellis Tepania had the time of their lives at the Masters of Rugby League Tournament in Rotorua this week. Photo/Stephen Parker*

While, for some, the fitness levels had deteriorated a little, there were still some silky skills on display at the 24th annual Masters of Rugby League Tournament this week. Thirty-two teams competed in the tournament, held at Puketawhero Park in Rotorua from Tuesday to Thursday, including home sides Pikiao and Ngongotaha, teams from Great Britain, Tonga and Cook Islands, and a New Zealand Army team.

Pikiao stalwarts Ellis Tepania, 63, and John Frank Lemmon, 80, enjoyed every aspect of the tournament.



*Ngongotaha's Jason Walker makes a break. Photo/supplied*

"There are a lot of cobwebs," Tepania said. "The skills come back - the biggest enemy for me is fatigue, the mind is always willing but I'm not as sharp as I used to be.

"The tournament is wonderful, we're all forming friendships and a bond. This is my first time playing and it's great. I just thought I'd try it, it's a new challenge, I played for Pikiao and in Wellington in the past.

"The best part is just the shared joy of having a run and being with all our people and our families. We're a really close, tight-knit community Ngati Pikiao.

Everyone comes out and enjoys the day, they come to see their dads, uncles and grandfathers run around."

Lemmon had been playing masters rugby league for years. A highlight for him was in 2010 when he represented Bay of Plenty in a curtain raiser for the New Zealand Warriors at Rotorua International Stadium.

"I've played rugby league my whole life, but this will be my last tournament. I started playing league when I came out of the army. This tournament is good for Rotorua and it's good for the kids to see, keeps them out of trouble. I'm making the most of this tournament, I've met a lot of people from different places, and I'll leave the rugby league to my grandchildren after this."

Masters of Rugby League New Zealand chairman Phil Campbell said organisers could not have asked for better weather this week and many of the visitors were impressed by the facilities in Rotorua.



Pikiao's Pete Makiha spots a gap. Photo/supplied

"Overall it has been a fantastic party in the park, we've been lucky and it has been beautiful. The players love the venue. This is probably the best venue in New Zealand because it's central, there are plenty of fields and the facilities themselves are wonderful," Campbell said.

The feature match, played yesterday afternoon, was between Great Britain and New Zealand.

"Twenty years ago, we welcomed the first Australian team, Runaway Bay Old Boys, to our first masters tournament held in Rotorua. Now, 20 years later,

we welcome the Great Britain Masters Team on their inaugural trip to New Zealand - masters history in the making. It has been a long time since a Great Britain rugby league team has played in Rotorua.

"There were a number of new teams; Howick Hornets, Manukau Magpies, Coastline Tauranga, Pikiao Rotorua, Ngongotaha, Rotorua, also teams representing Tonga and Scotland. Two ladies' teams are taking part for the first time, Masters One from Northland and Mustang Sallies from Ellerslie RLFC Auckland.

"With these teams a new era has begun in masters, we hope it will not be their last. This is what the great Masters spirit is built on," Campbell said.



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