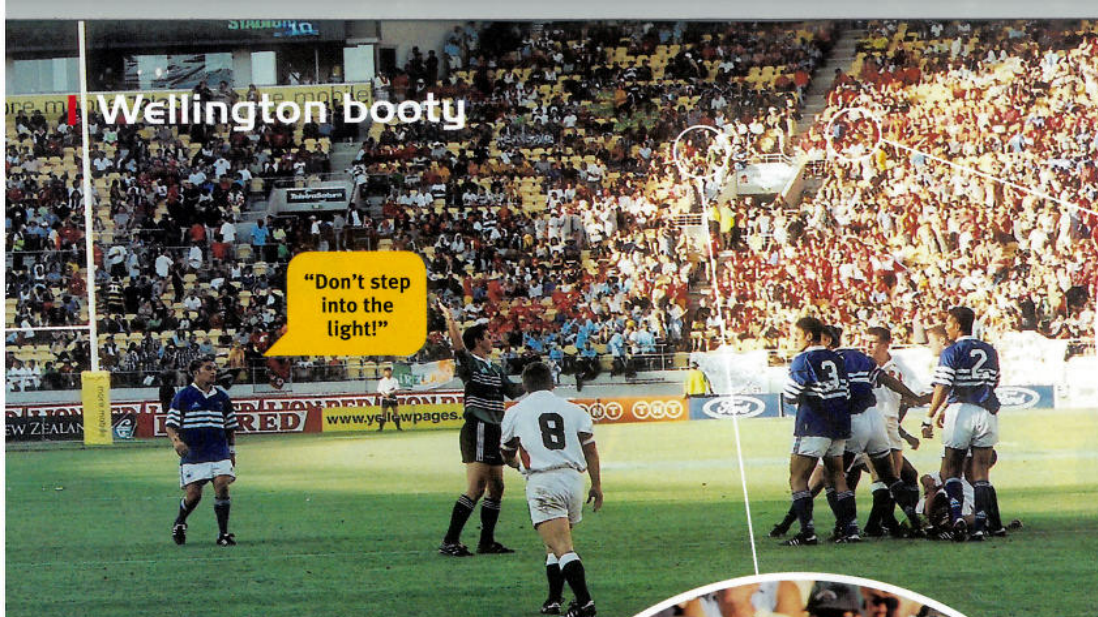


Wellington booty



FRIDAY

WELLINGTON'S stadium – known to the sponsors as the WestpacTrust Stadium, and to everyone else as "the Cake Tin" – is sold-out for the first time since the Sevens first kicked off here three years ago

At the 1pm start, though, the Cake Tin is mostly empty. One stand, known as "the Redzone", is fuller than the rest. Most of the people in it are dressed like idiots. A group of about 10, all wearing blue wigs, their faces painted black with a white cross, are screaming. "We wanna be on telly!" shouts a woman, pointing at the big screen at the far end of the field.

"We're a group of friends from all over New Zealand who get together and have fun," says Auckland Chris. "We were pissed before we got here. If New Zealand wins, we care about this a lot. If they don't, we don't care at all."

I ask Keely and Jo, two girls in cowboy hats, who's going to win. "Japan, whatever," says Jo.

You don't care, do you?
"We're just here for the after-match party. This is our first visit to Wellington in about 16 months. Wellington guys are a lot hotter than Poms," Jo says randomly.

What do you think of Sevens?

"You get the hottest guys from 16 countries here..."

On the pitch, Fiji wallops Canada 60-10. Games are only 15 minutes long, but on a full-sized pitch that's long enough for a good team to find the holes in a weak defence.

I see a bunch of people wearing "Oh Canada 2002" T-shirts and go over to commiserate. They aren't Canadians.

Where are you all from?
"Wellington!"

Except the one guy not wearing the shirt. He is Canadian. "I came over to talk to my countrymen," he says sadly.

It is 2.30pm and the stadium is filling up. China is taking on Samoa, which looks like some mythical battle between elves and mountain giants. The Chinese tackle the Samoans, but the Samoans don't notice. China loses 46-0, and the players come off looking slightly less happy than yesterday, and still baffled.

A Mexican wave makes it halfway round the ground but dies of apathy. A fool with a mic wades into the crowd to get people's best chant for the big screen. In a corner, five blokes dressed as the Blues Brothers do a dance. The atmosphere is building.

At 3pm, South Africa takes on France and wins 14-7 in a very tight game. The crowd cheers for both

teams equally. They cheer a boy who drives a kart onto the field with the kicking tee. They cheer everything. On a rail a banner says, optimistically, "China will roll you." Irish flags are being waved. The Irish team isn't here, but that's the Irish for you.

While England plays Papua New Guinea, the American team warms up vigorously by the side of the pitch. After half an hour they are still warming up. If they carry on, they will be too tired to play the match.

There is a big cheer as New Zealand runs on – to AC/DC, strangely. The USA stops warming up and starts playing them. In the first minute a Kiwi player

China is taking on Samoa, which looks like some mythical battle between elves and mountain giants

is sin-binned for battering a Yank off the ball; then the USA scores. This is a surprise, to say the least.

Startled into action, New Zealand scores in return, and the players start throwing the ball casually around the pitch, scoring whenever they feel like it. There is a sound like purring, which I realise is that of Kiwis watching their team grinding another into the dust.

Next is Argentina versus the Cook Islands, but no-one cares. With the first important game of the day out of

the way, everyone's gone to the toilet.

In the Redzone, I try and talk to a bunch of people with names like Dingo, Lulu, Tinkerbell, Angela, Edge and Rhino. They are all wearing T-shirts with "Redzone 2002" on the front, in case they become disorientated. Judging by the state of them at 5pm, this is a good idea.

"All we care about is beer," says Dingo. "And seeing a few tries."

"I'm getting married on Sunday," says Angela.

Does your fiancé know you're here?
"No."

Australia comes out for its match against Japan to massive – and

predictable – boos. Amazingly, Japan goes up 7-0, and hangs on to win. The Japanese players leave the field like heroes.

Through the afternoon and evening, the rest of the pool matches roll by. Fiji beats Tonga; Wales beats Canada; England beats the USA; China is trampled 61-0 by South Africa. Later, a male streaker dashes wildly over the floodlit grass and performs a couple of quite decent sidesteps before succumbing to a steward's, er, tackle.