

Wellington bootu



He wished he hadn't bet on a China win

Karl Te Mana & The Waka



The NZ Seven's Team

SATURDAY

SATURDAY is (slightly) more serious. Today, the better teams play each other, and the minnows get to play China. It is also much hotter. Gone is the infamous Wellington wind that earlier caused my plane to cartwheel onto the tarmac (well, nearly).

Once China has been thrashed 36-5 by the Cook Islands and Canada has beaten PNG (to the delight of the fake-Canadians), New Zealand plays Wales. Every time the Kiwis get the ball, they score. They get the ball a lot.

Wales is murdered 78-0. The crowd goes mad. The Blues Brothers do another routine; a guy in an Austin Powers outfit jitterbugs his way through the pissed blokes in the Redzone; a sex doll is thrown into the air; music blares after every try.

I talk to a group of girls who are happily bouncing up and down. Can I interview you for **RALPH**?

"No! We've got clothes on." Booring erupts as South Africa and Australia take the field. The support has generally been for the underdog, but here are two old enemies of the Kiwi. Ominously, South Africa beats a strong Australian team 28-0.

There is no let-up in the rugby. The tries are endless; there are plenty of

forward passes, but no-one seems to mind, least of all the referees. People tune in and out. Sometimes they clap and cheer; sometimes the most spectacular run is ignored.

All the teams are still playing, even China, which has lost every game. If you can't win the cup, you get a shot at the plate, then the bowl, or the shield. Finally, at 5pm, China's chances run out. They get the wooden spoon. The players also get a big round of applause, despite being crap. Or because of it. Just after 5pm, four blokes in dresses arrive. They get a big round of applause, too.

Everyone is drunk, but happy. High up in the stands, a gorgeous tanned girl is dancing like she's making love. She comes down to get her photo taken. I ask if she's having fun.

"Oh yes," she breathes, pointing her bronzed cleavage at me.

Empty plastic beer bottles cover the field's edge. When the losing England players do a lap of honour, someone chucks a full one down. A player picks it up, says "Cheers!" and downs it.

A huge cheer erupts as New Zealand and South Africa run on. Right from the start, the Kiwis feel the pressure of playing in front of a home crowd, rushing moves they performed perfectly against the Welsh. South

Africa breaks away and scores. The atmosphere drops out of the stadium, as though the floor's been removed.

It fills up again, even louder than before. Every time the Kiwis attack, there is a great whistling roar like a steam train approaching the end of the line at 200 kays. Never mind all that nonsense I've heard about not caring about the result. When New Zealand plays rugby, it's no joke.

The Kiwis equalise, and the place explodes. "Eric!" cries a woman from the stand, to veteran All Black hero Eric Rush. "Eric, will you marry me?"

But South Africa is a disciplined team. They break away and score again. The noise dips and fills, and

As the streaker is led away, a policeman arrives armed with a towel – and puts it on the guy's head

the applause for the South Africans is generous, considering. Then they score again. The Kiwis – team and crowd – seem resigned.

The South Africans win 20-10. The seven Kiwi players do a long lap of honour and are treated like they've won it anyway.

When they've gone, at least a third of the stadium has gone with them. It feels like a party with the alcohol suddenly confiscated.

But the rugby goes on. The Cook Islands plays PNG, to universal indifference. Music blares again to try and rouse the crowd. Under floodlights, the players run like maniacs, each with four shadows.

The winners of the plate, shield and bowl step up on a dais to receive medals. Another streaker manages to cover three-quarters of the pitch before he's caught. As he's led away, a policeman arrives armed with a towel – and puts it on the guy's head.

During the final between Samoa and South Africa, a player is injured scoring a try. He lies unconscious, or dead, accompanied by Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl" at full blare. Some

people dance, some don't. The South Africans win, taking the tournament.

There are presentations, and the Harleys do a lap of the pitch with the girls before roaring down the players' tunnel. The closing ceremony features a Chinese dragon and more flag-carrying girls. Then they're gone, too, along with the drunk people in wigs, who are heading off to get even drunker. I watch the stands emptying and realise I've been sober far too long.