

Peter Crawford - TCRT

Peter Crawford was chairman of the Taranaki Rugby Football Union when the idea of the trust was first mentioned to him.

In the preceding years, as a young executive from the Patea and Border clubs in South Taranaki, Crawford saw first hand the struggles the union went through annually to raise money to pay for the amateur game throughout the region.

"I spent a huge amount of my early years trying to raise money," he said.

"It was never ending and by the end of the year you'd think we had done reasonably well but the following year you would be back out there again, it was bloody hard work."

The Whenuakura farmer admits he spent many spare moments trying to think up ways to raise more money for the union to ease the burden, especially when the game went professional in 1996.

That included talking to many business owners when he took over the chairman's role at the union.

While a number of those meetings were fruitful, in his own mind he kept coming back to exactly what he thought was the backbone of the province - farming.

An early meeting involving then chief executive Paul Easton, former farm adviser Jeff Lagan, Kevin Barrett and Crawford touched on the idea of potentially leasing a farm but the idea never gained much traction.

However, Coastal's successful foray into the same concept raised Crawford's interest again which was further heightened following a meeting with Ray Barron and Bryan 'Scratch' Campbell.

"They ran us through what they had done but then the idea sort of stalled again," he said.

That was until former All Black Mark Robinson was appointed the new chief executive of Taranaki Rugby.

A meeting between Crawford, Barron, who was now an executive on Taranaki Rugby's board, and Robinson reinvigorated the enthusiasm to look further into developing a trust.

"He (Robinson) could see how good it could be for the union long-term almost straight away," he said.

It was not long after that meeting that they heard about a potential farm coming up for lease on Inaha Rd.

"The rest is history. We were in the car and out there."

Crawford said Robinson put "a power of work" into getting the concept underway and they went full steam ahead trying to make it happen.

He remembers the challenges - the Fonterra share issue, trying to get charitable status for the trust, dealing with on-farm problems and trying to sort a myriad of things happening from all parts of the province.

"I was chairman of Taranaki Rugby at the time and I was dealing with rugby 24/7 it felt like," he said.

Crawford was then delighted when Barron agreed to be chairman of the trust, with the encouragement of John Eagles, and when Michael Joyce agreed to come on board as a farm consultant.

“He was overseas at the time he agreed to it but I must say he was absolutely magnificent as well. I don’t know where we would have been without Michael and I say to myself sometimes just how lucky we are.

“Michael knew how to cut all the crap out, he knew exactly what sort of cows we needed, all his farm consultancy skills came through and he just worked his butt off.”

Despite all that work, the Fonterra share issue remained the biggest concern for Crawford who remembers vividly being called by the milk giant’s former deputy chairman Greg Gent to say they had a year to supply milk before they could resolve the issue.

The call had come while he and wife Sue were returning from Taupo where they had an emergency meeting with Barron and Joyce about the issue.

Crawford said Joyce’s skills, combined with the work Barron and Eagles were putting in, helped him eventually sleep through the night after a prolonged period of worry about the future of the trust.

“It was bloody scary stuff for a while,” he said.

Although the early teething problems gave him anxious moments, Crawford said the support from farmers, business owners, contractors and even tradies throughout the province was truly remarkable.

The donations of stock, farm equipment and labour all combined to bring collective enthusiasm to the project.

Crawford believed the concept of the trust appealed to so many people because they could see the money raised would go to the community game.

“I think if we were setting up a farm to look after the professional side of the game, it would have struggled,” he said.

“People decided it was good for them and the community aspect to it was what sold it for me.”

For Crawford, the motivation to get the trust established and make sure it was successful was in large part to make sure the region’s clubs were in a healthier state.

“We were very keen for cheques to start getting to the clubs. That’s why we set a policy from the start that money each year had to go to the clubs.

“That’s what we were set up and it would have been easy to spend money elsewhere when we got established but the clubs always had to come first in our minds.”

Although it has been a number of years since Crawford stepped down as a Taranaki Rugby board member and chairman, the life member has remained on the trust.

His motivation for that longevity was to reach a point when the trust was in a position to buy a farm, something it did in 2022 with the acquisition of the Johnston farm.

“Staying there to see that through was always the goal. Once we bought it, we knew we could never get chucked out, as long as we paid the interest.

“That was always a worry with a lease farm, you could always get kicked out. For me, knowing I could walk away with the sort of asset as farm ownership, long-term we know that is going to be huge.

“I don’t want you to put this down but I shed a tear when we finally got across the line because I think it’s just amazing.”

Aside from the farm ownership, and the continued success of the Beach Energy farm, Crawford said he was also proud of just how much they have done for the clubs in terms of providing coaching and development to grow player numbers was significant.

The rugby development officer programme was significant in his mind and the feedback from clubs had given him a lot of pleasure.

Seeing Taranaki Rugby able to field a number of teams it might not have because of its financial predicament in recent years also gave him a great deal of satisfaction.

“That’s part of the reason we were set up, to help the rugby union out in tough times. I’ve got a huge amount of pleasure in being part of the trust and to do things like that.

“I also have been really fortunate to work with the likes of Ray Barron and Michael Joyce and I must mention John Eagles. Without all the work he did to get that charitable trust, that was huge, and he will always be a legend of the trust because of it.

“Those three people, when I was chairman of the rugby union, they took on the lion’s share of work. It was just amazing.”