

TOGETHER TAI TOKERAU

RUMBLE IN RUSSELL



2026

EVENT WRAP UP



RUGBY
FOR LIFE



26 AND 27 JUNE 2026
TE TAI TOKERAU



What a Weekend

The Rumble in Russell 2026 brought Northland together in a way that reminded us all why sport matters.

MPs swapped Parliament for a rugby field, local heroes stepped up for their communities, the Parly Ferns took on Russell on the netball court, and Russell showed the country what Tai Tokerau is made of.

Thank you to everyone who made it happen.

Ajit Balasingham *Chair - Rugby for Life*

Riki Kinnaird *Co-founder and Deputy Chair - Rugby for Life*

Sir Michael Jones *Rugby for Life Trustee*



THIS WAS YOUR EVENT



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Welcome from RUGBY FOR LIFE®

When we set out to bring the Rumble in Russell back for a second year, our goal was simple: to demonstrate that sport can do much more than entertain, it can connect people, communities and leaders in ways nothing else can.

Over two days in June, we watched that idea come to life. Ministers stood shoulder to shoulder with All Black legends. Local heroes from Russell shared a paddock or court with the country's political leadership.

Families lined the sidelines at the school and ground - free to enjoy a day of netball and rugby with a community spirit that lifted and belonged to everyone.

Te Tai Tokerau at her best and together showing the nation that sport acts as soft diplomacy, an economic driver, team building skills with player confidence and the perfect panacea to winter blues bringing great joy to all.

None of this happens by accident, and none of it happens alone.

This weekend was made possible by the generosity of our sponsors, the tireless work of our volunteers, the hospitality of the Duke of Marlborough, and the warmth of the Russell community who opened their arms to all of us. A special thank you to our partners, the Russell Sports Club and the NZ Parliament Sports Trust, who stood alongside us to make this weekend possible.

This book is our way of saying thank you, to everyone who gave their time, their support and their belief in what sport can do for our regions and our country.

Rugby For Life exists because of moments like this. On behalf of the Trust, thank you for being part of the Rumble in Russell.



Ajit Balasingham
RUGBY FOR LIFE CHAIRPERSON

FRIDAY

'Formal' Function

Friday's Game Changers Forum brought together some of New Zealand's most influential voices under one roof at the Duke of Marlborough Hotel.

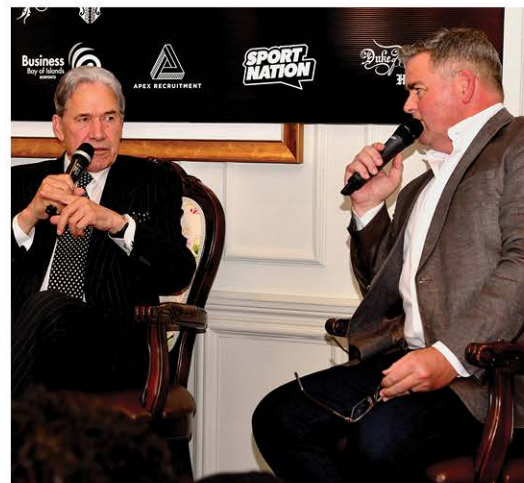
MC Andrew Saville kept the event moving with wit, charm and warmth along with the occasional raucous joke. When the Hon. Mark Mitchell, Minister for Sport, whose keynote was to set the tone for the weekend was delayed by storms and gale force winds, he drove from Wellington to Russell when his flight was cancelled. *Legend!*

A leadership panel featuring Melodie Robinson, Ian Jones, Kirk Hope and Burton Shipley explored sport's role in diplomacy, regional investment and protecting grassroots communities. The event's centrepiece was a fireside chat with Rt Hon Winston Peters, who spoke on sport, diplomacy, and New Zealand's global influence.

All of this played out against the legendary hospitality of the Duke of Marlborough - New Zealand's oldest licensed hotel, and one of the country's most iconic venues. Right in the heart of Russell, the Duke provided the perfect backdrop for the event where sport, leadership and community came together to connect and inspire.

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CHARITABLE TRUST

Duke of Marlborough
Hotel



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THE NETBALL: Dame Jenny Shipley Cup

Saturday's action at the Russell School kicked off at 9am with a first – which has quickly become one of the highlights of the Rumble in Russell weekend - the netball match for the Dame Jenny Shipley Cup.

The Parly Ferns, drawn from across Parliament, took to the court against a spirited Russell Invitational side made up of local talent and community stalwarts.

Named in honour of Dame Jenny Shipley, New Zealand's first female Prime Minister and a champion of women in sport and leadership, the Cup added real meaning to the contest. It was a fitting tribute, a reminder that this weekend is about more than the scoreline, it's about the people and values sport represents.

The netball brought a new energy to the Rumble in Russell, with families and locals gathering courtside long before the match kicked off. The standard of play was high, the atmosphere higher, and the Russell Invitational side gave the Parly Ferns every bit as much of a contest as their rugby-playing counterparts would face later in the day.

The local Russell team lifted the **Dame Jenny Shipley Cup** this year, but the real winner was Te Tai Tokerau, for the chance to see the game, and the country's leaders, up close.



THE RUGBY:

Locals v Parliament

At 2.30pm, the main event, the NZ Parliamentary Rugby Team against the Russell SC Invitational XV, battling for the Capital Cup kicked off.

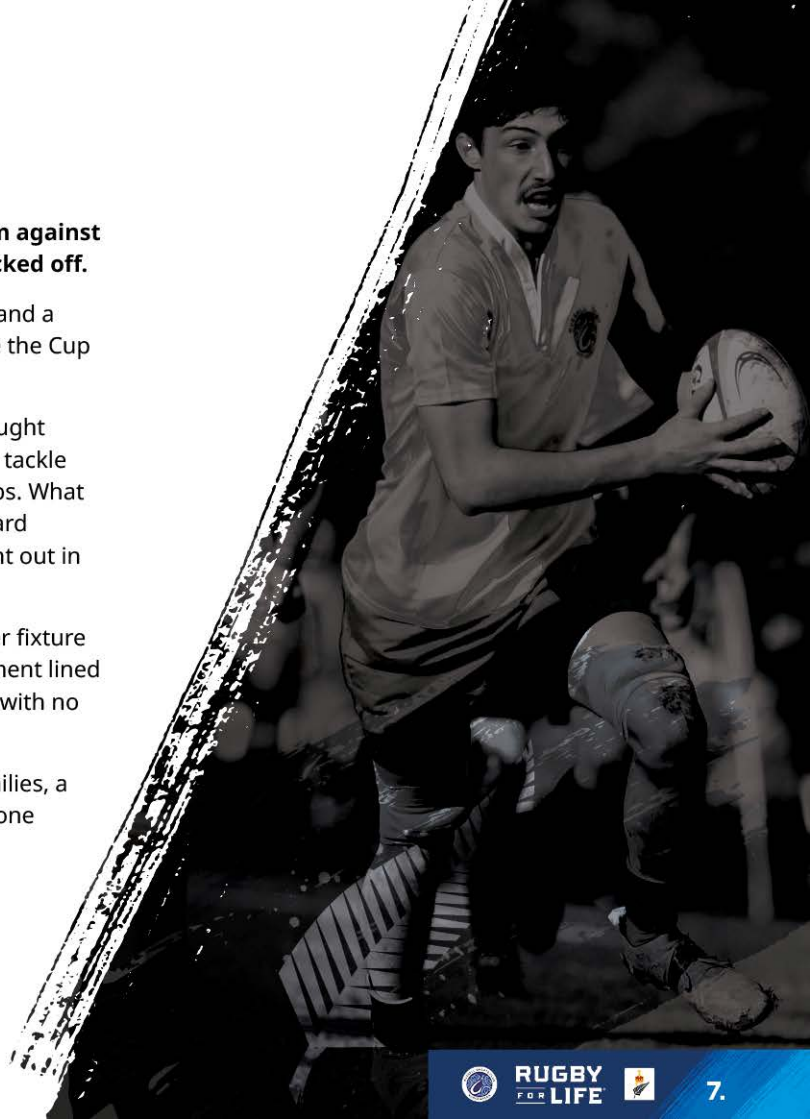
Russell arrived as defending holders, and with home advantage and a proud rugby history behind them - they were never going to give the Cup up lightly.

The Parliamentary side, made up of current and former MPs brought experience and a few surprises of their own including a late high tackle from a local player that gave Mark Mitchell a couple of broken ribs. What followed was everything a Rumble in Russell match should be: hard running, big hits, plenty of laughter, and a genuine contest fought out in front of a packed, free-to-attend crowd.

This is what makes the Rumble in Russell different from any other fixture on the calendar. All Black legends and sitting Members of Parliament lined up alongside Russell's own mates, neighbours, and local heroes, with no distinction made once the whistle blew. That's exactly the point.

The locals retain the cup, and the real result was a day full of families, a community proud of its team, and a reason that reminded everyone why grassroots rugby and netball still matter so much.

**WHERE RUGBY UNITES
A COMMUNITY.**



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RUMBLE IN RUSSELL



The Importance of Community

At its heart, the Rumble in Russell is not about rugby, netball or even the leaders and former sports stars who took part, it's about community.

A local sports club is far more than a place where games are played; it's where young people find mentors, confidence, and lifelong friendships, and where communities come together to support one another. This weekend showed that belief in action.

When clubs, iwi, businesses, government, and volunteers align around a shared purpose, incredible things happen. Strong clubs build strong communities, and strong communities build a stronger New Zealand and Russell proved that in June.



ANNOUNCEMENT

Sir Michael Jones x Waitemata

For Sir Michael Jones, community has always come first. Alongside his legendary rugby career, he's made sure no one in West Auckland goes without by providing food parcels through The Village Trust in Avondale.

Now he's bringing that same spirit to a significant announcement: Sir Michael and RFL Chair Ajit Balasingham confirm that Waitematā Rugby Club will be the first club in Auckland to adopt the Rugby for Life (RFL) framework.



The timing couldn't be better as 2027 marks Waitematā Rugby Club's 100th anniversary. RFL will stand shoulder to shoulder with the club, powering a vibrant, healthy future for the team and the community around it.

And results speak for themselves. Te Tai Tokerau and Tokoroa have already seen RFL transform their clubs through ETE (Education, Training and Employment) programmes and hands-on support for club managers.

Rugby clubs are becoming community powerhouses and RFL is leading the charge. By turning clubs into hubs for teamwork, communication, and big goal setting, RFL is helping tamariki, rangatahi and whole neighbourhoods thrive, thanks to the drive of passionate staff, volunteers, and coaches nationwide.



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Sponsor Acknowledgement

TRUSTEE & LEADERSHIP

- Ajit Balasingham
 - Sir Michael Jones & the Sir Michael Jones Foundation
 - Sir Graham Lowe
 - Riki Kinnaird
 - Rugby for Life Trustees
 - Clark Lewis and his team
 - Colab Marketing
 - Kathy Cunningham
-

GUEST SPEAKER & PANEL

- Winston Peters
 - Mark Mitchell
 - Shane Jones
 - Burton Shipley
 - Melodie Robinson
 - Ian Jones
 - Kirk Hope
 - Andrew Saville
 - Jenny Shipley
 - Graham Thorne
 - Deb Rewiri
 - Rob Nicol
 - Pita Tipene
-

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT & SPORTING TEAMS

- Parliamentary & RFL / Russell Sports Invitation Rugby Teams
 - Parliamentary & Russell Netball Teams
 - All Members of Parliament who travelled to Russell with special thanks to Suzanne Yee (their team manager)
 - Parliamentary team and RFL / Russell managers and support staff
 - Under 13 Ohawai and Keri Keri Junior Rugby Teams, parents and support staff
-

SPORTING ORGANISATIONS WHO PARTICIPATED

- Sport Northland
- Northland Rugby Union
- Northland Golf
- NZ Universities Rugby
- NZ Rugby Foundation
- Russell School
- Cheerleaders
- Referees
- Match officials

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- Nauti Penguin Tavern
 - Resport Charitable Trust (Joey and JD, and Sharon)
 - Kevin Drinkwater who gave his time for Transport
 - Deb Rewiri and Kororareka Marae
 - Peter Stewart & Gary Hooson and the Russell Sports Club
 - Russell School
 - Bay of Islands Business Association who paid for the community busses
 - Russell accommodation providers and Businesses
 - Russell locals
 - Rewi Spraggon NZ Hangi Master
-

SPONSORS & SUPPORTERS

- Northland NZ
 - Foundation North
 - Whangarei District Council
 - Kaipara District Council
 - Northland Regional Council
 - Far North District Council
 - Northland Waste
 - The Duke of Marlborough Hotel
 - Pub Charity
 - Grassroots Trust
 - Apex Recruitment
 - Te Hiringa Trust Business & Promotions
 - Te Kahu o Taonui
 - Marsden Wood Lawyers
 - Lion and Sharkey
 - 4 Square's (Russell, Waipapa and Paihia)
 - Neat Meat
 - Far North Rentals and Harrison's Carpets
 - All table hosts at the Leadership forum
 - And all Event sponsors
-

EMERGENCY & PUBLIC SERVICES

- Hato Hone St John
- The Dippie family and Richard for parking support
- Clair for Physio support
- Russell Mini Bus
- Northland Ferries



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In the News



MPs don rugby boots and netball bibs for charity

In photos: MPs, sports stars and hāngī chef rumble in Russell

Rumble in Russell: Politicians have a bruising encounter with ex-All Blacks



The Rumble in Russell 2026 captured the attention of media across the country. Here is what they had to say:



Mark Mitchell 'busted a couple of ribs' at charity rugby match



Northland's Rugby for Life charity grows as West Auckland joins programme



Russell Wins Rumble as Sports Minister Breaks Ribs



Rugby for Life fundraiser draws crowds



The Rumble in Russell featured on The Mike Hosking Breakfast



Millsy & Guy broadcast live from Russell across the Rumble in Russell weekend



Free Community Event - Rumble in Russell



The Rumble in Russell got a shout out on the Aotearoa Rugby Pod



Thank you to our Sponsors

The Rumble in Russell simply would not happen without the generosity of our sponsors and partners.

From Founding and Leadership Partners to Community Partners and individual donors, your support covered everything from catering and accommodation to ground preparation and transport allowing the public to enjoy this event completely free of charge.

Thank you for believing in what sport can do for our regions, and for backing a weekend that put Te Tai Tokerau on the national stage. Your contribution goes directly toward strengthening grassroots clubs and creating pathways for young people across New Zealand.

We are deeply grateful for your partnership.

EVENT HOSTS



Rugby For Life



*Duke of
Marlborough Hotel*



*Russell Sports
Club*



*NZ Parliament
Sports Trust*



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13.

Our Amazing Sponsors & Supporters



All table hosts at the Leadership forum | All Event sponsors



TOGETHER TAI TOKERAU

Together Tai Tokerau began with a simple vision: that sport could bring our region together in a way nothing else can.

The Rumble in Russell proved it. Over one weekend, sport brought everyone together. Mayors from across the region stood side by side, with ministers and members of parliament standing alongside them. Whangarei District Council, Kaipara District Council, Northland Regional Council and the Far North District Council all showed up for Te Tai Tokerau, alongside Northland NZ and leaders from iwi, business and community.

That is what Together Tai Tokerau means. When our region moves as one, we show the country what the north can do. Leaders bring leaders together, and communities are stronger for it.

To every council, organisation and leader who backed this kaupapa, thank you. This is just the beginning.



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Our Magnificent Volunteers

Behind every moment of this weekend, every meal served, every ground marked out, every guest welcomed, stood our volunteers, all 200 of them!

Long before the first guest arrived at the Duke or the first whistle blew at the school, volunteers were setting up marquees, organising transport, preparing catering and making sure sixty-plus visiting players and officials had somewhere to stay.

Over two days, they ran the gate, marshalled traffic, staffed the sidelines, and kept the community kai flowing. They did it all without asking for recognition because that's what makes the Rumble in Russell a true community event rather than just another fixture on the calendar.

Rugby For Life is built on the belief that strong clubs are held up by the people who give their time freely for the good of others, and this weekend was living proof of that. The Russell Sports Club and Russell Rugby Club volunteers, in particular, gave up their weekend so that the rest of us could enjoy ours.

To every single volunteer who folded a chair, poured a drink, drove a van, or simply lent a hand where it was needed, thank you. This event, and everything Rugby For Life stands for, exists because people like you show up.

- Registration team
- RFL volunteers
- Russell Sports Club volunteers
- Set-up crew
- Pack-down crew
- Car parking marshals
- Bus coordinators
- Water crew
- Grounds team
- Bar staff
- Kitchen staff
- Cleaning team
- Sound & AV team
- Stage crew



Media & Communications

A huge thank you to everyone who helped share the story of Rumble in Russell with audiences across Northland and beyond.

From media coverage and photography to radio and social media, your support helped build excitement and celebrate the event. You helped showcase the incredible community spirit behind the weekend.

- Sports Nation Team incl Kyle Mills
- Photography by Lex Wright
- Peter de Graaf and RNZ
- Mike Hosking and Andrew Saville for their week after chats
- Mark Mitchell
- Local newspapers
- Radio stations
- Social media supporters

SPECIAL SHOUT OUT

**A HUGE THANK YOU TO LEX FOR
CAPTURING THE SPIRIT, ENERGY
AND SPECIAL MOMENTS OF
RUMBLE IN RUSSELL**



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A Final Word of Thanks

Two days. Two codes. One community and a weekend that showed exactly what sport can do when the right people show up for the right reasons.

None of it was inevitable. It took a Minister who drove through a storm rather than miss it. It took a local Russell side that refused to let the Capital Cup go without a fight, and a Parly Ferns team happy to play and hand the inaugural Dame Jenny Shipley Cup to the locals. It took Ministers and MPs, All Black legends and local heroes, standing in the same paddock or school ground with no distinction between them. And it took two hundred volunteers who wanted to help and asked for nothing in return.

Most of all, it took the people of Te Tai Tokerau, who opened their hearts, their hospitality and their community to the rest of the country for a weekend, and reminded us why grassroots clubs matter so much and how sport has the power to change lives.

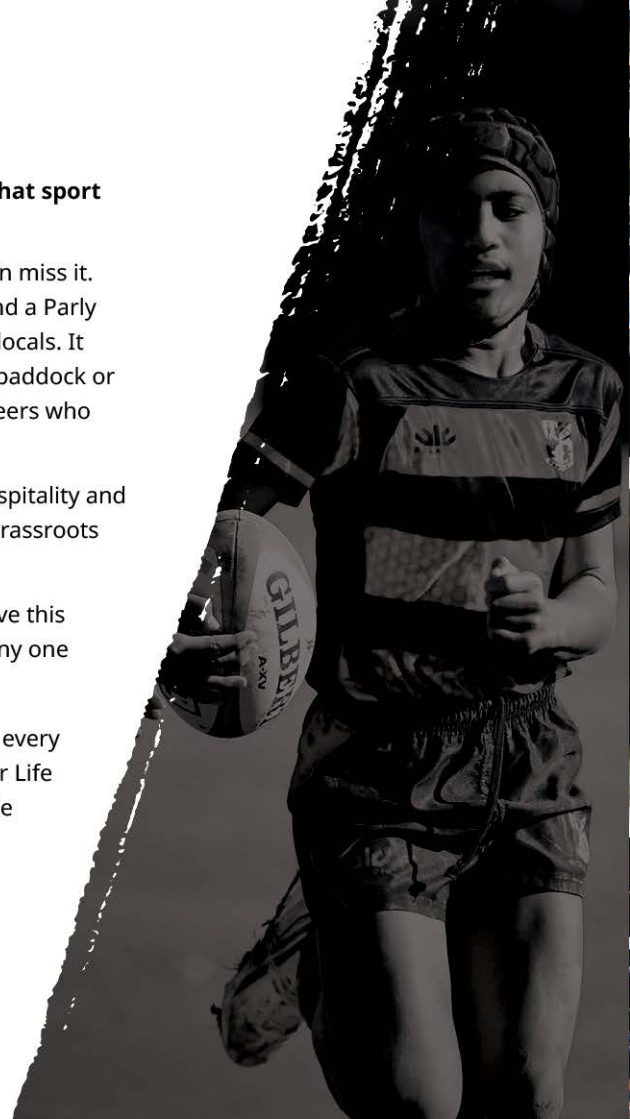
To our Founding, Leadership and Community Partners: you made it possible to give this weekend to the public for free, and that generosity built something bigger than any one sponsorship could buy.

To the Duke of Marlborough, the Russell Sports Club, the Russell Rugby Club, and every volunteer who folded a chair, parked a car or poured a drink, thank you. Rugby For Life exists for weekends like this. We're already looking forward to bringing the Rumble in Russell back for a third year in 2028, and we hope you'll be there with us.

On behalf of the Rugby for Life Trustees, it is a privilege to thank you.

Ajit Balasingham

RUGBY FOR LIFE CHAIRPERSON





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SEE YOU IN 2028