

Herne Bay Heroes: Mark Roberts

By some distance the highlight of the 2015 AGM was Scott Kittelty's announcement that the achievements of a past president were being recognized. Initially he withheld the name instead drip feeding the assembly with increasingly obvious clues. I knew who it was when he mentioned that the person in question used the gym to practice boxing. And so it was that a life membership was conferred on Scott's doubles partner, friend and mentor Mark Roberts. It was a shrewd and popular decision as it reminded us of Mark's considerable input during his time at the helm and helped the club move on from what had been an angry, difficult and entertaining AGM the year before.

Before revisiting the time when Mark and his wife Leanne ran the show it's worth spending time discussing his back story. Mark is one of three boys brought up in Cockle Bay in Auckland's Eastern Suburbs. They were a sporty lot: rugby and cricket were their main passion and all were pretty good. Mark's mum played squash and took him along to have a knock when he was a kid but it was cricket and rugby that captured the imagination of the Robert's brothers. Their dad Lucky was a talented sportsman and is someone Mark still considers one of two mentors who have shaped his life. It not just the countless balls that he threw at his sons but the messages he repeated to them about staying humble and things he still says to keep their feet on the ground. Between the ages of 18 to 25 Mark worked in the automotive industry before moving to his current outfit, AlSCO which was then owned by a New Zealand family and was called NZTS. He's worked there since. AlSCO is one of those companies most of us hardly notice that provides uniforms, cleaning products and linen and much else to other businesses. He started off as a delivery driver 28 years ago and in 2014 became Group General Manager of the New Zealand operation. He has around 800 employees under him and his job now takes him to The States every year, where the parent company is based, Australia more frequently and around this country most of all.

Lucky Roberts was a senior manager in the same business. He wasn't altogether comfortable when Mark entered the business but Mark knows his dad is proud that he's eclipsed where he got to. "But still to this day," Mark told me, "he still tries to keep me grounded. For instance I bought myself a nice car and he said "Really. What have you got that for? You could have bought a Holden or a Ford couldn't you?" What is revealing about this story is that anyone else would have bragged about their recent acquisition and given you the make and model of the car.

Mark was introduced to the Herne Bay club by a working colleague called Les Cross when he moved back to Auckland in 2002. He was talked onto the committee by then president Scott Griffiths and around a year later took over after Scott had a heart attack and subsequently moved overseas. By this time Mark's squash had improved. He was a D grader for a long while after taking the game up in Rotorua at age 34, before the penny dropped and he made it to B1 and stayed there until he reached 50.

I was keen to find out what were the initial challenges when Mark took over as President. Firstly he looked at the accounts and discovered long term liabilities in excess of three quarters of a million dollars including an outstanding loan from Squash New Zealand for twenty thousand bucks as part of a grant they gave us to put in the glass walls. Secondly what had been a brand new facility not that long before was looking tired and lacklustre. In Mark's words the tennis and squash courts were 'shagged', as were the changing rooms. It took time but with the help of a few people working in the right direction things were turned round. Mark was keen to highlight the contribution of Dealla Smith who raised almost \$300,000 for the club. "Without that we wouldn't have the tennis courts we have today." The front walls of the squash courts needed attention and the changing rooms were given a facelift. During his watch the bar was upgraded by working with the breweries and there were other improvements.

But the most lasting and most important thing that was achieved during his time was working with Council to ensure the Club remains a viable proposition. The Club would not be where it is today without the support of Council. On such a high level of debt the Club remains vulnerable to unfavourable interest rate fluctuations and increases. Whilst in recent years this has not been too much of a problem it would seem that interest rates are starting to edge upwards again and will continue to do so in coming years. The terms of the Club's arrangement with Council means we are somewhat shielded from market increases. This has been a significant help to the Club over the years and despite there still being a long way to go the Club's long term liabilities have reduced by a little more than 200k in the last decade.

Another good thing that came out of Mark's time in charge was the raising of the club profile. A posse of A grade squash players were lured to the Club which in turn revived our Cousins Shield team. This helped us to be the most consistently good club side in the country in the last 10 years including winning no less than 3 titles in that time as well as achieving a number of other high placings. Once again Mark deflects any credit for this citing Matt Taylor's vision and drive. The Herne Bay Open was a huge event in the early days apparently one there was an entry of 170 which included a full 16 draw of A graders.

Mark was president when I joined the club just shy of a decade ago. Leanne ran the office and also stayed around meeting members especially on Thursday evenings from both sides of the bar. It seemed they'd been there forever and things would continue that way but Mark made it clear that he wanted to give way to someone else. He had his arm twisted and stayed on as treasurer for another year before reverting back to being a mere playing member. Despite living in Mangere Bridge Mark considers HBPRC his home Club. He continues to play doubles most weeks and says he'd feel disloyal joining another club and of course the couple's daughter, Devon continues to play squash and is now a B1.

Talking about the role of club president Mark told me that sports clubs can't rely on one or two people and Clubs, like businesses need constant fresh energy and eyes. He added "It's

a pretty thankless environment at times, you rely on voluntary labour and there are a lot of competing interests and opinions. But if you do a half reasonable job it's a hard job to get the sack from."

"For Leanne and I it was a common interest for many years. We took a lot of pride and satisfaction in what we were achieving. Not for one moment did we feel bitter about being caught in a job so it wasn't that hard for me to transition back to being just a playing member again. I always felt I was supported by members of the club, both tennis and squash and there wasn't a lot of club conflict which I think can make these jobs so hard. When you do throw a bit of conflict into the mix it's very easy for people to get disenchanted."

Mark also played a bit of tennis which he enjoyed and it also gave him an opportunity to show that he wasn't just a squash member.

Knowing I'd just interviewed Mark, Peter Masefield volunteered something about him. He went on to say that he'd noticed that people worked twice as hard for Mark as they would for anyone else. I'm sure this is true and have been wondering why ever since. It must help that he's good with names and treats you the same and never appears flustered, maybe it's his modest demeanour or more likely it is that he is able to create the sort of working environment where everyone feels valued and knows their contribution gets acknowledged. Whatever it is it's a quality we'd all love to have more of.

Concluding the interview I asked Mark about his thoughts on becoming a life member. "It's an honour." He says "It's nice seeing my name up there on the board. I worked pretty hard but I was one of many. There's always unsung heroes as well."