

Brothers not in arms – siblings reflect across the 1981 Springbok Tour divide

Mike Mather 05:00, Jul 24 2021

The Two Sides mini-documentary was made by Bryce Amner and his brother Lindsay to mark the 40th anniversary of the events at Rugby Park in Hamilton on July 25, 1981.

Lindsay Amner was watching from the sideline as hundreds of protesters occupying the pitch at Rugby Park faced off against riot police when the man standing next to him pulled out a huge knife.

“He said ‘I’m going up in court on Monday. May as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. I’m going to kill me a protester’.

Unbeknown to Lindsay, his brother, Bryce, was among protesters marching to stop the match that day and the tour that was dividing a nation.

The knife-wielding man jumped over the fence and started to run towards the crowd, Lindsay recalls. “The police saw him within about 10 metres and about five guys jumped on him and carted him away.”

It was a surreal moment on an extraordinary day, probably the most dramatic day in the history of Hamilton.

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Four decades have now passed since the thwarted game between Waikato and the touring Springbok team, but for many who were at Rugby Park on July 25, 1981, the memories remain as fresh as if it happened yesterday.

The 1981 Springbok Tour was likely the most violent and divisive series of events in Aotearoa’s history this side of the New Zealand Wars. Pro- and anti-tour convictions ruined friendships and put families at loggerheads.

The Amner household of Hamilton East was very much a case in point.

Bryce and Lindsay were both teenagers at the time and, without each other's knowledge, both went to the sports ground that day. But for very different reasons.



BRYCE AMNER

Hamilton brothers Lindsay and Bryce Amner were on opposite sides of the battlelines at Rugby Park when the touring Springboks came to town to play Waikato.

“He was in the stands, I was in the protest,” says Bryce – although Lindsay later corrects him: “I was just on the embankment. I paid just \$4 to get in. It was the cheapest ticket in the house.”

It might have been a cheap ticket, but it proved to be a front-row seat for an extraordinary spectacle. After a group of about 2000 anti-tour protesters marched on the stadium, an estimated 500 of them ripped down a perimeter fence and fought their way through the spectators to get to the middle of the pitch.

Some of the protesters were set upon by the fans. Many more were collared by the police as they ran on to the field, but about 200 to 250 managed to get to the middle of the pitch, where they linked arms to form a tightly packed single mass.

Little did Lindsay, 16, know, but his 18-year-old brother was among those who had marched on the stadium.



JOHN SELKIRK/STUFF

A wall of policemen appeared on the Tristram St border of Rugby Park - but not before about 500 protesters ripped down a fence and ran onto the field.

Bryce was not in the contingent that made it on to the field, but he demonstrated his opposition to the tour in other ways.

“I was among those who tried to push the cattle trucks [protecting access to one end of the ground] and letting the air out of the tyres.

“I was a student at tech at the time, studying engineering. But I was also socially aware, and I had read about South Africa’s oppressive apartheid regime. I knew we were doing the right thing by trying to stop the tour.”

Lindsay would rather have been watching the game.



JOHN SELKIRK

Anti-tour protesters try to force their way through barriers behind the main stand at Rugby Park before the Springboks v Waikato rugby match. Bryce Amner was among them.

“It would have been a great game. Waikato were the holders of the Ranfurly Shield at the time and, out of all the provincial teams in the country, they would have had the best chance of rolling them. They were a really good side.

“A lot of the fans would have been thinking about a 1956 game, when Waikato beat the Springboks at the start of that tour. We were expecting history to repeat ... so I was really pissed off when the game was called off.

“When we saw the riot police run onto the field we all cheered – ‘Whoa! Look at that! Cool!’ We thought they would clear them off in a matter of minutes.”

But the expected baton charge never came, and the game was called off. Unbeknown to most at the ground, former World War II Spitfire pilot Pat McQuarrie had stolen a Cessna from a Taupō airfield and police believed he might crash it into the main stand.



JOHN SELKIRK/STUFF

Dozens of police attempt to remove the tightly packed protesters from the field as thousands of angry rugby fans look on.

Bryce, meanwhile, managed to avoid being set upon by the angry fans spilling out of the ground, “but I did see a few people coming out with bloodied noses.

“I was a bit weedy at the time and I wanted to avoid any kind of aggression ... I managed to get away down a side street.”

Lindsay is now retired and living in Whatawhata, on the outskirts of Hamilton, while Bryce is now an Anglican priest in Australia and also runs a creative consultancy with his wife, Sally Cloke, called Once in a Whale.

The couple are skilled videographers and happened to be visiting New Zealand at the time of the anniversary. Inspiration struck and they created a short documentary film about Bryce and Lindsay’s experiences.

Aptly titled *Two Sides*, the video contains amateur footage of the protests at Rugby Park shot by their uncle, Tom Bryce.

Lindsay now recognises he “was on the wrong side of history on that one ... but it was not until I got home that I realised Bryce had been a part of it”.

While the brothers have long since buried the hatchet, their respective presence at the aborted match was a source of antagonism between them for a while.

“I don’t think I ever punched Bryce ... but it did get quite heated for a bit there,” Lindsay says. “Our mother did a good job of making sure things got patched over. She was the referee a lot of times.

“I have totally moved on ... To this day I think Bryce was there because he wanted to have a good stir, rather than for any altruistic reasons. But I was pretty naive thinking that sport and politics did not mix.”