

The rising Blue bloods

Wynne Gray

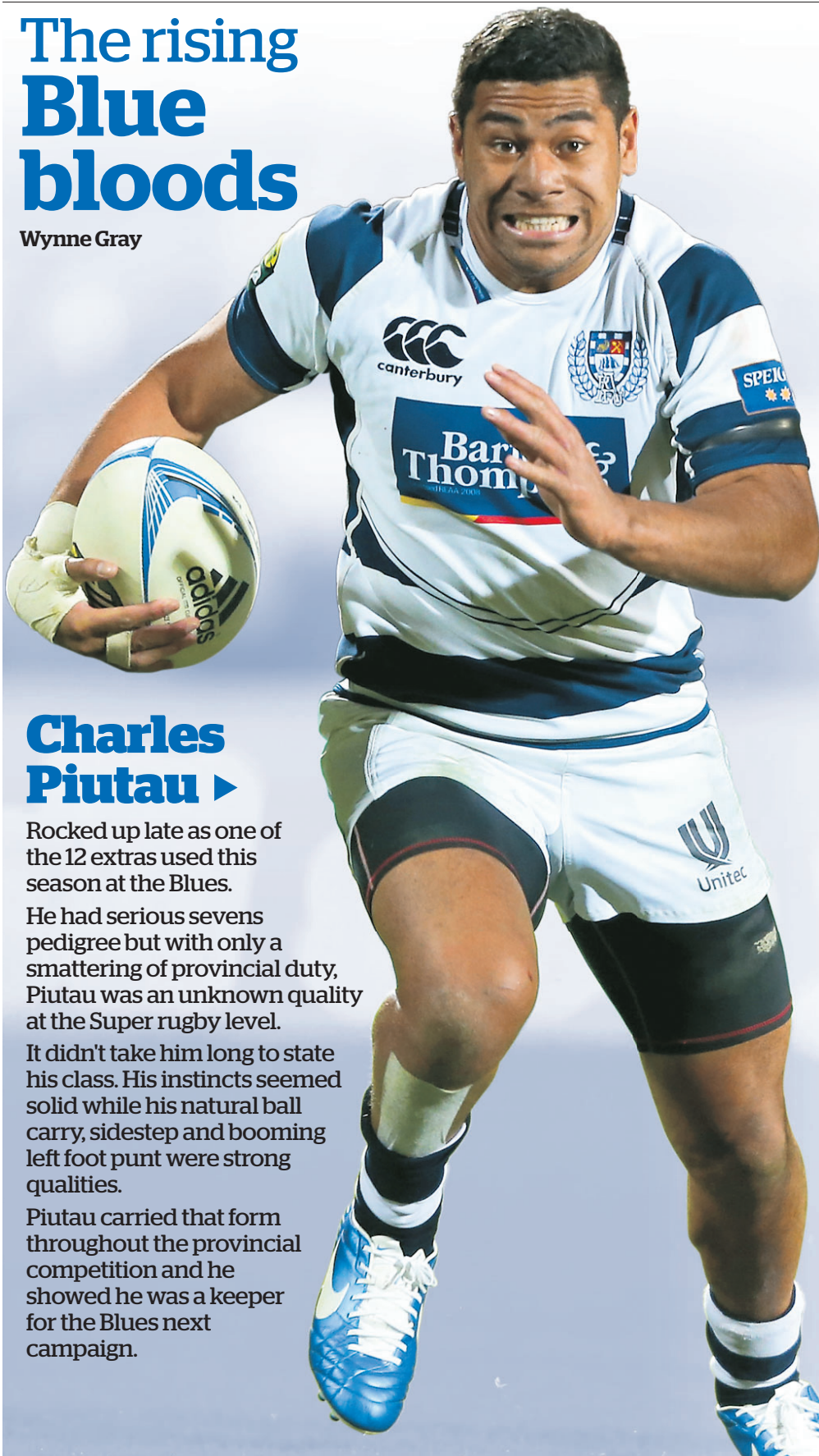
Charles Piutau ▶

Rocked up late as one of the 12 extras used this season at the Blues.

He had serious sevens pedigree but with only a smattering of provincial duty, Piutau was an unknown quality at the Super rugby level.

It didn't take him long to state his class. His instincts seemed solid while his natural ball carry, sidestep and booming left foot punt were strong qualities.

Piutau carried that form throughout the provincial competition and he showed he was a keeper for the Blues next campaign.



Frank Halai

Another who had zoomed into prominence on the sevens circuit is Counties wing Halai.

If anyone should know wing talent John Kirwan should and perhaps he saw some of the same physical power and enterprise he brought to the game, in Halai's frame.

At 107kg and 1.94m, Halai has the physical credentials to finish, make breaks or hold the ball for his teammates.

Malakai Fekitoa

Size keeps coming with Fekitoa, the bruising Auckland centre who, at just 20, made an impressive provincial debut this season.

He bounced defenders away who did not line up properly and also showed he was technically solid with his tackling.

Fekitoa shapes as someone who will keep Rene Ranger on the ball if he wants to nail down the centre job.

Baden Kerr

For a chunk of his teenage years Kerr preferred soccer before he switched codes and made strong progress.

He has a strong frame, attacks the line and is another young man with a strong success rate in his goal kicking.

His rivalry with Chris Noakes for the starting No 10 duties will be one of the major questions before the Blues start their campaign.

Jamison Gibson-Park ▼

As the Blues scoured for halfbacks, the cameo work from Taranaki's Gibson-Park, must have made its mark.

His eye for the gap, acceleration and clearance was a snazzy contrast to the province's starting men.

Another who has only blown out 20 candles this year, Gibson-Park shapes as someone who will compete strongly with his two senior halfbacks and if he gets a shot, will make things happen.

Kane Barrett

The surname is class down in amber and black land. Barrett as in Kane, is one of Smiley Barrett's clan, one who has donned the forwards uniform unlike All Black brother Beauden.

He is best at loose forward but could cover lock and has the size and mobility that Kirwan and Co want from their pack.



Ronald Raaymakers

Counties lock Raaymakers has pulled on his provincial jersey for a few seasons now and at only 22 is making his way in the rugby world.

With some questions about the fitness of men like Anthony Boric and Ali Williams, there should be plenty of incentive and opportunity for this young man to get a run, perhaps even as a utility loose.

Ofa Tu'ungafasi

Hair there and everywhere. Tu'ungafasi has been signed to the Blues for a while and after a strong debut ITM Cup year, the franchise could not afford to risk him being picked off in the draft.

He will back up Charlie Faumuina at tighthead prop and Tu'ungafasi may have to start the Super series if the returning All Blacks frontrower is not quite ready.

Blues 2013

Fullbacks: Charles Piutau, Marty McKenzie.

Wings: Frank Halai, George Moala, Waisake Naholo.

Centres: Rene Ranger, Malakai Fekitoa.

Midfield: Francis Saili, Jackson Willison.

Five eighths: Baden Kerr, Chris Noakes.

Halfbacks: Piri Weepu, Bryn Hall, Jamison Gibson-Park.

Loose forwards: Kane Barrett, Peter Saili, Steven Luatua, Brendon O'Connor, Luke Braid.

Locks: Culum Retallick, Ronald Raaymakers, Liaki Moli, Anthony Boric, Ali Williams.

Props: Ofa Tu'ungafasi, Charlie Faumuina, Tim Perry, Angus Ta'avao, Tom McCartney.

Hooker: Keven Mealamu, James Parsons, Quentin MacDonald.



Chiefs

- **Key signing:** Coach Dave Rennie has tweaked the squad rather than gone for any great overhaul and brought in players such as Gareth Anscombe, Nick Crosswell, Ross Filipo and Charlie Ngatai who will add depth.
- **Key loss:** Sonny Bill Williams stopped into Hamilton for one season on his sporting odyssey and helped deliver a Super Rugby title. He's since packed up his boots and headed to Japan and will next stop off in Australia to return to the NRL. SBW established himself as a genuinely good rugby player in 2012 and his outrageous offloads and strong defence will be missed.

Squad

Forwards: Ben Afeaki, Sam Cane, Craig Clarke, Nick Crosswell, Hikawera Elliot, Ross Filipo, Mike Fitzgerald, Romana Graham, Josh Hohneck, Tanerau Latimer, Fritz Lee, Rhys Marshall, Liam Messam, Brodie Retallick, Mahonri Schwalger, Toby Smith, Solomona Sakalia, Ben Tameifuna

Backs: Bundee Aki, Gareth Anscombe, Aaron Cruden, Andrew Horrell, Richard Kahui, Tawera Kerr-Barlow, Brendon Leonard, Lelia Masaga, Tim Nanai-Williams, Charlie Ngatai, Patrick Osborne, Augustine Pulu, Robbie Robinson, Asaeli Tikoirotuma.

Crusaders

- **Key signing:** Todd Blackadder hasn't signed any established players, but Canterbury loose forward Jordan Taufua, on loan to Tasman for most of the ITM Cup, and Johnny McNicholl, are exciting prospects. Taufua will have an important role in covering for Kieran Read, Matt Todd and George Whitelock, while wing McNicholl, will get plenty of game time following Sean Maitland's exit to Glasgow.
- **Key loss:** All Blacks McCaw and Ben Franks. McCaw will cool his heels after a hectic last couple of years and there is still a big question whether he will even turn out for the Crusaders next season. Prop Franks has moved to the Hurricanes for more game time.

Squad

Forwards: Dominic Bird, Shane Christie, Wyatt Crockett, Tom Donnelly, Corey Flynn, Owen Franks, Ben Funnell, Nepo Laulala, Richie McCaw, Joe Moody, Kieran Read, Luke Romano, Jordan Taufua, Codie Taylor, Matt Todd, Jimmy Tupou, George Whitelock, Luke Whitelock, Sam Whitelock.

Backs: Tyler Bleyendaal, Dan Carter, Ryan Crotty, Israel Dagg, Andy Ellis, Robbie Fruean, Zac Guildford, Willi Heinz, Tom Marshall, Johnny McNicholl, Jeremy Su'a, Tom Taylor, Adam Whitelock.

Highlanders

- **Key signing:** The additions of All Blacks Ma'a Nonu and Tony Woodcock will make a considerable difference but perhaps the most significant addition is Brad Thorn. The 37-year-old World Cup-winning lock shows few signs of slowing down and his professional can only rub off on his new teammates.
- **Key loss:** Adam Thomson remained loyal throughout his Highlanders career and it's a shame now he's decided to leave with the franchise holding so much potential. They have decent loose forwards but Thomson's presence would have made them even better.

Squad

Forwards: Josh Bekhuis, Tim Boys, Liam Coltman, Elliot Dixon, Ma'afu Fia, John Hardie, Jarrad Hoeata, Andrew Hore, Chris King, Jamie Mackintosh, Nasi Manu, Brayden Mitchell, Jake Paringatai, Brad Thorn, Joe Wheeler, Tony Woodcock.

Backs: Phil Burleigh, Tamati Ellison, Jason Emery, Hosea Gear, Ma'a Nonu, Declan O'Donnell, Kade Poki, Hayden Parker, Buxton Popoali'i, Colin Slade, Aaron Smith, Ben Smith, Lima Sopoaga, Fumiaki Tanaka, Shaun Treeby.

Hurricanes

- **Key signing:** Ben Franks went looking for a change from the Crusaders and had an option to head to the Highlanders but settled on the Hurricanes instead. He will add more grunt to a front row which has the services of two talented hookers in Dane Coles and Motu Matu'u and props Reggie Goodes and Jeffery Toomaga-Allen.
- **Key loss:** The Hurricanes haven't lost anyone of note. Midfield back Charlie Ngatai has opted to join the Chiefs where he will provide cover in the midfield backs.

Squad

Forwards: James Broadhurst, Dane Coles, Jason Eaton, Ben Franks, Reggie Goodes, Jack Lam, Faifili Levave, Karl Lowe, Motu Matu'u, Ben May, Mark Reddish, Ardie Savea, Brad Shields, Eric Stone, Blade Thomson, Jeremy Thrush, Jeffery Toomaga-Allen, Victor Vito.

Backs: Beauden Barrett, Tim Bateman, Samisoni Fasilau, Cory Jane, Rey Lee-Lo, Alapati Leuia, James Marshall, TJ Perenara, Tusi Pisi, Matt Proctor, Julian Savea, Conrad Smith, Chris Smylie, Andre Taylor.