BY RECOGNISING THE MANY WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO MAKE OUR GAME GREAT, WE HAVE GUARANTEED THE CODE A FUTURE WHICH KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES

PETER CRITTLE, ARU PRESIDENT

Chris Whitaker received due recognition by captaining the Wallabies for a match during the World Cup.

The Rugby World Cup year provided Australian Rugby with a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge some very important people who make up the fabric of our game.

A variety of functions were held throughout the year in which several hundred former Wallabies received their honour caps. Players from the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's were capped, a particular honour curiously denied them during their playing days.

I was one of those who received a cap. It was both humbling and uplifting to be recognised in this way. Rugby continues to preserve its heritage in a way other codes cannot replicate.

For their part, our classic Wallabies of the past made an enormous contribution to the game in 2003. They gave freely of their time and in many cases went to enormous lengths to support the True Colours of Rugby Roadshow that criss-crossed the country in the lead-up to Rugby World Cup.

In towns, suburbs and cities, approximately 160 former Wallabies acted as unpaid ambassadors for the game, attending ceremonies and functions and speaking about what representing their country meant to them.

This task was undertaken with enormous enthusiasm irrespective of whether the player was recently retired, or someone whose playing days ended many decades ago. It made me immensely proud to see men such as Arthur Buchan, a fearless loose forward in the late 1940's, offer to help in any way, any time and anywhere he could to continue to make a contribution to the game of Rugby. To all of those men, Rugby thanks you.

The other group that received recognition were those tireless volunteers without whom our game cannot survive. The Volunteer Recognition Program and Volunteer of the Decade awards were wonderful initiatives.

While the awards ultimately singled out individuals in every State and Territory, they ultimately served to remind us of the contribution made by all volunteers to the game.

Nevertheless, I would like to offer my congratulations to the ultimate winner of the Volunteer of the Decade, Margaret Myhill, whose 30 years dedication to Rugby development and particularly the Dundas Valley Junior Rugby Club, typifies the spirit of volunteerism in our game.

The Volunteer Recognition Program continues next year and beyond, ensuring many more contributors to the game will be appropriately recognised.

With the passing of each year, sadly some great men of the game are lost to us – Wallabies such as Keith "Arch" Winning, a former Wallaby captain, the very colourful "Wallaby" Bob McMaster, the great Col Windon, Jimmy Lisle, David Logan and David Shepherd.

We also mourned the loss of Charles Blunt, ARU President from 1969-1972, former Test referee Craig Ferguson, and tragically, young Queensland Reds and Australia A centre, Michael Tabrett.

International Rugby Board Chairman Vernon Pugh QC lost a long battle with illness during 2003 and we joined the rest of the rugby world in recognising his outstanding contribution to the game.

The pain of the 2002 Bali bombing was eased just a little for many players from the Forbes Rugby Club and others with the staging of the Bali Memorial Match in November.

The Australian Barbarians are to be congratulated on the initiative that was facilitated by staff from the ARU. Two matches were played before a very healthy crowd at North Sydney Oval and valuable funds raised for Royal North Shore Hospital's Burns Unit and a special Bali Fund.

The excitement of the RWC should not overtake a significant milestone in international Rugby, that being the Centenary of Test matches between Australia and New Zealand.

The Centenary Match itself was played in Auckland, which also hosted a magnificent dinner honouring virtually every living All Black and Wallaby captain. To have all those distinguished men in that room was an extraordinary experience.

Perhaps there is a future Wallaby captain among the six young men who made their debut for Australia in 2003. Congratulations to Morgan Turinui, Lote Tuqiri, Al Baxter, Matt Dunning, John Roe and Daniel Heenan.

As these players begin their Wallaby careers, others are leaving that special group having made a great contribution to Australian Rugby. Dan Herbert, Matt Cockbain, Toutai Kefu and Glenn Panoho have achieved great things during their time in our national colours and we thank them for that contribution.

Equally, Peter Marshall has ended his career as undoubtedly one of our greatest referees on the international stage, but his skills are certainly not lost to Australian Rugby having taken up a position as the ARU Referees' Manager.

I would also like to acknowledge Chris Whitaker on his selection as Wallaby Captain for Australia's game against Namibia during the RWC, Dave Brockoff, a former Wallaby and Wallaby coach who was this year awarded the Joe French Award for his services to the game, and also Phil Waugh who received the John Eales Medal for 2003.

Rugby's growing national presence was also reflected in Perth's victory in the Australian Rugby Shield. Congratulations to them.

It has been an extraordinary year with the wonderful Rugby World Cup, a great effort by the Wallabies in a climactic Final and a host of other milestones. One unusual milestone was reached during the RWC, when for the first time since 1899, Australia's win/loss history is on the right side of the ledger. Australia has now won 208 matches, lost 206 with 13 draws.

Finally, I would like to commend John O'Neill for his stewardship as Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of the ARU since 1995.

His resignation brings to a close a very important and successful chapter in the history of our game and I wish him well for the future.

Peter Crittle
President