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# A 'misunderstanding' which should never have arisen

THE Australians have always been the team the Hongkong Rugby Sevens spectators love to hate. But over the weekend the boos and catcalls which greeted their every appearance at the Hongkong Stadium were tinged with real resentment. And the roar of approval which greeted their defeat at the hands of the *French Barbarians* in the Cup semi-final had to be heard to be believed.

The anger was brought about by reports that the New South Wales Rugby Union was trying to sabotage next year's Hongkong event by staging the newly-born Sydney Sevens on the same dates in March 1987.

Yesterday, the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union and the Australian Rugby Union issued a joint statement which said the matter had been resolved and that it had only come about as a result of misunderstanding — later amplified by the chairman of the HKRFU, Mr Brian Stevenson, to include "poor communications between the two unions..."

Mr Stevenson also apologised for the

personal attacks and vilifications the Australian players had suffered not only on the field of battle but also on the streets and in their hotel and which "may have had an effect on their play."

What we find hard to resolve is the fact that the Australians have been playing in the Hongkong Sevens ever since it was founded 11 years ago. Also, as the joint statement said, that "as has happened historically in the past," this tournament is played at the end of March (except for this year because of Easter). As such, how could there have been a "misunderstanding" on the date of next year's event?

Would it not have been more truthful to say that flushed with the success of their first-ever Sydney Sevens, the Australians were impatient to grab the rugby spotlight which for the past decade has been focussed on Hongkong at this time of the year? An impatience for which the Australian national team paid for at the Hongkong Stadium before an hostile crowd last weekend and which could also take away some of the shine of next year's Sydney Sevens?

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For lovers of rugby, it was a "misunderstanding" that never should have arisen. After all, the Sydney Sevens had everything going for it. Unlike the Hongkong Sevens which, by its nature, is an invitational event catering to three levels of the game, the Sydney Sevens is a world class tournament open only to the very best. Given time, there is no doubt that the Sydney Sevens will become the rugby showcase of the world.

Rugby in Hongkong, on the other hand, depends purely on the expatriate community for support. This fact was proved at the weekend when all but a handful of the 25,000 watching the final were of Caucasian extraction. Given the countdown to 1997 and the "localisation" plans of both the

government and private sectors, it will not be surprising if the teams that now make the annual trek to Hongkong start looking *Down Under*.

In this context, therefore, the assurance by the deputy chairman of the Australian Rugby Union, Mr Ross Turnbull, that the ARFU will "continue to be represented at the Hongkong tournament whenever an invitation was open to them; and to support the Hongkong initiative in whatever ways are available in the future" is most welcome.

There is no doubt that the Australian presence is one of the main attractions of the Hongkong Sevens. The Australians and the New Zealanders are regarded as being among the best rugby players in the world and it is the anticipated clash of these two teams, plus the opportunity to put away gallons of booze, which has made the Hongkong Sevens one of the more important dates on our sporting calendar. It would be a pity if all this was to be sacrificed by any further "misunderstanding" or "poor communications" between Sydney and Hongkong.