

Up the Guts!

by Paora Tibble



“Come on then! See if you can score another one!”

“Are you for real?”

“You think you’re cool just because you can step around me. Try running straight up the guts!”

Sometimes I feel sorry for my brother. “Can I convert my try first?”

Shane and I play league, one on one. I usually win by sidestepping or just running around him. The added bonus is that I get lots of practice kicking conversions.

We’ve got this willow tree out the front of our house. It’s got a big branch. That’s our goal post. I’ve got the ball in two hands. I look down and then up at where I want the ball to go. Shane’s pulling faces, going cross-eyed, trying to put me off.

I’m focused. The ball drops to the ground, my right leg swings back, my foot follows through. Sweet as, the ball sails between the posts!

Just then Dad pulls up in the ute. Shane calls out, “Hey, Dad, check out my tackling.”

“Well, you better kick off first,” Dad replies.

Our whānau is league crazy. Mum and Dad have been Warriors supporters since day one. That was before Shane and I were even born! So, of course, whenever we play, Shane has to be the Warriors and I’m some other team – any team.

Just before Shane kicks off, he pulls out the same old trick he uses every time I’m ahead. “Hey, Para, last try wins. OK?”

“Yep. I haven’t got all day. Kick the ball.”

“OK, but don’t try to run round me. That doesn’t work in a real game. You need to take it straight up the guts!”

“OK, then,” I think. “If that’s how he wants to play it.”

I catch the ball, and I run straight at him. Next minute ... boof! I’m on my back, and the ball is on the ground. So much for running it up the guts! Shane’s just flattened me with a great tackle. He scoops up the ball and runs towards the goal line in slow motion.



Then he starts talking like a commentator in a cheesy Australian accent. “Shane Waha for the Warriors has just made a tackle on the Eels’ prop forward. He’s also picked up the ball. Amazing!”

Dad comes over and pretends to tackle Shane.

“The last line of defence for the Eels is their koroheke fullback, Henare Waha,” Shane continues. “But no, Shane’s fend is just tumeke! He scores!”

After scoring the winning try, Shane puts two fingers in his mouth to blow the final whistle of the game. Then, just to rub salt into the wound, he acts out an end-of-game interview with Te Arahī Maipi.

“Kia ora, Shane. You got Man of the Match. What made the difference for the Warriors today?”

“Chur, Te Arahī,” he replies to himself. “At the end of the day, it’s all about running the ball straight up the guts, eh!”

What a sad guy!

Dad gives me a hand up.
“You two ready for āpōpō?”





Saturday morning ...

It's the first game of the season – the Tigers (us) versus the Leopards. We play in the under-9 competition, but the Leopards have got this kid who looks about thirteen. His name's Latu. He's huge, but their coach has a copy of his birth certificate, so he's playing.

Latu is causing havoc on the field. When he gets the ball, he just keeps running at our smallest players. It takes three of us to stop him.

With five minutes to go, Latu gets the ball. He runs straight at me. I go for the tackle, but it's like trying to stop a bulldozer – he runs straight over me and carries on to score a try. I'm left face down in the grass.

Now it's almost time up, and the Leopards have the ball again. No points for guessing who they give it to. Latu turns and runs straight at me. Here we go again. As he gets closer, I close my eyes and go for his ankles. Shane comes racing in. He drives his shoulder up under Latu's ball-carrying arm, and together, we bring the big guy down.

The ball goes flying, and one of our players, Tasi, dives onto it. We have the ball!

The ref yells, "Two more minutes!"

I get up and give Shane a hand up. "Nice work, bro!"

He grins. "He wasn't running over my sister twice."

Tasi gets up and rolls the ball back between his legs. Stevie passes it to me. I pass to Shane, who runs it hard up the guts until he's tackled. Mum yells, "Go, Shaney boy!" Shame, Mum!

We do the same thing again in the next play. This time, I pass the ball to Tasi. It's only the second tackle, and we've made some good ground. We're in the Leopards' 20.

Latu is watching. I see him move to make sure he's opposite me. The ball comes to me again. I dummy-pass to my left, but at the same time, I step to the right. I'm aiming to get through the gap on the left of Latu, but it closes real fast! Shane was right – my fancy footwork is no good.



Latu grabs me, but I manage to turn in the tackle. He's still got hold of me, but my hands are free. As I'm falling, I pop the ball up to Shane, who takes it at full speed and flies through the gap between Latu and another Leopard defender. I fall with Latu on top of me – ouch!

I hear our team and supporters cheering. I look up. Shane has scored a try. I run up to congratulate him. He smiles. "You ran straight up the guts, even!"

Then he flicks me the ball. "Here, no pressure. Just kick the conversion."

Thanks, bro.

I'm focused. I imagine the willow tree in our front yard. I take a deep breath, the ball drops to the ground, and my right foot swings back ...



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