

Character is key in struggle to focus

The Lions now had five matches to complete, including the fourth and final test, and with several other tough opponents, including the New Zealand Maori team and North Auckland. They must have wondered at the task and if they could 'save' the tour by winning all these games.

They had lost the series. Their grand hopes developed over previous weeks had been shattered by the disaster at Lancaster Park. It is at such points on any international tour that character becomes the key component. Would these Lions rise to the challenge – or think that luck had deserted them and that they would ride away dejectedly over the horizon?

The situation called for a major and sudden lift in morale, however that might be achieved.

But the group who boarded the Viscount aircraft for the trip to Wellington the morning after were – besides being understandably sore and tired – not a particularly cheerful bunch. And if some were still a little downhearted during their stay in Wellington for their next match, against the New Zealand Juniors – as tour journalists suggested – it was not the fault of team members Andy Mulligan and Tony O'Reilly.

Soon after take-off, the two Irishmen had employed their charm and 'blarney' to persuade the hostess to let them use the loudspeaker system. Besides the Lions, the aircraft had other passengers on board – people returning to their places of abode after the third test. They included members of the NZRFU and some of the All Blacks who had defeated the tourists so resoundingly.

Now began a memorable performance as these two natural entertainers kept the entire 'audience' in fits of



Destiny awaits: Junior New Zealand's Tony Edgar and the Lions' captain for the day, Bryn Meredith, lead their sides out onto Athletic Park

laughter for at least an hour. Their speciality was mock radio interviews – usually with O'Reilly the interviewer and Mulligan, who was gifted at mimicry, the supposed subject of the interview. Several of their 'victims' were on the plane. They included the IRB's Sir Wavell Wakefield, the NZRFU president Gordon Brown and their team manager, Alf Wilson.

All took the jokes as well as anyone else onboard. "I can't get over it," said Mr Brown. "Here's a team that has

lost three Tests in a row, and you'd think they'd be in the depths of despair. I think it's marvellous!"

So, rather than a journey of possible commiserations, the flight became a long gale of laughter. They also enjoyed the spectacular views of the Southern Alps. It was a blue sky and a sunny day and everyone was much happier when the aircraft descended for its landing into the capital city.

As an aftermath, it was a huge compliment to the profes-

sionalism of the Irishmen's 'act' when NZRFU chairman Cuth Hogg had them record it the next day in Wellington. He then arranged that the 'better parts' were broadcast on national radio. It proved a major hit with New Zealand listeners.

O'Reilly, who would soon move on the path to becoming one of the world's great businessmen, is reputed to have wondered, out loud, whether it would be possible to share "a small percentage of the royalties."