

On a wing and a Prairiewood: battlers need help to fulfil their dream

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JARRED HODGES is confident some of the unknown teenagers he is coaching on the Prairiewood High School team have the potential to one day become marquee players in Super 14 and Wallabies teams.

While some may be stars-to-be of Australian rugby, making such a dream real is way beyond their thoughts for now, the Prairiewood First XV coach says.

The ambition for these rugby battlers from Wetherill Park, in Sydney's south-west, is realising the dream of raising the \$70,000 they need to get to Japan for the 10th World Youth Tournament from April 29 to May 5 for which they have been nominated as Australia's representatives.

The team yesterday received a major boost in making sure they get to play teams from New Zealand, South Africa, France, Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales, Tonga, Korea and Japan when the Australian Rugby Union, which nominated them to represent Australia, and the NSW Rugby Union each contributed \$10,000.

Prairiewood High's fund-raising committee must find the remaining \$50,000 themselves through various raffles and sponsorship drives, and they have already begun lobbying corporate and local and state government bodies.

The story of Prairiewood High School and its swift emergence as a school power since 2000 when the game was first played there was reported in the Herald late last month. It is not a story of a well-to-do blazer brigade and hugely funded private-school rugby, but one based on a traditional love of the game and a belief that good things must be earned and developed from the bottom - exactly where Prairiewood High School started.

A team boasting players of Pacific Island, Asian, Middle Eastern

and Aboriginal descent has gone from being Waratah Shield "easybeats" in 2000 to runners-up in 2003.

This year two players earned Combined High Schools selection, six were picked for the NSW talent identification program, and one - Dimitrius Ainuu - made the 2005 Australian under-19 World Cup team. Six old boys play in Sydney's first-grade competition.

As far as Hodges is concerned, that is all of little importance now. His players' futures can wait, for the present is all about raising the money they need to get to Japan.

"I think in the current squad there will be a couple of Australian Schoolboys among them in the next year or two," said Hodges, who in 2000 became the school's first rugby coach.

"And hopefully with more opportunities they can move on into the Super 14 franchises, but that's a fair way away ... we are chasing the funding to get Japan first."

Hodges said his players were not concerned they may fall short of money and not make the plane to Japan.

"We are full steam ahead," he said. "That's our target, to get there, but everything is about preparing to go. We will do everything in our power to get the boys there."

The ARU and NSWRU donations have gone into a tour fund bank account. On top of their total \$20,000 pool, the two unions also gave the team jerseys for fund-raising lotteries.

"This is a very worthy cause, and that's why we've stepped in to help," ARU deputy chief executive Matt Carroll said.

Donations can be made via the school's website:
www.prairiewoodhigh.com.au. Alternatively, funds can be deposited into the Prairiewood High School Rugby Tour account: BSB number: 012 074 Account number: 140 186 521

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