



Converts _ Hodges and some of the Prairiewood First XV.

Photo: *Jon Reid*

Japan, here we come, we hope: Prairiewood fairytale may carry a sting

Greg Growden Chief Rugby Correspondent | October 25, 2008

AT PRAIRIEWOOD High School in Wetherill Park, there are no endless hectares of sporting fields, state of the art gymnasiums, old boy networks or spectacular harbour views.

Instead, tucked in between a shopping centre and hospital, this school, deep in south-west Sydney's mortgage stress belt, boasts in one congested corner a no-frills rugby ground.

This is definitely not Joeys, Kings, Riverview, Scots or any other private school which has for decades been the prime breeding ground for Australian rugby union representatives. But in a few years, this unpretentious venue has done far more than many better-funded schools in producing vibrant rugby talent, while providing a reminder that athletic pursuits can inspire higher education.

So successful have Prairiewood been that they were recently nominated as the Australian representatives for next year's Sanix World Rugby Youth Invitational Tournament in Japan in April, where they will play school teams from New Zealand, England, South Africa, France, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Tonga and Japan. The Australian representatives, which have previously included St Edmund's College, Canberra, and The Kings School, must be rated among the country's best or most promising rugby schools.

As long as they can raise \$70,000 to get there, Prairiewood will provide a cross-section of Australian society, involving players who boast Pacific Island, Asian, Middle Eastern and Aboriginal backgrounds. This is not surprising, considering more than 60 languages are spoken by the 920 students at the school.

What is most incredible about Prairiewood is how they have achieved so much in so little time, as rugby has been played there for only eight years.

It began with the arrival of teacher Jarred Hodges, who initially had difficulties introducing rugby to a school entrenched in the larger international code - football. Just down the road is Club Marconi, while Prairiewood's best known former pupil is Italy striker Christian Vieri.

Hodges was persistent, and the first time Prairiewood played rugby in 2000, they were thrashed week in, week out.

The newcomers learnt quickly under Hodges's coaching - the following year making the semi-finals of the Buchan Shield, and in 2003 astounding many by appearing in the statewide Waratah Shield final, which they lost to St Edmund's.

Since then, Prairiewood has continued to flourish - this year its boasts two Combined High Schools representatives, and six selected in the NSW talent identification program. Six former students have progressed to the first-grade Sydney club premierships ranks, while Dimitrius Ainuu was picked in the 2005 Australian under-19 World Cup team. While the school has discovered the rugby program has convinced many to remain and complete their Higher School Certificate, it has involved sacrifices.

"A lot of these boys and their families live off the smell of an oily rag," Hodges said yesterday. "Every tournament we go to they have to pay. For buses to games, they regularly have to pay \$10 to \$20 a week during the season, and that's a lot of money for these kids. But they do it."

Raising \$70,000 is another matter, prompting doubts over whether Prairiewood will get to Japan. Raffles have been organised, but in these tough economic times school officials are worried the students could miss out on an important experience.

As Robert Benetel, one of Prairiewood's head teachers, explained: "Sadly, we can't call on the old boys network and say we're having a function in our auditorium, \$100 a head, conduct a silent auction, make \$150,000 and everyone goes."

Hodges added: "The harsh reality is that if we're unable to raise the funds, Australia will still send a representative, and at short notice, the only option is to send a private school. These schools have the networks to raise the necessary funds. Unfortunately we haven't."