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The growth of Area School Rugby in New Zealand

Providing opportunities for isolated youth

For most aspiring young sportspeople, the path to becoming an All Black, Silver Fern or other national representative is straightforward – make your school team, get noticed by a provincial selector, play consistently well and catch the eye of the national selectors. Quite simple really! This pathway has become even easier in recent years with several high school matches getting higher visibility through television and online media, resulting in selectors getting a better look at more players.

However, for a select group of players, the initial step of making the high school team is not an option. These are the kids from the approximate 40 Area Schools spread throughout NZ, from Taipa in the far north

to the Catlins in the deep south. Many of these schools are in isolated areas, hundreds of kilometres from large provincial centres. For the most part, these schools have too small a roll to accommodate teams such as a rugby 1st XV, so the players end up playing sport for the local club against older players, or in some cases don't play regular sport at all. These players represent a missed opportunity both for their own potential development and to NZ sport in general.

The sporting highlight for these players is the National Area Schools Tournament held annually in July. Teams from several sporting codes represent their zone of either Northland, Central North Island, Top of the South or South of the South and players compete for selection in either the North

Island or South Island teams for the final in each code. National teams are then selected, but typically these are only 'paper' teams with no game actually played so the opportunity for individuals to showcase their talents on a bigger stage is removed.

The opportunity for these players to shine started to evolve further when, in 1993, the National Area Schools Tournament was held in Whitianga, near the top of the Coromandel Peninsula. It was hosted by Mercury Bay Area School, which happened to have their Deputy Principal and rugby stalwart Mike Smith as one of organisers. Mike played top level rugby for both Northland and Thames Valley, coming through the NZ rugby development programmes, before trying his hand as



2015 NZ Barbarians Area Schools Coaches with NZ Barbarians President Bryan Williams & Kiwi Teamwear Director

a coach and manager. Rugby was a key aspect of the Area Schools Tournament and Mike, along with Ron Morgan and other organisers noticed the anomaly of there being no clear development path for their players beyond selection in the tournament team.

The group felt that progression should continue beyond the selection at the tournament and they sought to develop a structure under which the Area Schools rugby players could mix with peers of their own age and skill level and gain exposure to selectors for higher honour teams. They determined that a separate event should be held in August or September with the players coming into camp for 5-6 days of specialist coaching and one or two matches against other representative teams. This environment also provides the players with an insight into the off field aspects of higher level sport and seeks to assist them with a smooth transition to other representative teams.

Since the inception of the 1993 team, the NZ Area School's Rugby team have played in Australia, had an international fixture

with a USA school and played other NZ representative teams such as Northland Vikings, Hawkes Bay Saracens, NZ Harlequins, Waikato Tainui Waka Academy and Thames Valley Secondary School under 18 teams. The organisers have had their original intent confirmed with some great match results and several players going on to higher honours. These include Zar Lawrence who was an All Black Sevens representative, North Harbour sevens star Whiria Meltzer and several provincial players in the Heartland Championship.

Opportunities like this unfortunately cost a considerable amount to organise, even with much of the coaching and supporting roles being provided by volunteers. Travel from the remote schools to Hamilton where the camp is held is typically expensive and accommodation and food add significantly to the bill. In the early years, the players and their families or communities self-funded the tour, but it was doubtful whether this method could be sustained for the longer term.

Luckily, word of the success of the concept had started to spread and Mike and Ron

"A structure has been created to establish true pathway opportunities for young rugby players that would otherwise be left isolated in more than just a geographical sense."

introduced it to Rocky Patterson, CEO of the NZ Rugby Foundation in 1996. They were able to negotiate with Rocky for not only the financial support of the Foundation, but also for Rocky to become the patron of NZAS Rugby. This began a relationship which continued for almost 20 years until in 2013 the Foundation changed the focus of their targeted support and the financial contributions to NZAS Rugby were discontinued.

An urgent review of funding options was required to prevent the programme from being cancelled. At this time, Kiwi Teamwear agreed to a 3 year sponsorship deal to meet the apparel needs of the team and staff, covering both on-field and off-field items. The agreement was renegotiated in 2016 and support secured on an ongoing basis.

The organisers however remained concerned that the concept would falter if the main costs were pushed back on to the players so they restructured the entity to make it

more eligible for funding from charitable trusts to compliment other sponsors. With this in mind, in mid 2013, NZ Area School Rugby formally became an Incorporated Society dedicated to supporting the annual national representative team along with the general development of rural rugby players from the Area Schools.

At the same time, The NZ Barbarian Rugby Football Club, which is a non-profit organisation supporting the development of rugby, was approached for support. In recent years The Barbarians have become a major sponsor of primary and secondary school rugby and it was felt that there was a good fit with NZ Area Schools Rugby. The generosity of the Barbarians has removed the key cost concerns and the two entities now work together to share the costs and workload in funding and organising fixtures for the annual team. It was also agreed to rename the team as NZ Barbarian's Area Schools Rugby. NZ Area Schools Rugby Inc. still seek additional sponsorship to cover lesser costs such as selector flights,

accommodation, meals and transport at the national tournaments.

Like many other sports entities, the success of the NZAS Rugby programme is the result of many hours of dedication by a passionate group of volunteers. Mike Smith remains the instrumental figure and his dedication to rural school rugby has seen many players develop and flourish in both rugby and personal terms. He has been well supported by the work of many others including Ron and Rocky who retired some years back, Marie Relph in the key administration role and by Bob Telfer as selector & coach.

They've been able to create a structure to attract funders and other supporters to establish true pathway opportunities for young rugby players that would otherwise be left isolated in more than just a geographical sense. It would be interesting to see if other sports codes and entities can replicate the programme with similar results. 🏉

2015 NZ Barbarians Area Schools Team





2015 NZ Barbarians Area Schools vs Waikato Harlequins



Geoff is the owner of Kiwi Teamwear which provides both custom-made and locally stocked apparel and hardware for most sporting codes. He specialised in the international marketing and procurement of sports products before starting Kiwi Teamwear. His company has a well-developed network of suppliers and strong communication processes, resulting in a reputation for quality products and reliable delivery. www.kiwiteamwear.com