

Rugby at Grammar

Given his unique experience of the game*, our Chairman of Trustees, Mr David Kirk MBE was invited by Dr Vallance to address a gathering of Old Sydneians on the subject of Rugby. This is what he had to say.

I think it is fair to say that a significant number of people believe rugby at Sydney Grammar is not as successful as it could or should be.

The assertion depends very much, of course, on how we define success. There are no hard and fast rules here but I think there are three elements to consider in assessing a successful school sport. The first is participation. High participation is evidence that boys are gaining enjoyment and satisfaction from the school sport they choose.

I am pleased to say that participation in rugby at Grammar in 2012 was at a recent all time high. There are natural cycles in these things but in 2012 there were more boys in the School playing rugby than there were playing soccer. This is confirmation of the continuing encouragement to play rugby that occurs at the school and of the success the school has in retaining boys in the game as they move through the years. There were initially four Open grade teams. That was whittled down to three later in the season, but three competitive and committed Open grade teams with plenty of reserves is a healthy state of affairs.

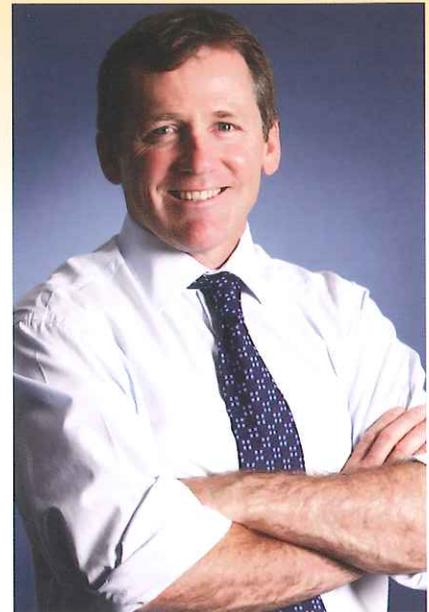
I notice there always seems to be something of a swing back to rugby in the final couple of years at school. In the final years the boys seem to enjoy the physical nature of rugby and its easy collegiality as a balance to the relentless and often lonesome demands of the classroom and the HSC.

The second measure of successful sport at school is the improvement boys make as they progress through the school. The boys that come to Grammar have many wonderful characteristics and we are more than a match for our GPS competitors in very many ways, but body size and natural athletic ability are not two of them. We need well-coached boys to compete effectively.

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involvement and engagement of masters in coaching and managing teams. This is an important contributor to the rich relationship between a boy and one or a few masters that is often the most enduring legacy of a boy's time at school.

The third measure of the success of a sport in school is the results achieved. I want to talk chiefly about the School First XV in this context, but before doing so, it is worth noting that in 2012 the under 16As had a very successful season: of the 17 games played, 10 were won, 2 drawn and 5 lost.

The First XV did not have a successful year in 2012. We beat High and competed well against St. Ignatius', Shore and Newington. We lost to Newington (who went on to win the Premiership) 52-0, which in fact was a very good result considering what we were up against. However, we suffered very heavy defeats at the hands of Scots, King's and St Joseph's.

To understand what has happened to GPS rugby we need to go back a few years. I think the turning point was 2006.

A year before, in 2005, Grammar beat High – as we might expect – but that year we also beat King's 15-5 and drew with Scots, at Bellevue Hill, 15-15. We lost to the eventual 3rd place-getters, Shore, 14-9, and to Newington by 14 points to 20. We had one large loss, 57-6, to St Joseph's. (One Kurtley Beale scored 5 tries.) That



year we finished 6th, a point behind Newington and ahead of King's.

In 2006 we did even better. We beat High as expected. We also beat Newington at Stanmore 23-20 and beat Scots at Weigall 26-22. We lost to King's at Parramatta by just a single point, 24-23. We finished 5th – above Newington, Scots and High. I wonder now if losing to Grammar was perhaps the turning point for Newington and Scots?

If we fast forward to 2012 we can see a great deal has changed. Newington won the Premiership unbeaten; Scots finished second, losing only to Newington.

What has caused these huge changes in the relative rugby ability of the GPS schools? Well, not us. Our entrance requirements, coaching, school involvement and preparation are all unchanged. If anything they continue to get stronger from year to year.

We did have a relatively weak Form V and VI rugby cohort in 2012 and we weren't helped by a bad run of injuries that exposed our lack of depth.

But this does not explain the structural shift that has occurred. Quite simply, Scots College and Newington College in particular have established 'sports programs' along the lines of the US College model. That is, they aggressively recruit

and provide scholarships to the best rugby players they can find. Quite often these boys come into the school in Years 10 or 11. Winning a rugby premiership is no doubt a component of the marketing these schools undertake to the parents of prospective pupils.

This recruitment has got to a point where it has nothing to do with developing rugby-playing talent. Newington College, the GPS Premiers in 2012, had three boys in their team who had been paid to sign contracts to play rugby league when they leave school.

As always occurs in these sorts of circumstances, an arms race in rugby-playing talent has developed. No doubt the standard of rugby played at the GPS level has gone up but this has severely and probably irrevocably undermined the integrity of the GPS First XV rugby competition.

What is Sydney Grammar to do in these circumstances?

The only thing we can do. Continue to be guided by what we think are the right educational values, which is to say we will not enter into a futile arms race we cannot win and for which, in John Kennedy's famous phrase, 'the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouths'.

We will not parachute in rugby players

in the final years of school to displace boys who have worked their way up through the grades and who look on an opportunity to represent their school in the First XV as a highlight of their school life.

Scholarships for sportsmen are not the solution. The School would gladly take in more gifted sportsmen of all sorts, but a boy who cannot gain entry to the School on academic merit is not likely to thrive at the modern Grammar.

In order to improve and learn boys need to play under pressure against opposition of a similar standard. In the current environment this means it makes little sense to play against semi-professional GPS First XV teams with whom we cannot compete.

Fortunately the things that really matter about amateur competitive sport and which are fundamental to our educational values – hard work, good preparation, the courage to try your best, sacrifice for the team, humility in victory and graciousness in defeat – will continue to be learned through rugby at Sydney Grammar School, whether or not we play each year against our customary GPS opponents at First XV level.

**David Kirk captained the New Zealand All Blacks to victory in the 1987 World Cup*