

995 words

Onkaparinga Women's Rugby – sisters in sport

By Jennifer Martens

Up in the hills of Adelaide, the Onkaparinga Women's Rugby team proves that contact sport is not just for the boys – and that it is never too late to take up physical activity.

Each Tuesday and Thursday night, head coach Ross Tanimu (Roscoe), assistant coach Deb Kiore and team manager 'Auntie' Pam Twigden lead a tough group of women through a number of gruelling drills to improve their speed, passing skills, game communication and strength. On Saturdays, they put those drills to the test in games that leave some of them waking the next day a bit bruised and battered.

Deb Pearse, a recent English migrant and a member of the team, had to leave a game against Burnside with a foot injury. Sitting on the bench the next day at training, her toe resembled an eggplant. She was in agony - but not from her injury. "Sitting on the bench is torture," she said. "It is really hard not to be out there playing with the girls."

The players, most of whom are young mothers, exhibit intense enthusiasm for the sport and for each other. If they didn't, they wouldn't bother with the many challenges of juggling training, games, family, jobs and other social commitments. Without their passion, it would all just be too hard. The camaraderie in the group is strong; so much so the players don't want to part after the season is over. To extend their experience, they formed two touch football teams to compete in the off-seasons.

Most of the players heard about the team through friends, the association's website or from a family member who encouraged them to give it a go. And all admit to being better women for joining; they list friendships, the family-friendly environment, stress relief, exercise, improved social skills and cultural diversity as the rewards for coming back each week.

The team is made up women from all different backgrounds: Australia, England, Aboriginal communities, Torre's Strait Island, Samoa and New Zealand - and they all delight in learning about each other's cultures. Nikki Baker, a mother of four, said it is a privilege to play alongside "people of the land" and learn about Aboriginal customs. "Without this club, I probably wouldn't have met these wonderful people," she said.

Training nights are usually bustling with kids on the sidelines. They don't have a choice about attending, but the night is anything but boring; they mimic the players' moves and drills, make up games of their own and enjoy the same intercultural exchange as the parents. All the while, they are being exposed to some of life's great lessons: diversity, acceptance, sportsmanship and self-discipline.

Deb, a mother to three boys, said she wants her children to experience the many benefits of sport. "The club and its members provide a good example for our children," she said. "It is great for them to see all these mums get out there and play." One important lesson the kids learn is how to play with intense emotions and 'flip the switch' on them when the game is over. Sport in general is a great avenue for teaching kids how to manage their emotions.

As a Torre's Strait Islander, Kainee Bon grew up in a community that had limited opportunities for women to participate in sport. For her, membership in the rugby team challenges some of the social barriers and stereotypes that exist in her culture and it fosters a sense of inclusiveness within the Onkaparinga community.

For Naomi Hicks, a member of the Narrungga and Gunditjamar communities, playing in the rugby team continues to be a journey. She said, "Before I joined, I was in a rough place in my life." She was looking for an inclusive, respectful environment and she found that and more with the Onkaparinga team. "The coaches, team manager and players were very supportive, loving and caring," she said.

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Because the culture of the club revolves around respect, kindness and support, Naomi has felt extremely comfortable talking to the staff and players about any issue she has – on or off the field. Keen to see others reap similar benefits, she has recruited seven more women to the team.

The club has been around for ten years, but early on participation and commitment were inconsistent. That has changed according to Violet Buckskin, who since joining has become a leader in the team and in her Indigenous community. She believes the current group of players is committed enough to build the program's reputation within the South Australian Rugby Union and establish real staying power for the future.

Single mum Alisha Wills encourages women to forget all the stereotypes typically associated with rugby and give the game a go. She says the tackling appears scary at first but that "it isn't that bad". And according to the group, you don't have to fit into any particular stereotype to play: "Just have fun and be yourself."

If sport is something you've been reluctant to try, you may be surprised at the doors that open once you take that first step. Rita Holt, one of the youngest and smallest players on the team, said since joining she has been inspired to go back to school to become a personal trainer. Team-mate Brenda Twigden, an adult re-entry student at Christies Beach High School, is using her experience with the team for a school project. The opportunities generated from participation in sport are endless – but, as the saying goes, you have to 'be in it to win it'.

Rugby isn't for the faint hearted and if you want to be a part of the Onkaparinga women's team, you've got to have moxie. Naomi summed up the team's enthusiasm for the game when she said, "It beats sitting around with a cuppa!"

For more information on the Onkaparinga Women's Rugby Team, please ring Deb Kiore
or Maryanne Longstaff