

College Sport

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Sister act as St Mary's win national title

LIAM HYSLOP

The sisterhood of the St Mary's College sports teams is one which few people outside of it will truly understand.

For those girls, it means something special to not only represent their school, but to do it with their best friends.

That much was seen on the Sport and Rugby Institute field in Palmerston North on Sunday, as a resilient defensive performance from the St Mary's first XV earned them their first top four national tournament title with a 29-12 win over Hamilton Girls' High School.

"We're willing to die for each other out on the field," captain Dhys Faleafaga said yesterday, following a special school assembly to honour the winning team.

"I think the bond between us girls is what gets us through each game. Being on the field and looking to the side and seeing your sister playing with all her heart and putting her body on the line, it makes us want to play for each other and win it."

It wasn't a bond limited to just the rugby field. A lot of these girls play multiple sports to a very high level, with New Zealand under-21 netballers and Junior Tall Ferns basketballers among their ranks.

"I think it's just the special thing about St Mary's, our sisterhood. It goes across all sports here. Our sisterhood is something that I don't think you can get at another



St Mary's College celebrate their win in the national first XV top four final.

PHOTO: AARON DAVIES

school," Faleafaga said.

The togetherness was needed in the final against a Hamilton side which had soundly beaten Southland Girls' High School 51-12 in their semifinal. St Mary's lost last year's top four final to Southland.

Coach Tuga Mativa made a shrewd move with his lineup, shifting Faleafaga from No 8 to second five-eighth for the final to combat Hamilton's strong backline.

"I thought Dhys was the lady-to-be and she did a good job there,"

Mativa said.

Faleafaga said she wasn't feeling quite so confident before the final.

"It put heaps of pressure on me. I was kind of scared going into that game because I haven't trained at

second-five, but I had the mindset to just make the switch and it turned out well."

With that being said, it took a total team performance for St Mary's to put the sour memories of last year's final loss behind them.

"The bond between us girls is what gets us through each game."

St Mary's captain Dhys Faleafaga

They remain a good chance of repeating the dose next year as they lose only three year 13s.

They have plenty of depth, with their second team reaching the division two, 10-aside Wellington final against Porirua College's top team. They also have a third team in that second division, as well as an under-15 side. No other girls' school in Wellington has more than one team in the top two divisions.

That's all the more astounding when you consider that when Mativa took over in 2015 they didn't have a rugby team. That year they won the second division, but asked Mativa if they could stay in the 10-aside competition. He convinced them otherwise and the rest, as they say, is history.

Even though they might remain dominant for some time, Mativa said that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing for women's rugby as a whole.

"The more we add young ladies to the game, it's just going to get bigger, not just for St Mary's, or even Wellington, but right across New Zealand. It would be good to

keep growing the game for women and have an even playing field with the men's game."

Their attention now turns to sevens as they look to defend their Condor Sevens national title. That competition has the carrot of a place at April's Sanix World Rugby Youth Tournament in Japan, which St Mary's won this year.

Mativa said they wouldn't be getting ahead of themselves with regional tournaments to get through before they even make Condors, but said a goal had been set.

"We've got regional finals first, then Condor finals, so if we do want to go back [to Sanix] we've got to win those first. That's the ultimate goal, to defend the world title. We'll see how it goes."

Mativa made special mention of his long-time forwards coach, All Blacks flanker Ardie Savea, and the work he had done with the pack. Savea had other commitments on Sunday, but was able to watch the game via a Facebook Live stream.

"Ardie has been a big part of it. He's helped me right throughout the year. He's coached me as well. Every time he's there we try to pick his brain and take as much as we can from him."

Mativa was as yet undecided on whether he would be back to coach the team next year, but there will be a lot of people hoping he does given the success he has brought not only St Mary's, but women's rugby in the region.

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