

Young duo make big impact

DANE AMBLER

Two 15-year-old Sacred Heart College rowers made a big impression competing against older girls at last week's Maadi Cup.

Racing in the under-18 pair, two grades above their level, Izzy Ahearn and Maddy Devery had the fourth best time overall at Lake Karapiro.

The Maadi regatta was stepping stone for the young pair, who are expected to make big progress in the coming years. They were part of the star-studded Petone women's eight which won the national title on February 14 with an inspiring 6.59.93 row.

Axel Dickinson, who was in the New Zealand squad at the Rio Olympics, has coached the girls for the last two years. "It's unheard of for 15-year-olds to do so well. This is the youngest, least-experienced crew from one of smallest clubs," he said.

Ahearn was also astonished by the performance. "We hadn't been doing well in the eight all season, but when it came to the final everyone got so into it and somehow we won," she said.

The other members of that crew were Saint Oran's Abbie Pritchard, 18, Georgia Coyne, 17, Laura Fienson, 17; Sacred Heart's Tia McDougall, 15; Hutt Valley High's Poppy Newell, 16, former Saint Oran's schoolgirl Alice Wright, 23, and promising Coxswain Lucy Bird, 18, the daughter of Andrew Bird, New Zealand's last coxswain Olympic medallist.

Dickinson has no doubt that many of the nine will flourish in coming years. "Most of the girls have had interest from ivy league schools in the United States and will be looking at scholarships in the coming years."

Petone's young rowers are often pushed to train with their older, more experienced counterparts. But that doesn't bother Devery, who feels quite at home with her older team-mates.

"We train with people older than us, it's the norm. So when it comes to racing I don't feel like I'm up against people that much older than me," she said.

Dickinson said the unconventional method rewards juniors, but hard work was key to their success. "We don't get on the water much in Wellington so they have to put in a lot of hard yards on land and in the gym, and it's paid off."

In December last year, Ahearn smashed the 42.2km ergo record for her age by fifteen minutes, completing her marathon row in 3 hours 24 minutes.



Maddy Devery, left, and Izzy Ahearn, right, at Petone Rowing Club.

"I love the crew environment and the fact that you are always surrounded by people who are trying their hardest."

Maddy Devery

Ahearn also rowed a pair with the very promising Ruby Willis, 20, sister of 1500m runner Nick Willis. The pair took out the silver in the senior 2 at the North Island rowing championships.

Willis went to the world rowing junior championships and has won two national club titles.

Dickinson said the club atmosphere encouraged those in their late teens to stick with the sport.

"Most high schoolers quit the sport after their last Maadi regatta,



Petone women's winning eight at nationals in Twizel. From left Tia McDougall, Abbie Pritchard, Poppy Newell, Laura Feinson, Izzy Ahearn, Alice Wright, Georgia Coyne, Maddy Devery, Lucy Bird (cox).

PHOTO: CHRIS ELSON

but some people don't shine until after Maadi. Those rowers who keep at the sport through the club environment can sometimes make the New Zealand squad," he said.

Devery said she had no plans to quit the sport after college. "I love the crew environment and the fact that you are always surrounded by people who are trying their

At a glance

Other Wellington Maadi Cup results:

- The Wellington College boys over-15 lightweight coxed four of Zach Hough, Zane Goggin, Hugo Hibbert, Josiah Duffield and James Dunne (cox) claimed a silver medal in their event, five seconds back from the Sacred Heart College crew.
- Their schoolmates Ricky Kiddle and Adam Smith won bronze in the boys under-17 double sculls.
- Samuel Marsden's Ruby Leverington won bronze in the under-18 single sculls.

hardest. In which other sport can you wake up and go out on the water at Petone beach every morning?"

Ahearn, who has secured a North Island under-18 trial on April 14, has a clear long-term goal in mind. "After I finish school I would like to row for New Zealand," she said.



Chelsey Edwards developed a chest infection during the New Zealand Age Group Championships, but still came away with five medals. PHOTO: ANDRE CHUMKO

Edwards battles past infection

ANDRE CHUMKO

Upper Hutt swimming sensation Chelsey Edwards fell ill during the New Zealand Age Group Championships, but this did not stop her from winning five medals.

The 15-year-old Chilton Saint James student developed a debilitating chest infection on the first day of the five-day event, which went on to impair her breathing in all six of her races.

She went on to win gold in the 200m freestyle, in 2 minutes 6.51 seconds, silver in the 50m, 100m and 400m freestyle finals and bronze in the 100m butterfly.

"On the first day I kind of knew. I was getting really puffed during warmups. I was like, 'I should be feeling good'."

"It didn't feel like a normal cold, it just felt different. My coach even said my face looked so red during the race."

Edwards said continuing to compete through the pain was difficult as she could not breathe properly, but remaining positive was the most important thing.

"I had to look positive and look forward to the next one. It's not something I can really control. I just have to try to overcome it."

Edwards also placed fourth in a 50m butterfly final, which her mother Debbie said she would have won "easily" under normal circumstances.

Edwards' illness came as she prepared for five days of races at the upcoming Australian Age

Swimming Championships to be held in Brisbane from April 16-23.

Last October, Edwards won five gold and four silver medals at the national short-course championships, as well as placing second among all ages for the 200m freestyle.

If she performs well in Brisbane, she will be on track to compete in the Commonwealth Youth Games in the Bahamas in July and next year's Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast.

In the wake of her most recent performance, Edwards said she felt pressure to deliver.

"Everyone is looking at me like, 'Oh, there's Chelsey'. If I don't have a good race I know people will be thinking."

Edwards has been swimming since she was five, and competing since she was seven.

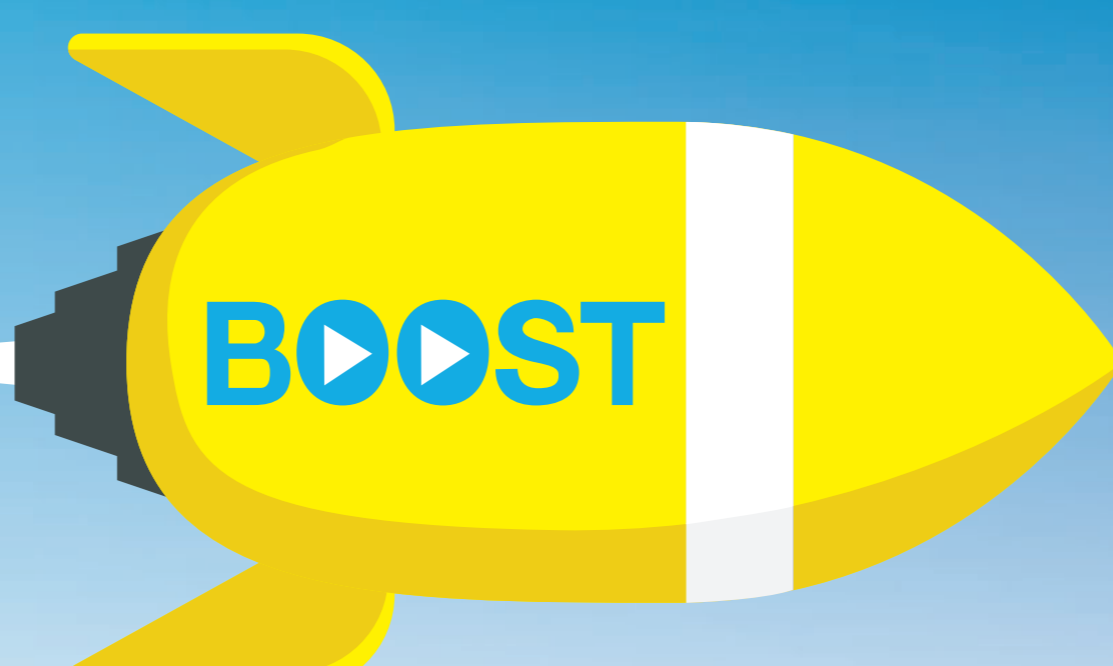
She wakes up at 4:30am to get to the pool for two hours of training before school, as well as training after school, four days a week. She also trains on Saturdays.

Debbie Edwards said she does "a lot of paperwork" to continue funding Chelsey's talent, including making grant applications to the Silverstream Lions Club and the Upper Hutt Cossie Club, which recently gave Chelsey \$7500.

Edwards said she watched videos of 16-year-old Canadian Olympian Penelope Oleksiak for inspiration that someone her age could compete on an international stage. "I am quite nervous but I have to look positively and think that I can do it."

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