

# COLLEGE SPORT



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## Fear factor doesn't exist for Leti-I'iga

**RUGBY**

AYESHA LETI-I'IGA is fearless on the rugby field.  
 The Porirua College 16-year-old is the youngest and one of the smallest members of the Wellington Pride in the national provincial championship, but runs into spaces others are too timid to risk.  
 She's scored three tries in five games for the team, who call her "baby", using to great effect the electric pace she nurtured as a sprinter during her early teenage years.  
 Sprinting was the sport she first had a serious crack at, but following her first game of rugby two years ago, filling in for her college's sevens team, she has been hooked on the oval ball game.  
 "I didn't know how to play but because I used to be a sprinter we used that to our advantage," she said.  
 "As soon as the whistle went, I got the ball, broke the line and scored in the first minute.  
 "After that I decided I wanted to pursue rugby."  
 Leti-I'iga's life was touched by personal tragedy in 2009, when her mother, Mary Asolupe Leti-I'iga, died at just 35 years-old after being hit by a car.  
 Even at the age of 10, Leti-I'iga knew she was at a crossroad.  
 "I could've gone downhill but I chose to use it to push me even harder with school and sports," she said.  
 She has now a guardian angel watching over her during her games.  
 "Every game I write my mum's name on my wrist and it helps me.  
 "Every time I'm running she's always there running with me and everything I do, I do it for her."  
 Perhaps knowing there is someone there helps her fearless attitude. Her grandfather, Paau, who she lives with along with her grandmother, Salafa, also helps make sure she goes into every physical confrontation with a full head of steam.  
 "A lot of people underestimate me because of my size, but my grandpa always says to never be scared and always play with your heart, because once you're scared it's your game over, you won't make your tackles."  
 However, grandpa wasn't



Porirua College student Ayesha Leti-I'iga has been a handful for her much older opposition in the women's national provincial championship.



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Ayesha Leti-I'iga

always that supportive of her rugby.  
 When her aunt, Oriental Rongotai prop and Porirua College girl's rugby coach Fuamai Tbaumoli, wanted her to play in 2014 her grandparents initially resisted, not wanting her to get hurt given her diminutive stature.  
 It took a lot of persuading but they eventually gave in.  
 Her first full season in 2014 saw

her make the Wellington under-18 team, something she was not expecting but proud to have achieved.  
 This year she followed Taumoli to Ories, scoring a hat-trick in her first game against Wainuiomata on the way to 17 tries in 12 games.  
 Pride coach James Porter said he had been keeping an eye on her since she made the under-18 team and was excited by what he saw.

"We invited her to trial [this year] and from that point she's just been one of the more dangerous wingers in the competition.  
 "She's quite compact but it's that speed off the mark and I don't know whether it's because she's 16, but she's just fearless.  
 "Fearless in the tackle, fearless in the carry, she runs holes but that most girls would try to avoid. It's a weapon and we've just got to

try and keep getting her good ball."  
 While she's fearless on the field, she has a bubbly nature off it which is contagious.  
 Her efforts this year have helped the Pride book a spot in the NPC semifinals, with Leti-I'iga saying she thinks they can go all the way.  
 It's a far cry from earlier in the season, when she hadn't even

entertained the thought of making the Pride.  
 "I was never gunning for Pride because of my age, I was gunning for under-18s again, so to make Pride was a big achievement for myself. It was all with family support, my grandparents pushed me to do my best."  
 Porter said they had even taken the step of bringing her into the team's leadership group.

Photo: MAARTEN HOLL/FAIRFAX NZ

## Wellington East eye top finish

**NETBALL**

AFTER two heartbreaks this season, Wellington East Girls' College are banking on an experienced squad to see them through to a high finish at the netball nationals.  
 The team will lose six year 13s at the end of the year, so will have a team hungry for success in their final year at the school.  
 They qualified for the national tournament, starting next Tuesday, as runner-up in the lower North Island tournament this month.  
 They lost the final 25-23 to Wellington's St Mary's College, with their coach, James Laursen, putting it down to a team-wide brain explosion.  
 "The girls lost their heads, we were up by seven and lost by two," he said. "The main reason they lost is because they cracked in the second half. They didn't adapt and didn't change to St Mary's changes."  
 "We took a lot of learnings from that and having an understanding of how to pull through those pressure points."  
 East also lost the Wellington regional final to Wellington Girls' College, with Laursen saying they were targeting another final at nationals.  
 "I have high expectations of these girls, these girls are good enough to make it to the final and

that's ideally where I want to be, but on any given day anything can happen."  
 They will rely of their depth of experience, with their spine of New Zealand schools representatives anchoring the team, Laursen said.  
 "Tiana Metuarau, Mila Reuelu-Buchanan and Marcelle Parkes has been consistent throughout the season.  
 "[Softballer] Mereana Makea has been great to have back in the team. She just gives so much depth to the team, so much range and her vision and passes are stunning."  
 "It was always tough keeping the team motivated for such a long season, he said.  
 "It is a long campaign. We started in February for goodness sake, and now we're still going in October. It's one of the longest seasons I know of for any sport at the moment."  
 They should be able to at least match their fourth from last year and have Cashmere High School, Westlake Girls' High School and Waikato Diocesan in their pool – none of which won their regional tournaments.  
 Another strong Wellington contender should be Wellington East's lower North Island conquerors, St Mary's.  
 They still have a relatively young team, with just three year 13s, but have targeted an improve-



Wellington East's Mila Reuelu-Buchanan, right, will be an important cog in her team's national title bid.  
 Photo: MAARTEN HOLL/FAIRFAX NZ

ment on their seventh place in 2014. They have also avoided other regional winners, drawn against St Andrew's College, Epsom Girls' Grammar and Napier Girls' High School in pool play.  
 But St Mary's coach Pelesa Semu was wary of getting too far ahead of herself before the tournament had even begun.  
 "The Auckland teams are always strong, the defending champions Mount Albert Grammar will be very strong and then you've got teams from down south who will be tough and of course the teams from Wellington as well."  
 She said her year 13s of Colleen Faleafaga, Jermaine Howard-

Vallance and Milan Lefaoeseu had commanded the three vital areas of the court, but she had also been impressed by some of her younger players.  
 "It's quite good when you've got three key players in the three key areas of the court.  
 "[Colleen] and Renee [Savai'inaea] have been working really hard, she's my year 10 student in that defensive end and they've been working really well.  
 "There's another year 10 student, Ainsleyana [Puleiata] who's an amazing athlete who has been coming along really nicely."  
 A top-four finish would be on the team's agenda, with the team expected to be even better next

year. "When I looked at all 16 teams at nationals, most teams are losing six or seven players whereas we're only losing three.  
 "There is a good base that will be there next year, which is great for the school and great for the team."  
 It's been 16 years since Wellington Girls' secured the last national title for a Wellington team.  
 Wellington Girls will be at the nationals after finishing fourth at lower North Islands, but face a tough task in pool play against South Island champions St Margaret's College and upper North Island runners up Saint Kentigern College, as well as Southland Girls' High School.

## Wellington Girls' on track for redemption

**BASKETBALL**

WELLINGTON Girls' College are on track for a slice of national basketball redemption.  
 The team recorded 24 successive wins during the 2014 season, but lost the national secondary schools final 64-46 against New Plymouth Girls' High, a team they had beaten twice in the preceding month.  
 They have gone to nationals with a similar record this year, having won 19 of 20 games – their only loss a one-point thriller against St Mary's in round three of the Wellington competition.  
 They went on to win the Wellington competition, before going through the lower North Island tournament undefeated.  
 Having maintained a core group of players since 2013, the team went to nationals in Palmerston North this week with a starting lineup that has been together for three years and has high expectations.  
 In their opening two games, they trounced Massey 82-36, before extracting a small amount of revenge on New Plymouth Girls' with a 57-45 win.  
 Their final pool games against Rangiora High School and Auckland Girls' Grammar today should result in wins and safe passage to the quarterfinals.  
 Meanwhile, the other two Wellington girls' teams at the tournament have not fared so well.  
 Wellington regional runners up



Tegan Graham will be an important part of Wellington Girls' College's quest for a national basketball title.

St Mary's lost to St Hilda's Collegiate (64-45) and Rangitoto College (71-44), while Hutt Valley High School went down to Christchurch Girls' (60-53) and Napier Girls' (81-48).  
 Wellington schools on the boys' side of the draw also struggled.  
 Wellington champions Onslow College managed to pick up an 84-74 win against New Plymouth Boys' in round one, but went down 71-67 to Hamilton's Fraser High School.  
 They were to take on a stacked Rangitoto College today. Their lineup includes Tall Blacks centre Tai Wynyard, alongside four members of the New Zealand team that recently contested the FIBA under-16 Oceania championships.  
 Wellington College lost their opening three matches to Middle-Open Grange, Palmerston North Boys' and Auckland Grammar to slip out of contention.

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