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Sports are a part of education

There seems to be a general downgrading of sports when it comes to its place in education. A majority of the focus is in the classroom, as it should be, but other aspects of education — music, art or sports — is relegated to second-tier status.

But there is a program in San Mateo that is proving that sports is a valuable aspect of a complete education. Keala Keanaaina, a member of the San Mateo Police

Department and a school resource officer for the city of San Mateo, was tired of watching players from the San Mateo High football team lose interest in school following the football season. He decided to start the San Mateo Warriors — a club rugby team made up of players from San Mateo, Aragon and Peninsula high schools. Since the advent of the club, the Warriors are undefeated in their first year playing in the Skyhawk League — which is comprised of eight teams, including club teams from Valley Christian, Bellarmine and a combination team of players from Menlo-Atherton, Woodside and Serra. The San Mateo Warriors have a showdown Saturday against undefeated East Palo Alto at 11 a.m. at San Mateo High School.



Nathan Mollat

"Once our football players stopped playing football, their grades go down. How do we keep them engaged (in the classroom)?" Keanaaina said.

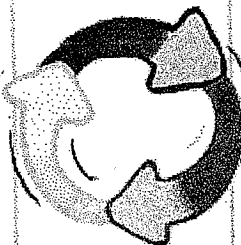
More important than the undefeated season, however, is the fact that the club has got a number of at-risk student-athletes actively involved in school again. Keanaaina said there are two players on the Warriors who had dropped out of school all together. When they heard about the rugby club, they wanted to play. Since the club flies under the USA Rugby banner, one of the rules is that the players have to be enrolled in school. These two players enrolled at San Mateo Adult School and are working toward achieving their GEDs.

"Those are my victories," Keanaaina said. "You get a kid who was sitting at home doing nothing, coming back saying school is important because they want to be somewhere where they belong."

Since the Warriors are not officially affiliated with the school, the team has to pay for field use, equipment and uniforms. To that end, Keanaaina went out into the community to raise funds. Fa'a Pacifika, a community-oriented organization in the Tongan community, donated about \$9,000 and he also got Outback Steakhouse to help out as well. The team also got a huge lift when Patelesio Latu, a coach in the San Mateo Rugby Club, offered to coach the

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When the first day of practice rolled around, however, only 12 players showed up. A team needs 15 on the field. But it was a matter of time before those numbers swelled.

"The next day, we had 18. Now we're at 40. It got to the point where we had to tell kids if you're not serious about this, don't play," Keanaaina said. "We have guys from Aragon and San Mateo, guys from different neighborhoods that have had some issues. But there have been no problems."

Since the team is not officially part of the school's curriculum, Keanaaina can not hold the players to the minimum 2.0 grade point average needed to play other sports at the school. He does mandate, however, that the players all have to spend three hours a week in study hall. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, all the players spend an hour-and-a-half studying.




"All these kids have brought up their GPAs," Keanaaina said.

Primarily made up of kids of Polynesian decent, the Warriors have experience a tremendous amount of success in a short amount time. They entered a tournament in Sacramento with just one game under their belts and advanced to the championship game against a powerful Jesuit-Sacramento team.

"All these other clubs are saying, 'We can't believe this is your first year,'" Keanaaina said.

Regardless how the Warriors do this weekend and the rest of the year, the program is a smash hit — both in and out of the classroom. It just shows that if those at-risk kids have something to look forward to, they'll do their best to attain it.

"Culturally, rugby is big on the island. It's like soccer in other countries," Keanaaina said. "There were never the resources (to put this club together in the past). I had the resources."

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