

San Mateo rugby team comprised of at-risk youths comes close to national title

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SAN MATEO — Three years ago, the Warriors rugby team didn't exist, but last weekend, the 40 or so teens were in Utah playing for a national title.

Not bad for a group of kids who aren't exactly the clean-cut type — almost 80 percent of them were on probation for various offenses in 2007. But the San Mateo Police Activities League-sponsored team lost in the semifinals to a Utah squad that was ranked third in the country. It hurt, but the boys shrugged it off.

"We're going back to nationals," said inside center George Naufahu, 16, who joined some of his teammates on the football field Thursday at San Mateo High.

It isn't about winning, only. The team was founded by San Mateo police Officer Keala Keanaaina in December 2007 when he noticed a worrying trend among the athletes at San Mateo High School, where he works as a resource officer. Outside of football season, many of the kids would stop studying because they didn't have to worry about staying eligible to play. This led to problems with teachers and resulted in a drift toward the street and all its dangers.

So Keanaaina held a meeting one day with some of the at-risk teens and asked them what they wanted to do.

"One of them said, 'Let's start a rugby team,' " Keanaaina said Thursday. "If they would have said badminton, that's what we would have done."

The journey to Utah started simply. Only a few guys showed up to the first couple meetings. But at every subsequent gathering, a few more came.

Gary Vihmahi, who plays hook, was one of the first to get involved but wasn't really committed, Keanaaina said. That changed when the now 17-year-old got arrested for driving without a license two years ago. He ran from the officers who pulled him over, but a police dog caught up to him. After that episode, Vihmahi and Keanaaina had a talk. Keanaaina explained it was time to make a choice: get it together or ruin his life.

"Now he can outrun the dog," said Keanaaina, adding that Vihmahi is one of the players who has made the most progress athletically and mentally.

Vihmahi is part of what became the core of the team, which started winning matches. And by the close of this season, which started in February and ended in May, the Warriors were 5-1 in the Pacific Coast Rugby Union. Not long after that, they were chosen to head to nationals. In the union, the teams are selected to advance based on their record and the overall quality of the team.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It don't happen often," said Pau Maile, 17, of the trip to nationals.

Those matches would also have been a chance for the Maile family to snag a second national title. The boy's father, Sione, and his Burlingame high school team won a U.S. rugby title in 1985. Maile learned the game from his dad, who went to Utah with the team.

"I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my father," he added.

He may get that chance. Most of the team is coming back next year, and they learned a few things from their first shot at national-level play.

As the boys talked about what they could have done differently — some said motivation, others said focus and playing as a team — they all agreed that they had in some ways beaten themselves. And when — not if — they get back to nationals, they vow not to make the same mistakes.

For 16-year-old Moto Filikitonga, who plays outside center, those lessons have been learned, and he is thinking about next year.

"The next game," he said. "Get ready for the next game."

To donate to the rugby team, which has annual costs of \$15,000 to \$20,000, visit www.sanmateopal.org or send checks made out to San Mateo PAL to 200 Franklin Parkway, San Mateo, CA 94403.