

PARRAMATTA

# Eels girls to blaze trail

First Parramatta team lines up for inaugural Tarsha Gale nines competition



PE teacher Amanda Farrugia.

## Teacher shows the way

**Carleen Frost**

THERE'S never been a better time to be a woman in professional sport. Female athletes are finally starting to steal some of the limelight from the blokes through record crowds, history-making TV deals and a swag of new leagues.

At the forefront is a new generation of sporting stars encouraging young girls to break through the barriers of gender stereotypes.

Among them is Parramatta schoolteacher Amanda Farrugia. A PE teacher at Our Lady of Mercy College by day, on the weekends the 32-year-old skips the Greater Western Sydney Giants women's side in the inaugural AFL Women's League.

Since its first bounce on February 3, the women's league has attracted capacity crowds and millions of TV viewers.

Farrugia says the early success will be a turning point for women's sport across the country.

"I say to (my students) there's no better time to sink your teeth into something because your gender is no longer restricting you to what you can do," she said.

Western Sydney University Institute for Culture and Society's Professor David Rowe says there has been a definite shift over the past year in favour of women's sport - with women's leagues starting to claw back some of the nation's already "crowded sports market" from men.



**■ We can tackle just as well as the boys and run just as well**

Shilea-T Schaaf

**Melissa Yeo**

WHEN they take to the field this weekend, these girls are making history.

The under-18s players are the first Parramatta Eels team in the inaugural Tarsha Gale nines competition - and it is a feat not lost on the energetic teens.

"It's not just a boys' game anymore and to have this opportunity to represent the Eels really shows that you can progress further than just the club level," captain Shilea-T Schaaf said.

"We can tackle just as well (as the boys) and run just as well ... It gives hope to the rest of the girls that want to give it a go."

Nine NSW teams will go head-to-head in the nine-a-side competition, touted by the NRL as a pathway for women's rugby league and a breeding ground for talent for what is expected to be a 2019 first grade women's competition.

Head coach Paul Bent has high hopes for the players in his squad.

"Girls football is going to be phenomenal," he said.

"Every boy has had a sister who comes along and watches football, before this came along every girl had to play along with the boys until she was 12.

"Finally they've got something to call their own, the school level is already phenomenal and it's only going to get better."

For most of the girls on the team, selection in the Eels

was the next logical step in their football careers, even if it meant moving interstate.

Rosita Utia, 16, has been a keen league player for some time now, but growing up in the AFL heartland of Melbourne meant she could not always find a team.

"I've always wanted to play football but in Melbourne there just weren't enough opportunities for me," she said.

"I feel proud that we are finally getting somewhere with a women's team and I know it's just the beginning for me, I want to go to the Olympics with the nines."

A little closer to home, Guildford's Akosita Masima has been a loyal Eels fan for as long as she can remember and was mentored by her uncle, Parramatta Eels cult hero Fuiufui Moi Moi.

"I never thought a women's league would happen but my uncle used to tell me that one day league would get big for girls," she said. "I feel so blessed and so grateful that I can play in a rep side, especially because it's the highest level a girl can play in rugby league."

The girls have put in strong performances in their pre-season training and trial matches.

"Our ball skills and our speed set us apart from our competition," winger Akosita said. "We're tiny compared to the rest but we can use that to our advantage."

The girls will take on Illawarra on Saturday at New Era Stadium.



Parramatta Eels under-18s women's team captain Shilea-T Schaaf and, right, the team training.