

## Why schoolboy rugby stars should be careful what they wish for

Paul Cully 12:28, Dec 06 2018



MARK TAYLOR/STUFF

The victorious Hamilton Boys' High School First XV after beating St Kentigern College in 2013.

**OPINION:** Five years ago a young No 10 called Bryn Gatland helped Hamilton Boys' High School to the national secondary schools crown with a drop goal against St Kentigern College. That memory still brings a smile to Gatland's face but the new Highlanders recruit observes something else about that HBHS team.

Only two players have really kicked on. Gatland looks around the scene in New Zealand and sees only himself and North Harbour halfback Harrison Levien, who was captain on that day. It's a cautionary tale for those young players, or their families, who think that success in first XV rugby is the fast lane to a well-paid professional career.

For every Rieko Ioane or Taniela Tupou, there are countless others who dreams never quite materialise. And that should be the central debate in schoolboy rugby. Not the winning, not the trophies, not the glory - but the outcome for the boys themselves. Are they being best served by being put through almost professional-level programs at a young age, only to realise later in life that they peaked at 17?



PHIL WALTER/GETTY IMAGES

St Kentigern players celebrate a try against Kings College in May.

The jury is still out. This low conversion rate from first XVs to professional contracts must surely be vexing New Zealand Rugby as it weighs up its approach to schoolboy rugby.

**Stuff Article:** <https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/rugby/opinion/109134947/why-schoolboy-rugby-stars-should-be-careful-what-they-wish-for?cid=app-android>

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Player 'poaching', or 'recruitment', is part of a much broader issue but it is a symptom, not the malaise itself.



MARK TAYLOR/STUFF

Bryn Gatland nails a drop goal against St Kent's in 2013.

The bigger issue is the intense pressure to win being put on young athletes, whose minds and bodies are still growing. Whenever someone pipes up these days about the game going soft then my response is: go and stand on the side-lines of a high-quality schoolboy rugby game. There, you can hear the bone-on-bone crunch of well-conditioned, powerful athletes. It is brutal.

On a bad day you may see a boy - and they are still boys - in the arms of his family, close to tears after a painful injury as plans are made to head to hospital. Some of this is part and parcel of a rough sport that is probably getting rougher in terms of the volume and intensity of contact. But surely we are nearing a point at which we ask what schoolboy rugby is trying to achieve, and who it is best serving.



MARK TAYLOR/STUFF

North Harbour halfback Harrison Levien after Hamilton Boys' win against St Kents in 2013.

Those questions are equally relevant to the 'winners' in this debate, the talented youngsters who are being handed scholarships.

Indeed, the outstanding player in Gatland's HBHS team was an athletic young lock called Sam Chongkit, who looked like an All Black in the making.

"Sam picked up a shoulder injury and then disappeared, then I saw a couple of photos pop up of him playing in Japan," Gatland says. At least Chongkit is still active, still playing the game he loves.

But how many sadder variations of this story are there up and down the country?

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