

# ARCHIVE

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## Washington City Paper

### Cheap Seats

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### The Real All Blacks

By Dave McKenna

The congregation at the Greater Deliverance Christian Center in Southeast this past Sunday welcomed Josh Williamson home like a prodigal son. Parishioners got up from their pews to cheer the announcement that Williamson had just been invited to represent his country next month in a youth rugby tournament in South Africa.

After the standing ovation, churchgoers approached his family with some questions about the upcoming event.

Such as “What kind of ball do they use?”

“They didn’t know much about rugby,” says Valerie Williams, Josh’s mother. “But neither did I a few years ago.”

Williams says she’s used to such queries from friends and family. If given the time, her son can recite not only a detailed ball description, but every rule related to rugby as well. But he finds it’s quicker and easier to kick off his treatise on the 19th-century sport with the most important aspect of his relationship with it.

“Rugby got me out,” says Williamson.

Out of the neighborhood street trade, he explains. And out of trouble at school, his mother will tell you. And, for all the right reasons, out of D.C.: Williamson’s a freshman at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, where he’s on an athletic scholarship. The fleet 5-foot-10 260-pounder is a product of the rugby program at the Hyde Leadership Public Charter School.

As a growing percentage of the rugby world knows, that’s Tal Bayer’s program. The Hyde rugby season got off to an unofficial start last week when Bayer took a busload of

kids to a camp at Penn State University.

Bayer, a 35-year-old former military brat, learned the game when his father was stationed in England. He first played for club teams while in high school, after his family moved to Fairfax County. After college at Radford, where rugby is a mainstay, he took a banking job in Atlanta and stayed in the game by playing for club teams there.

He was looking to both switch careers and get back to the D.C. area, and when a local rugby connection told him about plans to open up a brand-new charter school in Northeast in the late '90s, Bayer moved here quite intent on getting a job teaching and coaching rugby.

The first goal seemed a whole lot more achievable than the second.

“Before Hyde was open, I just started showing up at every parent-interest meeting that there was,” he says. “Pretty soon, parents were coming up to me at the meetings and asking questions, thinking that I was part of the school. I was just there to get a job.”

Persistence paid off: Bayer was the first teacher hired when Hyde opened its doors in 1999. And, though most students had never seen a rugby ball before, he immediately started a rugby club. It's regarded as the first, and still only, all-black high-school rugby squad in the country. It's also the only public-school rugby program in D.C. The program had some rough spots early on—“I remember getting beat 100-to-like-nothing a lot,” says Williamson—but has found its stride. Last year, Hyde was one of just 16 teams to earn berths in the national high-school rugby championships in Dallas. And Hyde's sevens team—an increasingly popular miniaturized version of the old game—has gone undefeated since 2002.

When Bayer announced that he was offering the program to middle-school kids this year, more than 60 students, about half the male population, signed up.

“I'd never seen a rugby ball before,” says Williamson, who was a founding member of Hyde's club. “I thought it was going to be like football, and I'd played football before. But, at the first practice, after a few hits, with all that constant movement, I remember thinking right away, Hey, this isn't football!”

His mother noticed a difference pretty quickly, too—in her son. She says the serious behavioral problems that had kept Josh jumping from school to school disappeared. And she stopped having to worry about him hanging out on T Street NE and getting into mischief, or worse. The sport, the coach, and maturity get the credit.

“The players' relationship with Bayer is incredible,” says Williams. “I tell Josh that Bayer's his Caucasian father.”

Over the years, a few of his own players have occasionally approached Bayer and asked, with more cynicism than gratitude, what a white guy gets out of running an all-black

team. He tells them that he's just doing something he loves.

Even if Bayer wanted to bury the racial angle of his program, the world won't let him. Weeks after his team's trip to a tournament hosted by a predominantly white private school in New England, he got letters from rugby parents in the host city confessing in shame that they hadn't offered room and board to his players—a standard practice for regional or national youth events—because they were afraid to let inner-city blacks into their homes.

And he stammers trying to hold back leftover rage when asked to recount the story of the trip home from a Pennsylvania tournament two years ago, when the bus driver pulled over at a convenience store outside Baltimore. A customer in biker regalia asked the clerk, amid a stream of profanity, why “all these crows” were in the store.

“The old me would have just head-butted the dude, smashed him in the face, and thrown him through the door,” says Bayer. “I remember being on the verge of going crazy and then looking over this guy's shoulder and seeing my kids all over the store. And I started thinking, If I take this guy out, I've just shot to hell everything else I've ever preached to these kids.”

So, Bayer simply announced, “These are my kids,” and escorted his team back to the bus.

For the rest of the ride home, Bayer says, players came up to his seat to console him.

“I couldn't stop shaking, I was feeling so deflated and crushed by what happened,” he says. “But my kids, they're all well aware that racism is alive and well in this country. And they were worried about me? Bad as that was, I look at it now as the moment I became an adult.”

But in some small part because of the racial angle, the local, national, and even international rugby community has embraced the Hyde team and looked upon it as an important part of growing the game. Last year, a deceased veteran D.C. rucker's family suggested that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to Bayer's program. USA Rugby, the sport's national governing body, touts the Hyde squad on its Web site.

And John Wood, the ambassador to the United States from the world's most rugby-crazed nation—New Zealand, home of the legendary All Blacks, currently the top-ranked national squad on the globe—has established the Ambassador's Shield Game, an annual matchup featuring expats from all over the United States on the Hyde campus, with profits going to the school. Wood also brings the Hyde kids with him back to the embassy for a postgame barbecue and party.

“When there's an opportunity to make available in an area like that a program that can take them out of their environment on the basis of sporting merit, and give them another avenue, we should all want to support it,” says Wood. “I've been in situations talking to people in a social context, people who've heard about the Hyde program, heard about our

event, and they've just pulled money out of their pocket, saying, 'We would like to be involved.' But I don't think any of us appreciated what a springboard it could be for the young Hyde players to achieve national recognition."

The 2004 Shield Game, held in November before a crowd of more than 1,000 people, brought in \$10,000. That money will help pay for the team's travel to the Penn State camp and out-of-town tournaments, and Bayer's proud to say that no Hyde student has ever had to forgo rugby because of financial need.

Like too many schoolboy coaches in this town, Bayer has lost players to murder and dysfunctional families. But the good stories, Bayer will tell you again and again, dwarf the bad. Stories like Williamson's. And Kendall Brown's. Last week, Brown, who like Williamson started playing rugby the first year the school offered it, learned he'd been accepted to Penn State. The coach touted that news as if Brown had made the national rugby team. Since Hyde opened, every graduating senior from the rugby team has gone to college.

Year after year, Bayer says, kids like that build his faith in Hyde and rugby.

"The game of rugby builds character, in my opinion, vastly better than other sports," he says. "Bottom line, you have to work your butt off to play this game, and no matter if you're fat and tall or short and skinny, there's a way you can contribute, so long as you work 100 percent of the time. There's no time for you to huddle up or go to the sideline to take a timeout in rugby. And while football is a game run by the coaches, when game time comes in rugby, the players have to step up and play. That teaches leadership in a way that I don't think the other sports do."

Williamson will testify to that.

"Rugby's definitely more of a team-based game," he says. "You support your teammates on the field, and you get so close, you support them with any problems they had off the field, too. I believe that rugby is what gave me the life I have. I look at things like: Hey, I'm going to college! Hey, I did something with myself! Hey, my mom's proud of me!"  
—Dave McKenna