



females on the field

The girls from Bilo get the whole town out for a show of guts and glory.

On a Saturday afternoon, in a small rural town in Central Queensland, the local rugby fields are set with a stage for live music, a photo booth and an arrangement of stylish couches ready for a high tea. It's Ladies Day at the Biloela Rugby Club which means women both on and off the field are being recognised for their role in the community.

Ladies Day has been an annual event for five years but its significance has changed since the women's team joined the competition. Only three years ago, girls in Biloela could play rugby until they were 12 years old before they were politely kicked out of the team, no longer allowed to play alongside the boys. There weren't enough players for an all-girls team. But today, it doesn't take long for the sidelines to fill up with spectators so that you're forced to fight for a seat.

What is everyone buzzing to see? The Biloela women's team.

Women's Rugby Sevens is a version of rugby union in which two teams of seven take the field and play seven minute halves, with a two-minute half time (instead of 15 players playing 40 minute halves). Each team is allowed five interchanges of positions. When a try has been scored, to convert the goal, the ball must be drop-kicked from behind the field posts. Because of the small scale, rugby sevens tends to be a fast paced game.

One of the team's youngest players, Annika Middleton (17) got into rugby when a friend from high school invited her to training. "After only one training session I played my first game," Annika says. "I was so nervous and I didn't think I was prepared but once you get in there

and give it a go, the adrenaline kicks in and you really start to enjoy it. I fell in love with the sport.

It's a great place to get started if you are interested in contact sports.

The community we have here is welcoming, so you feel supported."

Biloela may be a small town but that doesn't stop its people rallying behind the Biloela Cockatiels. This is the third year the Cockatiels have been in the Capricornia Rugby Competition and the second time Biloela has had a ladies team. Now the competition is growing and recognised as a sport rather than a novelty, the aim is to expand to include more teams and more versions of the sport: 7s, 10s and 15s.



Cockatiels' Coach Dean Brewer has been playing for 23 years and coaching for over a decade. Coach Dean says the difference between coaching men and women is more mental than physical. "The skills they have to learn are the same. There's no difference in the catch, pass or tackle. The difference in the ladies is there is no ego or arrogance. They are keen to learn."

Coach Dean says watching the girls develop as players is one of the most rewarding parts of the game. He says training ladies means building their confidence. "It's about telling them they can do more than they think they can, getting them to back themselves, and having a go. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out! It doesn't matter," Dean says. "We always say there is no wrong

decision – except making no decision. It doesn't matter whether you pass or you run as long as you don't do nothing.

If you pick up the ball and you don't run, you're going to get whacked."

At this year's Ladies Day there are three Cockatiels girls playing their first game outside of training, but you wouldn't know they hadn't played before. The girls charge into the opposition with determination, tackling as if they'd been doing it for years, with exuberant cries from their teammates and coach and cheers from the crowd. Training sessions involve practising tackling in a safe and controlled environment but the girls bring their own enthusiasm to the game.

As well as learning new skills and drills, Annika says rugby has given her a whole group of new friends, through comps and training camps. "Some of my best friends have come from rugby and even though they live in different towns, we stay connected. It's competitive on the field, but at the end of the day everyone gets along and can get in and have a big group huddle. We'll share players if we don't have enough."

The Biloela Cockatiels have since played at the season's grand-final, losing the game in the final seconds. This loss will motivate the team through pre-season training as they tackle headfirst into taking new chances and their goals to grow the competition.