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How rugby provides pathway to college

By

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The boys of Hyde Leadership Public Charter School's rugby program in Northeast come from rough neighborhoods and challenged backgrounds. But, by focusing their energy on the school's unique sports program and a little guidance from coach Tal Bayer, every boy who has completed the school's rugby program has gone onto college.

"If I didn't have sports and rugby to help me release my tension and anger, it would get bottled up inside," said Chris Holmes, 17, a Hyde rugby player from a rough Northeast neighborhood who plans to go to the University of Maryland at College Park when he graduates. "I would end up letting it out at the wrong time."

Founded in 1999, the school has had three graduating classes. All of its graduates have gone onto college, a statistic, school officials said, which is unheard of in the neighborhoods from which the students come.

"A major part of the school is leadership," Mr. Bayer said. "Everything we do is to try to create leadership in kids in everything including ... how he acts on the street. We teach them to not be afraid of a challenge."

The school serves about 500 students in kindergarten through middle school and about 200 high school students. Every teen who attends Hyde is required to take sports as a character-development activity.

Although the school also offers football and basketball programs for boys, about 45 of the fewer than 90 male high schoolers are involved with the rugby team.

Yesterday, Hyde and the New Zealand Embassy hosted a fundraiser rugby game on the Hyde campus between the Mid-Atlantic Rugby Football Union team and a team of New Zealanders from all over the U.S. who came to the District specifically for the match.

Several hundred people attended the match. About \$15,000 was raised for Hyde from donations and raffle tickets sold for a trip to New Zealand.

The donations will support Hyde's rugby program and allow the team to travel to out-of-town games.

Rugby, which originated in England, can be described as a cross between soccer and American football. Though it involves tackling like in football, players do not wear any padding, with the exception of a head pad and a

mouth guard.

The game is special for Hyde students, said Hyde assistant coach Alex Karber, because "it gives an opportunity to release any anger, like any sport, but rugby especially gives the chance to release any tension."

Several of the Hyde students who attended yesterday's match agreed, but said that almost as important to them as releasing aggression is the strong leadership provided by their coaches.

"I have problems with controlling my anger," said J-Ra Douglass, 19, whose Northeast neighborhood is riddled with shootings, drugs and street fights. "When I was younger, Dad wasn't around much. The counselors here became male figures for me and taught me to make smart choices -- to know when to do things and when not to do things."

Mr. Douglass passed the GED last summer after being expelled from Hyde during his senior year. A troubled student for most of his life, the Hyde staff gave him several chances to change his attitude and stay at the school, Mr. Bayer said, but it just became too much.

It was after Mr. Douglass left Hyde that his relationship with Mr. Bayer became the strongest and his attitude changed. And even though Mr. Douglass no longer was on the rugby team, Mr. Bayer kept up with him and encouraged him to take the GED and apply in the next few years to Radford University, where he hopes to take up rugby again.

"He needed that kick in the pants that was going to straighten him out," Mr. Bayer said. "We help focus them and teach them to not rely on what they're born with, but their attitude. I'm like that with any kid. All the teachers are. It's a lot easier to teach when the relationship goes beyond the classroom."