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## Inside the story of the Rowville Sports Academy and its success

A government school in Melbourne's outer east has quietly built itself into a hotbed of sporting talent production through its innovative sports program. Inside the story of the Rowville Sports Academy and what sets it apart.

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*Jasper Stubbs, Jake Soligo and Nyadiew Puoch are among Rowville Sports Academy's successful alumni.*

There's a common train of thought many of Victoria's best sportspeople hail from elite private schools.

The 'footy factories' who have a knack of producing sporting stars across an array of codes.

This may be true, but a government school in Melbourne's outer east has quietly built itself into a hotbed of sporting talent production over the best part of two decades through its innovative sports program.

Enter Rowville Secondary College and the Rowville Sports Academy, which was established in 2008.

The Rowville Sports Academy's list of notable sporting alumni includes 22 AFL and AFLW draftees, A-League men's and women's players, WNBA players, Masters golfers, state cricketers and more.

Over 100 students have also gone on to attend college in America.

It's a sporting pedigree as good as any school across the state.



*Victorian cricketer Mitchell Perry attended Rowville. (Photo by Martin Keep/Getty Images)*

“Sport’s such a huge part of our culture here in Victoria, we’re at the foothill of the Dandenongs and it’s the accumulation of a lot of different sports,” explained assistant principal and director of sport Alex Von Scheven about why the Rowville Sports Academy was established.

“Basketball’s really big in this area, soccer’s really big in this area, AFL’s really big in this area, and we had a lot of students who were passionate in those spaces. That was the catalyst, providing a program for students to engage them in their education and future pathways.

“The students that we had loved sport, so it made sense, dual campus school, let’s consider alternate ways we can focus on strengths of young people.

“It wasn’t really based on anything, I’m sure there were sports-based programs out there, but the idea was to establish something that ran from year 7 through to year 12, capturing for the entrance into secondary school.

“There might have been one or two sports programs back then that were aimed toward the senior level when sport tends to get quite serious.

“Our ideology was that it can be quite disruptive for students to transfer schools to pursue their strengths later on, it would be great if it was just a full integrated process right from that transition into secondary school, that’s where the ideology came from.

“I don’t think there are many other schools currently that run a sports program the way we do, fully integrated in the school day, it stemmed out of a need for our students, not really based on any other program, it was really to create something that was unique.”

The only other government school sports academy in Victoria which rivals Rowville is the Maribyrnong Sports Academy of Maribyrnong College, which was established in 2006 and counts Touk Miller, Zak Butters and Johnny Furphy among its alumni.

[Rowville made headlines earlier this year its intermediate boys footy side defeated Scotch College to win the Herald Sun Shield](#), backing up the efforts of its girls side who also won the intermediate crown.



*Baxter Sruk is an emerging footy talent who excelled at Rowville this season. (Photo by Craig Dooley/AFL Photos)*

One student who previously reaped the rewards of the school’s program was AFL footballer Jake Soligo, who is still in the infancy of his career but has already played 85 games for Adelaide and has become a mainstay of the senior side.

“I wasn’t too happy at my previous school, and their perspective was AFL wasn’t the pathway for me, and it seemed they were focused on scores and pathways after school around that, so I became pretty disengaged,” Soligo said.

“Once I was at Rowville I locked in in the classroom, (Darren Bewick) was a massive influence on my footy development, and he and the program really focused on drive, and really showing that it’s up to individuals to strive for the absolute best, not just in footy but in all aspects of life including school in the classroom.

“This was huge for me. I can’t speak highly enough of the program ... we focused on fundamentals which I still use to this day, some of the little things are just part of my practice as an AFL player now.”



*Jake Soligo. (Photo by Morgan Hancock/Getty Images)*

### **AN ALTERNATE PATHWAY**

The distinguishing factor between Rowville and the state’s other successful sporting schools is the fact it is a government school, making it accessible to both everyday families and aspiring athletes who aren’t offered scholarships to elite private schools.

“The independent sector plays an important role in professional sport, I understand that ... but we want that to be accessible to everyone in the community regardless of what their socio-economic status is,” Von Scheven said.

“Also an opportunity for other students on the periphery who might not be identified at 11 years old - not uncommon - the opportunity to pursue something that they’re really passionate about and become the best versions of themselves, that’s what secondary schools are supposed to do.

“The most critical things that are learned in schools are the learning skills, things around resilience, persistence, and we believe anchoring to a strength based program really provides students that opportunity.”



*A-League star Jake Brimmer was also educated at Rowville. (Photo by Phil Walter/Getty Images)*

The school offers specific programs across eight sports: Golf, Australian rules football, soccer, basketball, netball, volleyball, cricket, and tennis.

There is a focus on having a national level coach or participant involved in each sport. Former Diamond Erin Bell is the director of netball, Victorian great Darren Berry is the director of cricket, former Bomber Darren Bewick is director of Australian rules football,

A-League games record-holder Leigh Broxham is a soccer assistant coach, and two-time NBL champion Adam Gibson an assistant basketball coach.

The Rowville education experience is also unique from your typical government school as a vast portion of school hours are dedicated to the specific sport a student is enrolled in.

“The hard thing for a mainstream school is they can’t allocate enough time,” said Rowville director of golf Tim Wendell.

“Whereas from year 7 to 10 I have seven out of their 20 classes a week to get them into routine, habit and behaviour over a six-year period, the (students) that are genuine will flourish in that space.

“They’re writing goals, maths and english are big in my program, they’re doing mental training, every week they’re putting in a reflection piece, have they got balance in high performance training ... they’re always dealing with performance information, what does the training app tell them, what does their scoring app tell them.

“The most important thing is we actually practice what they can consume. The world doesn’t suffer from a lack of information but until you start to experience that for yourself.

“A lot of people get tricked by I know something, but they don’t understand. Schools are built not to just throw content at people, there’s a scaffold set for these ambitious kids, and they’re stepping on and off the scaffold we have until we build up enough foundation underneath that they just go past us.”

Wendell’s students are made to set four sets of timebound goals that vary from two weeks to a year in length.



*Jasper Stubbs. (Photo by Andrew Redington/Getty Images)*

He is speaking from the fairway of Royal Melbourne on an Australian Open practice day, where he is spending the day with Rowville alumni Jasper Stubbs, who competed in both the US Masters and The Open in 2024 - two of golf's most prestigious majors.

“Most of my Rowville kids are better prepared than people out here (at the Australian Open) because they know about goal setting but they never practiced it,” Wendell said.

“We’ve practiced it over and over again because your journey is all about your ability to achieve.

“If you haven’t used goal setting as a process of measuring how long it takes you to achieve, how much you can chew off in a particular period of time, you get yourself into a big bit of pressure because you swallow too much in a particular period of time. My guys are a little more aware.

“It’s not a school for people who don’t go to school and they just want to hide out in a sport.”

### **Every AFL and AFLW draftee who attended Rowville**

- Lachlan Dovaston — AFL Draft Pick #16 by North Melbourne (2025)
- Xavier Taylor — AFL Draft Pick #11 by Melbourne (2025)
- Georgia Knight — AFLW Draft Pick #26 by Collingwood (2024)
- Cooper Hynes — AFL Draft Pick #20 by Western Bulldogs (2024)
- Christian Moraes — AFL Draft Pick #38 by Port Adelaide (2024)
- Caleb Windsor — AFL Draft Pick #7 by Melbourne (2023)
- Nick Watson — AFL Draft Pick #5 by Hawthorn (2023)
- Hailey McLaughlin — AFLW expansion pre-draft selection by Hawthorn (2023)
- Sophie Butterworth — AFLW Draft Pick #45 by Hawthorn (2023)
- Alyssia Pisano — AFLW Draft Pick #6 by Melbourne (2023)
- Josh Bennets — AFL Category B rookie (Hawthorn, 2022)
- Amber Clarke — AFLW Draft Pick #4 by Essendon (2022)
- Lewis Hayes — AFL Draft Pick #25 by Essendon (2022)
- Tyler Sonsie — AFL Draft Pick #28 by Richmond (2021)
- Jake Soligo — AFL Draft Pick #36 by Adelaide (2021)
- Connor Macdonald — AFL Draft Pick #26 by Hawthorn (2021)
- Flynn Kroeger — AFL Draft Pick #48 by Geelong (2021)
- Biggie Nyuon — AFL Draft Pick #54 by Richmond (2019)
- Sam Hayes — AFL Draft Pick #47 by Port Adelaide (2017)
- Tom North — AFL Draft Pick #65 by Fremantle (2017)
- Taylin Duman — AFL Rookie Draft Pick #3 by Fremantle (2017)
- Jack Maibaum — AFL Draft Pick #45 by Sydney (2016)

*\*All players listed attended Rowville, but some accepted scholarships to private schools before the completion of their schooling. E.g. Nick Watson moved to Caulfield Grammar in year 11*

## **THOSE WHO DON'T MAKE IT**

Sport may be central to a student's education at the Rowville Sports Academy, which begs the question of what happens to those who don't make it at an elite level.

Wendell points out that while he had three golf graduates who were in the field to compete at the Australian Open, another was there as the tour fitter for Titleist and one was filming content for the social media company he runs.

"It's a big industry, love of the sport, finding your place in a big industry, that's my pride," Wendell said.

"We've not just found the most talented kid and thrown everything at them, we've worked on every kid and they've all found their space."

Von Scheven noted that the school provides "all the pathways" for students.

"Being an elite athlete is clearly the goal but we have 150 graduating students every year and they're not all graduating elite athletes," Von Scheven said.

"We are very proud at Rowville to provide all the pathways for students and I think that needs to be a focus in secondary schools a little bit more.

"We have great tertiary entrance, students go off to university and granted they do go into the sports field a bit, sports management and that sort of thing, but we also have people going into teaching and education and law and arts, we celebrate all those electives."