



PHOTO: DEAN TREML

Searching for the wind of success

David Smith is a name not known to New Zealand rugby, but as **KENNEDEE JEFFS** discovers, the Ponsonby winger is somebody to watch.

In Samoa, there is a saying "Ua usiusi-fa'ava'asaili"—like a canoe before the wind. It's a reference to speed, anything fast. You could say it applies to speedster, David Smith a short, sweet, Samoan boy with a non-Samoan name.

Smith is an up-and-coming rugby union and sevens player. In a short time he has made his mark both on the field as a winger and off the field as a sweetheart.

Born the eldest of five in Motootua, Samoa, on October 12, 1985 to parents Masei and Fiti, David Smith began his rugby career at primary school.

For three years Smith played in the first XV for Avele College in Fiji, captaining the side in 2003. It was there he gained the 32cm scar on his right thigh that resembles a crescent moon.

He also gained a reputation for being quick.

It didn't take long for him to come to the attention of Uaea Laki Apelu. Apelu has long been a talent scout for Samoans to play rugby in New Zealand. He has a 12-year relationship placing boys at Mt Albert Grammar School in Auckland and when Apelu called to say he "had a very nice kid with some talent and did we want him", director of sport Brett Kingstone was quick to say yes.

"And it was one of the best investments we've ever made," says Kingstone.

Despite missing out on the Auckland first XV A-grade title in a "gut-wrenching" final to Auckland Grammar School in 2004, Kingstone maintains that the likeable Smith was "a huge part of last year".

"He was outstanding. When the ball was in his hands, you just knew he was going to score.

"He's just a bloody neat bloke. He's an interesting chap and he's undoubtedly talented."

Fellow team mate and vice-captain for the MAGS first XV last year Leo Taliu agrees. "He's the best player I've played with. He's got everything; he's fast, he's strong, he's got a good step and I don't think I've ever seen him drop a ball," says Taliu.

Taliu is also Smith's best friend, sharing not only rugby victories but his obvious charm.

"Leo was David's minder. We told him to watch him and see if he was any good to train with the team. Fifteen minutes later Leo told me he'd found what we'd been looking for," says Kingstone.

So MAGS came to love Smith.

"He really made an effort to introduce himself to everyone, say hello to everyone. He's a very humble and respectful young man."

But did Smith love MAGS?

The answer can be seen on his muscular left forearm in the form of a MAGS tattoo. It complements the AC tattoo on his right shoulder, representing his undying love for Avele College.

"I loved it. I was a bit shy at first, but once I started playing rugby and got to know people, it was good. I enjoyed it, the friends, the teachers, and the rugby."

Smith was in the MAGS sevens side and made the Auckland Secondary Schools team and the Northern Region's A team. Because of residency criteria, he just missed out on the New Zealand Secondary Schools team.

Eligibility requirements also meant that Smith was selected but ruled out of the New Zealand sevens team. But consolation came in the form of the Ponsonby and

Auckland sevens teams.

Selection into those two teams rewarded the 19-year-old with trips to Singapore, Hong Kong, Scotland and Dubai.

And that brings us to the present. He was selected in the Auckland B team for the National Provincial Cup. No mean feat, but for Smith his selection was a disappointment.

Kingstone says Smith was "really unlucky to miss out" on selection into the Auckland NPC team. His competition for the spot was All Black Joe Rokocoko.

While Smith is visibly crestfallen at the mention of non-selection, he's philosophical as he drinks his Milo at the dining room table of the Mt Roskill home where he stays.

"I've just got to wait for the right time; my time will come. I've just got to keep training," he says.

As if he doesn't train enough.

"I train every day except Sunday although sometimes I might train then too. Sometimes it can be twice a day, but it's easy," says the 1.74m utility.

The guy has got skills. Along with playing wing, Smith is a talented half back and full back. He helped Ponsonby Ponies premier side win the Gallaher Shield final against the Waitakere Rangers at Eden Park earlier this year. Along with Tony Koonwaiyou he was described as one of the fastest wingers in Auckland by *Western Leader* sports reporter Peter White.

Smith's Mt Albert Grammar coach, Alfred Uluinayau, has nothing but praise for his former star player.

"He's very exciting. He's a rising star in Auckland, and probably New Zealand," Uluinayau says.

Uluinayau should recognise talent. He played professional rugby in Japan for eight and a half years before returning to New Zealand in 2003. Uluinayau became Smith's rugby manager.

But where would Smith be without rugby?

"At home," he jokes.

Unlikely. Smith has a back-up plan for this very scenario.

During the week he attends ProSport, a course based at Eden Park where he is taught how to coach and referee and gets practical experience coaching primary and intermediate aged children. If his rugby future ends because of injury, he would like to be a coach or physical education teacher.

His "goals for the future" marked in orange felt-pen in a book shows Smith's dedication to the sport. His hopes of making an NPC team in 2006 are at number one followed sequentially by dreams of making a Super 14 team and eventually an All Black contract.

"It's a game I started playing when I was young and I love playing it. It's a fun game and I hope it can make me famous and help me to earn money," Smith says.

While dreams of a black jersey spur many Kiwi boys it could be a reality for Smith. He's trained with the All Blacks twice this year and those who've seen him play believe he can go the distance.

"He'll probably be an All Black," says Taliu.

Uluinayau believes Smith's hard work and goal-setting could see him at the top.

"He definitely has [potential]. He's given himself time to reach that black jersey, so he'll just take those small goals year by year and go from there," Uluinayau says.

Former Northern Region's selector Nick Tuialii says in terms of potential, Smith is right up there.

"The thing that makes him different is that he has flair for the game. He's strong, though he's small and he's got a high work ethic.

"He's got a love for the game. He's a student, watching it. He watches the wingers and learns."

But is that enough?

"I think he can play Super 14. An All Black? Maybe," Tuialii mulls it over.

"Yeah, he could do it."

Smith speaks with a slight accent, occasionally tripping over his words but that's nothing unusual for a person whose native tongue is not English.

Everyone agrees success hasn't gone to Smith's head and they will let him know when he's getting too big for his boots.

Does he miss Samoa?

"I miss my family and it will always be 'home', but I don't think I'll ever go back there to live," he says.

"In Samoa, it's Samoan people, talking Samoan."

"Over here, there's a big difference. Different people and opportunity! If I make the All Blacks, that's a good future."

Smith realises though, that there's a long road ahead.

"I train hard, but I can do better. For now, I've just started. I've only just finished school. I've got a long way to go."

He smiles, acknowledging his own challenges.

"I know he wants to be an All Black, he's just got to put the work in," says home-stay mum Wendy Tuialii.

"I really hope his dreams come true."

Whether those dreams materialise into reality depends heavily on Smith's dedication,

performance, and the make-or-break

selectors, but like a sturdy stream-lined canoe is

destined,

Smith will go wherever the wind

takes him.

