

Women's under-20s off to Worlds in Russia

by Brenton Vannisselroy

The under-20 women's soccer team will compete in the youth world championships in Russia in August – after becoming just the fifth New Zealand team to qualify for a world cup.

The women qualified for the FIFA U-20 Women's World Championship after beating Tonga in the final of the Oceania championships 6-0 in April.

The team, coached by John Herdman, were rarely tested at the tournament, which was the first the Australians were absent from, following their move into the Asian confederation.

With Australia absent from the Oceania section, Herdman says this is a great opportunity for New Zealand football.

"It is good at this present moment in time that teams have an opportunity to qualify, go and experience what a world cup is like so we develop a knowledge bank and an experience about what the modern era world cup holds," he says.

Herdman has just returned from Russia where he attended the world cup draw and toured the facilities.

"We have sort of taken a no-stone-left-turned approach ensuring we know exactly what we are coming to in Russia," he says.

New Zealand's draw includes hosts and European champions Russia, Brazil and trans-Tasman rivals Australia.

"For us it is going to be a great learning curve out there. We are certainly going to put the work in to ensure that we represent New Zealand with a bit of respect and pride.

"The Aussies are obviously a great draw for us. If there is a team you are going to beat, with the trans-Tasman rivalry, I think that's the team the players can get up for," he says.

Herdman says the experience will be something that his players never forget.

"The organisation behind this FIFA tournament will be something that this group of girls have never experienced before and will probably be the highlight of their football career to date," he says.

Herdman also points out the youth and inexperience of his side, which in age averages just over 17 years, compared to the average age of almost 19 years in the other 15 teams in the tournament.

"It is going to be tough on all angles but we are ready to overcome some hurdles."

The team's captain, Kirsty Yallop, can't wait for the tournament, especially for the opportunity to take on the Brazilians.

"If there was one team I wanted in our group, it was Brazil," Yallop says.

When asked about the team's strength, Yallop believes the side works well as a unit.

"We are a team, we are not a bunch of individuals," she says.

Yallop acknowledges that it will be difficult to keep up with



QUEENS OF OCEANIA: New Zealand's U-20 women's soccer team after winning the Oceania champs.

her work at Unitec, where she studies towards a Bachelor of Sport.

"It's going to be a bit tough," she says.

New Zealand Soccer chairman John Morris believes that

this side has great potential as the organisation has started to get in behind women's football.

"They are probably the best prepared girls team to leave New Zealand. They are well-coached, there is no doubt about

that and they have one of the best support groups. All the stuff they require is there.

"I'm really optimistic that they will do a very good job. A lot of them will go on to play for the full women's team," Morris said.

Auckland's low-scoring pitches under spotlight

by Craig Borley

Auckland's wet summers are being blamed for a run drought in premier club cricket.

The state of pitches may seem a subjective point, but the statistics speak volumes. In Auckland's premier club grade this year only 30 per cent of 50-over team totals were over 200 runs.

In comparison, 44 per cent of innings reached the 200 mark in Wellington's equivalent club games – with one passing 300. With comparable weather patterns, is it fair to just put all the blame on Auckland's weather?

Auckland's three age group teams have just completed a remarkable sweep this season, with each going unbeaten in their respective national tournaments. It's never been done before, by any province.

Auckland Cricket Association club cricket coordinator Iain Laxon says the issue is more complex than pitches alone. Statistics don't tell the whole story, he says, as there are many reasons why batsmen under-achieve. But Laxon accepts low quality pitches are the biggest hindrance to high scores.

Some argue that quality club pitches are needed if the overall standard of New Zealand cricket is to improve.

But Laxon disagrees. "There are a couple of reasons why we



TOUGH LIFE: Auckland pitches can make batting a nightmare.

have club cricket, but preparing players for domestic or international level is not one of them.

"It's up to New Zealand Cricket's long term plans to change that sort of thing.

"Everybody involved in club cricket has different opinions on what sort of tracks we should be preparing. In the past, it has been geared towards the bowler."

"If the wicket's a dog, you're going to struggle."

But he says cricket culture is changing, with pitches being prepared for batsmen, following Australia's successful example.

"It's a continual process. The standard can be higher – we can and want to do better."

But improvements are being made. Last season, the average team score on Auckland pitches

increased. By one run. "But that's quite significant. We're doing okay. You can keep on improving, but we're on the right track."

David Shackleton, of Canterbury Cricket, an association known for its high-scoring pitches, believes the answer lies in experienced groundsmen.

"We're fortunate with the groundspeople we've got. If the wicket's a dog, you're going to struggle."

But he concedes the area's hot dry summers are favourable for pitch preparation.

Laxon knows expertise is key. He says the departure of an experienced groundsmen can be disastrous for pitch quality.

And then there's that weather. "It chucks it down on a regular basis up here," he says. Ultimately the best pitch could be prepared, and Auckland's weather "could pretty much screw you over".

Rufer gears up for FIFA's World Cup

by Justin Latif

New Zealand soccer great Wynton Rufer is looking forward to this year's World Cup in Germany, not just for football, but also because of the exciting projects he is involved in.

Since his own appearance at the World Cup and professional career in Germany, Rufer has kept strong connections with international soccer.

He will have "quite a bit of involvement" at the World Cup in July as football ambassador for FIFA and Oceania.

He is expecting Brazil to be difficult to beat, but also predicts strong challenges from England, and hosts Germany.

"An African team usually grabs a few upsets," he adds. Cote D'Ivoire could be that team with Chelsea superstar Didier Drogha leading them at their first World Cup.

Other players that Rufer believes will stand out are FIFA's player of the year, Brazilian Ronaldinho, and club teammate, Argentinean Lionel Messi, voted best under-20s player in 2005. Being involved with the 1994 World Champion Brazilian team, Rufer believes that the values of that team still remain along with a core group of players who should guide the

flamboyant South Americans to victory on July 9.

"I was involved in 1994. I knew [the captain] Dunga, Leonardo and Jorginho."

Rufer supports the Brazilian team, particularly as many of the players are Christians like him.

"They always pray before the game and in the changing room. After a long time without success it's nice to see success come with this group."

Along with enjoying the international games, Rufer will be running a soccer camp for 300

children a week before the opening ceremony. On June 30 he will be coaching a New Zealand under-14 team

at a five-a-side mini World Cup. This tournament has been given a 10 million euro budget by adidas and will undoubtedly be watched by talent scouts looking for the next Rooney or Ronaldo.

Rufer's coaching schools in New Zealand can only see a few young players, such as Mario Hoffman and the Fitzgerald brothers, with the potential to play on the world stage

"New Zealand's problem is there needs to be a focus on the youth. New Zealand Soccer doesn't understand that. I'll probably be going to Australia. My wife's Australian and [New Zealand Soccer] doesn't want to work with me."

"New Zealand's problem is there needs to be a focus on the youth."