

Small town kids make good: Isolation no Great Barrier to international success

Phillip Rollo. 5 Jan 2018



Eloise Blackwell grew up on Great Barrier Island. This year she won the Women's Rugby World Cup with the Black Ferns. Photo: GETTY IMAGES

ELOISE BLACKWELL - RUGBY

From: Great Barrier Island (74km from Whitianga, 93km from Auckland)

Black Ferns lock Eloise Blackwell says she simply would not be playing rugby had she not grown up on Great Barrier Island, where her family migrated to in 1865.

"I'm six generation to the island," the Women's Rugby World Cup winner said. "When people find out they're like 'what? you're from all the way out there?'"

"It is a really cool thing and everyone back home is really proud of my achievements and that's something I can have to make our island a little bit famous."

Blackwell lived on the island until she was 13, only moving away to study at Mercury Bay Area School in Whitianga as there was no secondary school to attend. She spent years 12 and 13 playing rugby in Canada.

The 26-year-old said her earliest memories of growing up on Great Barrier Island, which is home to less than 900 people, is playing "little league". It was essentially a game of scrag

played in barefeet. The players came from the three primary schools on the island. Their ages ranged between four and 18.

"We had two fields going, depending on your age group. Every Saturday it was really cool because you got to meet up with your friends from all three of the primary-intermediate schools. The unstructured aspect is what I enjoyed because you could just run around in your barefeet and it was basically just like a muck around, which was a continuation of school where all we did was play games.

"I don't think I would have been playing rugby if I grew up in a bigger city."

There are no takeaways - not even a supermarket - on the island, so junk food is difficult to source. There is limited power too, so it is uncommon for anyone to spend hours in front of the TV. Blackwell said her family caught or grew most of their food, with pig hunting and fishing not just a hobby but a way of life.

"I guess it's more satisfactory because you can provide for your family and live off the land and that's a lifestyle I really enjoy," she said.

"All we could do really was be outside and playing games. We spent a lot of time building tree huts and the only time we were really at home was to eat dinner and to sleep really. A lot of my life I was outside."

By spending so much time outside, Blackwell said growing up in Great Barrier Island played a significant role in becoming a Black Fern - a dream she wrote down on paper at primary school.

"A lot of the games and activities that I used to do, it's all transferable skills through to rugby and spending a lot of time out on the farm is where I got my strength, chasing after the sheep and all that kind of farm life and outdoor life is a huge contributor to who I am today."