

THE NEWCASTLE COBRAS MEN'S TEAM IN ACTION LAST SEASON. PHOTO CREDIT: VAL BIRDA. SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY

# GAINING GROUND: GRIDIRON MAKES ITS MARK IN THE HUNTER

American football – or gridiron as most would know it – has been steadily gaining ground in the Hunter during the past six years.

Its foothold, originally established by Gillieston Heights man Lee Smith and a band of other devotees, began in part when a group of men spent a year just completing training sessions until they attracted

enough players to enter the Sydney-based Gridiron NSW Division 1 league.

Fast forward six years and interest in the sport has hit all-new heights to include teams representing the Newcastle Cobras in the both the Division 1 and women's competitions, as well as the expectation this season of being able to field a squad in the Colts division for the first time.

The Cobras have produced a number of highly skilled players who have secured or are in the mix for representative honours, while Smith's own desire to see the sport grow has led to the formation of the Hunter's own men's gridiron competition.

#### QUIST'S QUEST

Among the members of the Cobras women's team making their mark on the sport is Matilda Quist.

The 27-year-old Kurri Kurri woman was one of two Newcastle players invited to take part in a five-day training camp with 93 other women last February in the hopes of securing a spot on the Australian Outback women's team.

She spent six months training just to go to the camp and her efforts clearly weren't wasted, with Quist one of 60 players so far asked back to a second selection, to be held early next year.

From this a travelling squad of around 45 players will be named to head to Europe mid next year for the third edition of the International Federation of American Football (IFAF) Women's World Championships against powerhouse countries such as the USA and Canada.

Quist, who played rugby union in the Hunter for eight years before switching to gridiron in 2012, said making the team would be a dream come true.

"The first year we were involved with the Newcastle Cobras there was talk there may be a World Championship competition and Australia might be entering a team," she said.

"Then it seemed so distant and although I would have loved to, I never really thought that could be an achievable goal.

"But then as I kept playing and kept getting better I thought 'I can do this.' And now it's so close."

The passionate and determined woman can play almost anywhere on the park but has been identified as a potential safety (strong safety and free safety) or weakside linebacker by selectors.

She trains six days a week following a gridiron-specific program and will also have another season with the Newcastle Cobras under her belt before the Australia squad is named.

Quist is also seeking sponsorship to help her chase her dream. She is already supported by Hunter business Best Body Supplements and has set up a Go Fund Me account to try to add to the kitty - [www.gofundme.com/matildaquist](http://www.gofundme.com/matildaquist)

#### MORRALL MAKES HIS MARK

While Quist continues on her selection journey, another Newcastle Cobra has already taken the next step toward his first experience wearing the green and gold.

Thornton man Scott Morrall was named in the Australian Junior Outback team that will contest the 2016 Under-19 World Championships in China.

The 18-year-old is a more recent convert to the code, having taken up the sport just a year ago following 14 years playing football (soccer).

Morrall said he was looking for something new when he came across a Cobras post on Facebook – and hasn't looked back since.



After his first season with the club in 2015 Morrall attended an under 19s selection camp in Queensland in February, trying out for a variety of positions on the offensive line including his standard role of right tackle.

"There was a fair amount of competition," he said.

"I just went in and did my best, I didn't have any expectations in case they got let down.

"I found out about two weeks later – it was unreal, I didn't know what to think. It was an awesome feeling."

Gridiron heavyweights USA are among the countries Australia is likely to come up against during the World Championships, which will be held in Harbin, China at the end of June and start of July.

The event is also likely to include teams from China, Japan and possibly Mexico.

The Australian Junior Outback team will go into a pre-competition camp in Queensland at the end of this month before flying out to China on June 27.

#### A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

As President of the Newcastle Cobras club, Smith said it was testament to the calibre of players in the region that someone like Morrall could make the Australian team after just one season.



THE HUNTER GRIDIRON LEAGUE WILL INCLUDE FOUR TEAMS.

Visit [www.facebook.com/huntergridironleague](http://www.facebook.com/huntergridironleague) for more information about the league.

His mission now is to uncover more of them – something he hopes to do following the creation of the Hunter Gridiron League with fellow Cobra Corey Harragon.

Based out of Walters Park at Speers Point, where the Cobras have their home, the league will offer players a chance to try their hand at the sport without having to make the more burdensome commitment to play in the Sydney-based competition.

In its first year the league will be made up of four teams playing a nine-a-side version of the game.

Each has been named to loosely connect them with a region in the Hunter – the Miners (Hunter Valley), Cannons (Newcastle), Marauders (Lake Macquarie) and Bombers (Port Stephens).

This would allow for Smith's future plan to have the teams based in different geographic areas across the region.

"The biggest downside of the Newcastle Cobras team is all the travel, it puts a lot of people off," he said.

"So it's always been a dream of mine to get something local.

"The numbers have been better than we hoped for and people are still reaching out to us now.

"We think if we can have something week-in, week-out in the Hunter hopefully it will create some more interest and then it will get even bigger next year."

The competition kicked off on May 29, with matches to be played each Sunday for the next five weeks before the top teams compete for the Hunter Bowl in the championship game.

MATILDA QUIST IS ON A QUEST TO MAKE THE NATIONAL TEAM. PHOTO CREDIT: TOMMY LARVIN

