



## RAMSI UPDATE

# FIRST AUSSIE RULES STAR WITH RAMSI'S HELP

Solomon Islands has a new sporting hero in 17-year-old Freddie Una who has taken up the sport of Australian Rules Football (AFL) after attending weekly Auskick clinics organised over the past few years by volunteers from the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.

Over the 18 months, Una has literally taken great strides under the watchful eye of RAMSI's Special Coordinator, Graeme 'The Kid' Wilson, who himself played for the South Melbourne Swans (now the Sydney Swans) in the 1970s and has taken a particular interest in Una's progress.

Una, who recently represented the South Pacific Nations in the Under 18 championships in Australia, is the first Solomon Islander to be picked to play in a regional team.

These championships include teams from within Australia as well as a Rest of the World side. The South Pacific team this year included players from Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, New Zealand, Nauru and Una, as the sole Solomon Islander.

According to Mr Wilson, that while the South Pacific team did not win the tournament, the team, including Una, acquitted themselves very well.

"Una's story is one that should encourage other young Solomon Islanders to realise that, no matter where you are from, anything is possible if you use your God-given talents and apply yourself to the task," says Mr Wilson.

Una, who was born in Malaita Province and went to primary school there before coming to Honiara to live with his uncle at Namoliki village, a settlement just near Honiara's Chinatown, did not do any further schooling and is currently without a job.

"His actual sporting ability, including a magnificent standing leap, impressive speed off the mark and great agility means he has many of the attributes needed to be become a good AFL player," says Mr Wilson.

"With two or three years of practice, just once a week at Saturday's Auskick clinic (run by volunteers from RAMSI's civilian, police and military contingents since 2004), Una has been able to refine his kicking and marking skills considerably."

Mr Wilson, who helps with training and umpires the game each week, said he recognised Una's talent immediately and alerted the AFL who sent a development officer to Honiara to check him out. The AFL representative, Jamie Briody, who visited Solomon Islands in June, was impressed with what he saw and invited Una



Freddie Una...goes high for the ball.

to come to Australia for a short period of training before joining the South Pacific team.

But this was only half the battle as Una, never having travelled overseas, had no passport, had not been on a plane before, had no clothing suitable for a Melbourne winter or the funds needed for a return ticket to Australia.

It was at this stage that the RAMSI social club stepped in and together with individual donations and other fund raising efforts managed to raise enough to give Una the means to travel.

They also helped provide him with warm clothes, complete his passport and visa applications and other advice to help him successfully navigate the international plane trip and adjust quickly during his brief stint in Melbourne.

For his part, Una says the four weeks of footy in Melbourne was a once in a lifetime opportunity which has already changed his life.

"I had a great experience in Australia, played some good competitive football against some other really strong sides, so I'm really excited to

be invited back to Australia for a longer period next year. Hopefully, it will be in Queensland where the weather is warmer," he says.

"RAMSI has been very good to me, especially the Special Coordinator, Graeme Wilson, who has encouraged me all the way and talked to me about the importance of just trying my hardest, doing my best and being a good team player."

With Una already becoming a role model for the other 40-50 boys and girls that turn up each week at the Auskick clinic, the game is starting to develop in Honiara, with plans for expanding it through the recruitment of a youth ambassador who will be responsible for working with local schools to run regular Auskick clinics.

Mr Wilson is hopeful that Solomon Islands might be able to field a team in the Under 16 regional competition in December in Tonga.

"Freddie Una's success, with the help of his friends in RAMSI, will hopefully encourage others to live their sporting dreams because they just might come true." B