



In flight: Counties Manukau under-17 captain Elizabeth Ene in action against Wellington in the final of the under-17 national netball at Minogue Park in Hamilton last Thursday.

Big bonus for Counties side

By ALAN APTED

Long-suffering Counties Manukau netball supporters finally have a team they can look up to.

It's the Counties Manukau under-17s.

They are the second best team in their age group in New Zealand after narrowly losing to 29-27 Wellington in the final of the under-17 national championships at Minogue Park in Hamilton last Thursday.

It's an epic achievement by the team of Chanelle Campbell, Ashley Fennessy, Monique Fitzpatrick, Destinee Jansen, Nicole Jensen, Nadia Loveday, Olivia van Diepen (Papakura), Stephanie Collins, Akeneta Wacocecoke, Elizabeth Ene (Howick Pakuranga), Chelsea McLeod and Anastasia Brake (Pukekohe) and their coach Delwyn Sanders and manager Kathryn Garner.

No Counties Manukau age group team has ever ranked as high nationally before.

But the icing on the cake had to be the naming of Fennessy, Jensen, Campbell, Collins, Ene, and van Diepen in the tournament team.

That's a compliment to Netball Counties Manukau and the work being done to develop the game and keep the region's best talent at home.

It's the most any Counties Manukau team has contributed to a tournament team. The previous best was three, achieved by last year's

Nicola Waite says the region's development programme is on track.

"For us as a region what's exciting is reaching the final of a national tournament and the depth and development of local players coming through.

"Most of these girls had been identified at the under-15 level and have gone through our development programme," Waite says.

Waite says Counties Manukau's Regional Netball League has also got to take credit for the development of players.

Five of the six girls selected for the tournament team play in the league. Fennessy, Jensen and Campbell play for the league's defending champions the Papatoetoe Rangers, while Collins and Ene play for Mellons Bay.

Van Diepen is the only one who doesn't. She plays for the Takanihi club at the Papakura Netball Centre.

Her selection for the tournament team hints at some of the the adversity the team had to go through in the lead-up and during the championship.

A knee injury that needed surgery sidelined captain and New Zealand secondary school representative Nadia Loveday just before tournament.

Disaster struck again on day one of tournament. McLeod, the team's number one goal attack, badly injured her

the rest of the tournament with only 10 players and two of their best on the sideline.

Van Diepen filled McLeod's shoes so well she caught the eye of the selectors and got picked.

Coach Sanders put the team's success down to commitment, respect, gutsiness and hard work.

"At the end of the day they're all teenagers and they could have mucked around and not done the work.

"But they worked hard at every two-hour training session we had.

"I expected them to make top four. Making the final was a bonus."

Sanders says the players were stoked.

"You'd would have thought they had won it. They were just as happy to come second because they knew they'd become the first Counties Manukau team to make a final."

The Counties Manukau Regional Premier League has plenty to do with the success of the team, she says.

The league has kept the girls in the region and because they're being competitive week after week, they were sharp come tournament time.

Sanders voted centre Nicole Jensen her most valuable player and Ene as her best defender.

■ The results: CM 55 Mid Canterbury 7, CM 50 North Harbour 24, CM 45-Taranaki 22, CM 47 Dunedin 23, CM 40 Christchurch 22, CM 40