

A NEW EXCITING ERA for Briars Hockey

In 1997 Briars Hockey was at its lowest point with only 2 senior men's teams and a huge list of unpaid players fees. John Price was on the clubs Board at the time and was asked to investigate why this was so. He contacted the Chairman at the time and organised to meet. Upon meeting the Chairman immediately resigned and said 'it was all too hard and no one listened'. With this John then spent the next month of Saturdays visiting the men's games and collecting the fees due.

At seasons end John decided things had to change. He heard former triple Olympian and Kookaburra **Warren 'Busta' Birmingham** lived nearby so he decided to contact him, arrange a meeting and invite him to coach. At first Busta was reluctant to get involved with hockey again having only recently retired, and the thought of working with a lowly placed 2nd division Club was NOT appealing. John and Busta stayed in touch and eventually Busta called him one day and said, "the club cannot afford to pay me what I would want to coach, but what if you guys could introduce me to business contacts that I could meet and try and sell my companies staff training products to, and if I am successful with my selling to these contacts, I will coach your club" - The deal was done. John contacted all the OLD Briars who worked in decision making jobs and introduced Busta, Busta then met them and sold his stuff - and it worked. By December 1997 Busta was announced as Briars Coach much to the surprise of many Sydney Hockey clubs, especially the Premier Division clubs. The goal was to build our club to be competitive in the Premier Division.

1998 was Busta's first season and it was tough. Playing strength was poor but we grew to 3 teams with John himself coming out of retirement. The 1st grade team didn't win too many games as they had no quality strikers BUT they drew many of their games against quality opposition all on the back of Busta's tactics. He coached to their strengths which was defence, and they became good at it.

During the off-season of 1998 Busta and John developed the idea of promoting The Briars Hockey Academy. Somehow John obtained a list of all Country players who represented NSW and Regional teams, so he set about contacting them and inviting them to trial for a place in the Academy.

The next problem was finding a synthetic field we could use as a home ground. We knew the clubs that had their own synthetic field, were all successful. John negotiated with MLC School to use their multi-purpose field for our home games, after all it was only 1 minute from our Clubrooms at Burwood and next to our former home ground Burwood Park.

So, the first Academy trials took place in December 1998 at MLC and with over 30 players attending, a series of short games were played over several hours with Busta watching on intently. Following the trials all players were invited back to the Club for a BBQ lunch. Back at the Club all players were interviewed one-on-one by Busta and John. Those that said they were moving to Sydney next year or were prepared to travel to train and play were immediately offered a place in our Academy. It worked a treat and overnight we had near 15 new quality players from the country to add to a handful of Sydney based players who also wanted to be coached by Busta.

1999 saw a completely new look Briars Hockey. We were the leading club in 1st division and after a tough tussle with UTS, claimed the Club Championships and the 1st Grade Premiership. This meant we were in line for promotion to the Premier Division.

The next hurdle was to convince the Sydney Hockey Association that we were worthy of promotion. After several presentations to the SHA Board and much lobbying of SHA directors, Briars were granted promotion to the elite Premier Division. With the help of Dean Garland Briars also revived our women's program. Deano managed to cobble together enough girls to field a team.

During 1999 Concord Council advertised to proposals for the use of land at their old tip site at Cintra Park. They wanted to do something different, not just another soccer/rugby field. Bob Tagg called John Price and said 'why not try for a hockey field at Cintra?'. With this John immediately met with Mayor Peter Woods (who always enjoyed our Annual Dinners and liked The Briars) and began the process of lobbying all Councillors to support our proposal. Working with John Suraci he managed to negotiate the purchase of some cheap but high quality 2nd hand synthetic turf from the Homebush States Sports Centre and this coupled with a Government grant was enough to convince Concord Council that this was a good enough idea.

Timing was everything, the Federal Government needed another synthetic field to use as an Olympic training venue, and in a hurry, and Concord had the land and was ideally located close to Homebush. Briars purchased the turf and these monies were to be offset against future rent to Council, so Briars now had its own synthetic pitch and it cost them nothing more than a few nice lunches.

Y2K was a big year for Briars Hockey, we now had our own water based synthetic pitch, had grown to 6 men's team (thanks to merging with AMP) including a Premier Division team and the junior program had commenced, but we needed to do more. John began approaching other Premier Division Women's clubs with a view to merging with Briars. The attraction was our new synthetic pitch, access to our Burwood Clubrooms and the promise of some quality coaches from our men's program. Gil Burns and the Everjays girls decided to merge with Briars so we now had 3 women's teams including a Premier Division team.

Briars was now competing at the highest level of hockey in both men and women but we needed to do more to be successful at this level. Courtesy of Everjays, Briars had inherited some NSW and Australian players, now we needed some males of similar calibre. John and Busta began to target some of the NSW men's players as well as Kookaburras. First on our list was Michael McCann. Mick was with Bankstown Hockey having recently returned from the Perth national program. He was not enjoying his hockey and was continually frustrated on the field which was clearly affecting his game. We convinced Mick that if he moved to Briars, he would be removing all his frustrations and get the benefits of Busta's coaching.

John Price 2018