



Golden Girls

Teenagers are often given a hard time by the older generation for many reasons, but as **TONY GRANT** discovers, there are some very motivated and talented young people in this great region. Photography by Rob Cooper.

Fiona and Meagan Ryan have a hectic schedule, one that would tax people twice their age. The 16-year-old twins are fully committed students and are about to enter their penultimate year at St Monica's Catholic College and they are members of Cairns Surf Life Saving Club. It is at the club's Palm Cove base that you will find the girls pushing themselves to the limit in pursuit of higher physical achievement. Their involvement in the club and their competitive edge has deep roots. Their father Michael, elder sister Eliza, 18 and 12-year-old brother Steven are all members and have competed in surf competitions. In fact, Michael still competes, while mum Patti "runs the line" officiating at events. As Meagan says, the whole family is involved in some way. "Dad was a member when he lived on the Gold Coast and mum has been a member at Cairns, so when Fiona and I turned eight, we joined."

From May to November, the girls train and compete on one the most popular beaches in Cairns. Participating in surf life saving has many benefits, from the recognised health and fitness side to the more serious where they are able to spring to immediate action should a swimmer need assistance. There is, however, another benefit, Meagan says. "During a recent training session, we were paddling around Double Island and we spotted a pod of dolphins," she says. That is pretty

cool, regardless of your age. What is not quite so cool, perhaps, is seeing a crocodile in your peripheral vision. But in Fiona's experience, the sighting was a source of "inspiration". "They certainly make you go faster," she says. These two girls are clearly very dedicated. Tuesday and Thursday mornings they are on the water doing board work, Wednesdays and Fridays they surf-ski train at Kewarra Beach, while Sunday finds the pair at Palm Cove. In between all of this, the girls work out at the gym twice a week. Then there is school, where they have swimming instruction classes twice a week, as well as being involved in a host of other activities.

Fiona and Meagan's tireless efforts in their commitments earned them individual grants from the RSL youth development program. The award recognises and rewards high achieving students in the academic, sporting or civic community areas. Applicants had to write an essay explaining the importance and relevance of the RSL and ANZAC to today's young Australians. They were just two of 128 recipients of the total \$500,000 prize pool. The girls entered in the sporting division and duly won \$2600 each, part of which they spent on surf-skis for their club commitments. Their involvement in keeping the ANZAC spirit alive received a memorable boost last year when they travelled to Gallipoli for the annual memorial service, an experience that will live with them forever. "It was the first time the service was

conducted in English and Turkish," Meagan says. "It was a very eerie visiting the site, knowing what happened all those years ago." The girls applied for the youth development grant for year 11 students and this time it was for their academic achievements. The straight-A students have between them topped their year in chemistry, maths, physics and physical education – they tied for the latter.

Meagan was also captain for her year's Relay For Life team, she also won the senior sports woman of the year and was behind a group of girls from St Monica's to donate blood for the Red Cross. "It was fun," she says of the blood donating experience, "but many of the girls found they could not give blood because they discovered they were anaemic, some had low blood pressure or had been sick. We did give it a second attempt and it was a lot more successful." No sooner had we completed this interview than the girls were back on the phone to advise they had been among recipients of the RSL grant for 2009. They plan to spend the money, \$5200 each, on travelling to university open days. "We are looking at studying engineering, law or medicine," Fiona says.

Fiona and Meagan Ryan should be the type of teenagers we hear about more often, their energy seems boundless and their solid work ethic is an example to Australians of all ages. **CL**