Knocking down private schools’ barrier

The AFL is picking at the stitching of rugby union’s tweed jacket

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THE sight is enough to make an old boy weep into the weave of his tweed jacket.

There, on the hallowed fields of Knox Grammar, stand two sets of proud, straight goal posts without a cross bar in sight.

Beneath them a small group of boys — 80 at best — are kicking long and low, marking high and handballing. All in school colours.

They are the boys from the Knox Grammar Under 12s and 14s who play for their school in the Greater Sydney Juniors competition.

For the leather elbow set, it is as galling and as unwelcome as a fly in the chardonnay. Or renters moving into the house next door.

For the AFL, it is a rare green shoot on the barren ground of NSW’s private schools.

While the code is intent on establishing a beach head in the league heartlands of Sydney’s west, the NSW AFL has been fighting a silent battle to get into elite education establishments.

After a decade of knocking on doors, Knox has become only the second Sydney private school after St Ignatius College, Riverview — which is the boarding school of choice for AFL scholarship holders — to field teams in the Sydney club football competition.

The north shore school with more than 2000 students is part of a Combined Associated Schools sports network that is dominated by rugby union but significantly infiltrated by soccer.

Students in the private schools have compulsory sporting commitments on weekends and now at two of the schools AFL is offered alongside rugby and soccer.

Paul Roos, former coach of the Swans and now head of the Swans’ Academy, experienced the dilemma first hand with his two sons as their school demanded they play a winter sport on the weekend but did not offer AFL. They took up tennis while pursuing club football.

NSW clubs have always experienced a sharp drop off in participation when players graduate from primary to secondary because it becomes too difficult.

As Roos points out, it is not just that they had rugby union and AFL, the modern private school student also has a ridiculous amount of homework to do. Something has to give and it is usually the outsider’s sport.

The NSW AFL runs a spring competition between winter and summer sports for the private schools and is in contact with headmasters and sports masters to see what they can do.

To that end, Knox is a small but significant victory in a long campaign.

Knox headmaster John Weeks was finally convinced to come over as he believes schools must offer boys what they want, and there was a groundswell of participation among his students.

“We see it as a logical move for us at Knox because we are in a community which is strong on AFL and hundreds of our boys were playing AFL in local competitions,” he said.

“And we know, given our size, we would have no problems fulfilling our commitment to rugby and soccer.”

Weeks said the rugby old boys were not threatened by the move because that sport remains strong.