

Kefu rates O'Connor tops

FORMER Wallabies enforcer Toutai Kefu has no doubts Australia possess the best backline in world rugby but it's winger James O'Connor, not Quade Cooper or Will Genia, he rates No. 1.

Kefu, a stand-out in the 1999 World Cup triumph, yesterday declared the multi-skilled O'Connor the pick of the crop from a rising Test side oozing with exciting young talent.

An interested spectator at Wallabies training on the Gold Coast, the 60-Test back-rower and Tonga forwards coach marvelled at the 21-year-old's ability and expected

Jim Morton

AAP, Gold Coast

him to only get better. "I think James O'Connor is the best footballer in Australia at the moment and he's only 21," Kefu said.

"He can do everything: kick, tackle, run and he's quick. He's absolutely got no fear.

"I just think he's a wonderful athlete."

Genia shaded the versatile O'Connor for man-of-the-match honours in the 39-20 Tri Nations thump-

ing of South Africa while halves partner Cooper also shone, setting up two of the Wallabies' five tries.

Along with fellow youngsters David Pocock, 23, and Kurtley Beale, 22, Kefu believes Australia have the players needed to make a serious tilt at the World Cup.

He said the embarrassing 32-23 loss to Samoa to open the international season would be well forgotten by the time the quadrennial tournament kicks off in New Zealand on September 9.

"I think in hindsight that could be a blessing in disguise, it gives

them a wake-up and they have a core group of players who I reckon could be challenging for the best in their position in the world," Kefu said.

"The halfback and five-eighth (Genia and Cooper) particularly, and I've thought if you have three or four of those in your team you're a very good side.

"They have some wonderful athletes and they're interchangeable as well; you can't just say (O'Connor's) a good winger or (Beale's) a good fullback - they're out and out great players."

But Kefu said it was all very well

possessing the most exciting team on paper and warned they needed to produce at Eden Park against the All Blacks on Saturday week.

Australia hasn't held the Bledisloe Cup since 2002.

The Tongan-born Queenslanders has been recruited by the Pacific Islanders for the World Cup and strongly believes they can take a leaf out of Fiji's 2007 Cup book by nabbing a quarter-final berth.

The Tongans are drawn in the All Blacks' pool along with France, Canada and Japan but feel they can cause a boilover.

Shellback, 16, has eye on playing for Matildas

A CLOSE-UP look at Australia's national women's soccer team has Jade Shellback inspired to fulfil her dream of one day becoming a Matilda.

The 16-year-old was in Germany representing the Queensland women's open soccer team at the same time as the Matildas made the quarter-final stage of the World Cup.

Shellback said watching the national side was motivation for her as she ramps up preparations to make the next step in her career.

"We saw the three pool games and the quarter-final," she said.

"It was awesome to see them all and then get their autographs."

The team was front and centre for the world-famous handball farce, that saw the referee miss a blatant handball when the Matildas played Equatorial Guinea.

In true Australian spirit, they didn't hold back letting the official know what they thought.

Brad Thompson

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"We were very mad and were yelling at the referee," Shellback laughed.

On the field, the Queensland side won four of five games played against German and Dutch sides.

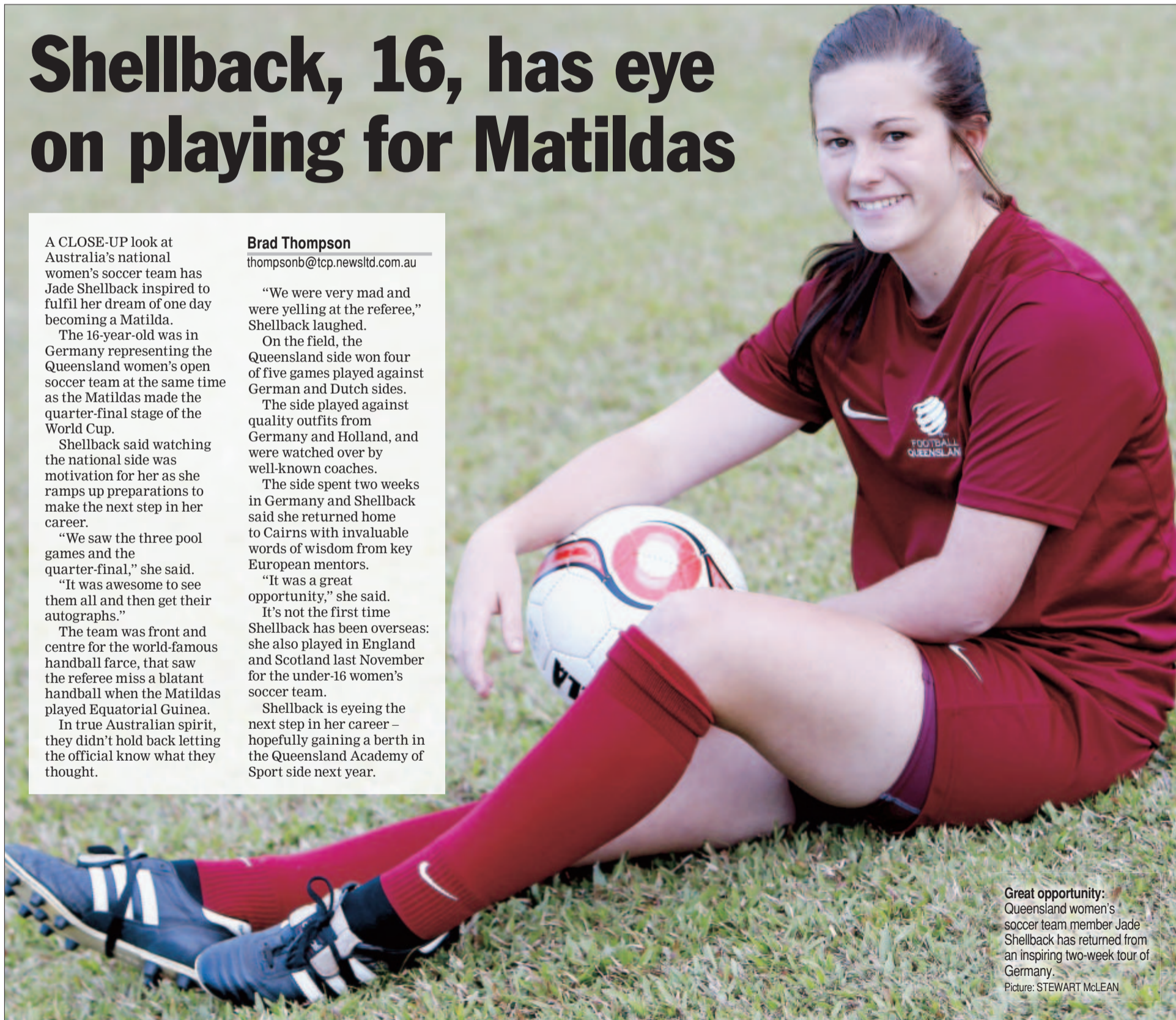
The side played against quality outfits from Germany and Holland, and were watched over by well-known coaches.

The side spent two weeks in Germany and Shellback said she returned home to Cairns with invaluable words of wisdom from key European mentors.

"It was a great opportunity," she said.

It's not the first time Shellback has been overseas: she also played in England and Scotland last November for the under-16 women's soccer team.

Shellback is eyeing the next step in her career - hopefully gaining a berth in the Queensland Academy of Sport side next year.



Great opportunity: Queensland women's soccer team member Jade Shellback has returned from an inspiring two-week tour of Germany.
Picture: STEWART McLEAN

Peninsula plan to go one better than second this year

PENINSULA boys will start their bid to go one better at the secondary school soccer championships when the tournament begins today at the Marlin Coast Rangers Football Club at Trinity Beach.

Twenty-two teams from across Queensland will take part in two days of round-robin action today and tomorrow, before quarter and semi-finals on Saturday, and the grand

final on Sunday. Peninsula, who finished second at the event last year, will kick off their campaign with a 9am fixture with the Northern Region side from Townsville.

Coach Geoff Mayes, who is also the secondary schools under-15 state boys mentor, was hopeful his Peninsula side could get off to a flyer.

"We've beaten them previously and while

there's not a lot of history with this being its third year, the boys know the intense rivalry between the two regions," he said.

"We're hoping for good home support. I'd expect it to be a tough tournament, it's always difficult because it's a very high standard."

Mayes believes he has a strong side all over the park, but was hoping for solid contributions from Queensland Country

midfielders Damien MacMunn and Cameron Nucifora.

The boys play their second game today against Capricornia at 11.30am. The Peninsula girls play at 10.15am against Metropolitan West and South Coast at 3.15pm.

From the tournament, a boys and girls side will be selected to tour New South Wales in October.