

INSIDE
 Television programmes.....D2
 Crossword and Sudoku.....D3
 Movies.....D3
 Diary.....D7
 Stars.....D7

The Southland Times Unwir

YOUNG TURK
... comes of age **D6**



Warchild with a message

After surviving as a child soldier in Africa, rapper Emmanuel Jal tells **Dan Rule** why life is so precious.

EMMANUEL JAL has an easy way with words. They seem to fall from his mouth. He is becoming well versed, it seems, in sharing his life.

In conversation, as on wax, the rapper broaches the most blood-curdling of accounts with almost casual ease. He makes cheesy wisecracks, he raps and sings his favourite lyrics, he giggles at his own expense.

"What I've come to realise is that I'm responsible for my own happiness," he says proudly, with a distinctive east African inflection. "On a daily basis, I wrestle with trying to keep myself happy, not to blame somebody for taking my happiness away from me."

Quips aside, Jal's memories are not the kind that are easily forgotten. Born in a village outside Tonj, southern Sudan, about 1980 (he has no official record or knowledge of his birth date), he grew up in the shadow of the second Sudanese civil war, which has now gripped the country for more than two decades.

Jal can barely remember his father but knows he was a police officer who left, without warning, to join the Sudan People's Liberation Army, when fighting broke out in 1983.

He remembers his village being razed and burnt, his mother killed. He remembers being 7 years old, or thereabouts, gripped by grief and determined to seek revenge.

He remembers enlisting voluntarily in the SPLA and leaving for Ethiopia to train as a child soldier.

And for the first time in our conversation — which takes place over the phone from his base in London — his voice drops noticeably.

"When a kid witnesses something in their eyes, it remains a picture in their mind," he pauses.

"If someone tells you that this is the person who killed your mum or your dad, you don't think twice, even if you're young.

"So when we went to Ethiopia, we were willing to be trained. Everybody agreed, you know, because in your own little picture you could see your village burning and people running. You see your mum screaming, screaming.

"You see all the horrible things, and you say, 'Yes, I want to be trained'.

"My desire was to kill as many Arabs as possible, as many Muslims.

"That's what the politicians instil in you, and then you give a little kid an AK-47 and he has the same powers as anybody who has it. First shot, first kill."

The fact Jal is still here to tell his story, let alone via the international platform of traditional folk and pop-flecked new album *Warchild*, is remarkable.

His willingness to share his horrific experiences is even more astonishing. Aside from his album, a documentary film about Jal's life — also named *Warchild* — has already picked up awards at this year's Tribeca, Seattle, Edinburgh and Berlin film festivals, while an autobiography is due out next year.



Emmanuel Jal

Continued page D7

The greatest social rugby team ever

MATE
MARK WILSON



FROM disillusionment comes greatness — 20 years of Verses Rugby. In 1989 deep in the bowels of Dunedin's student ghetto a group of Southland lads disillusioned with competitive club rugby put together a social rugby team to be known as the Southland Boys' High 2nd 15.

That name was short lived. After Salman Rushdie penned the infamous text, *The Satanic Verses* resulting in a fatwa (religious assassination order) being issued on him by then supreme Iranian leader of Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the name was changed to the Satanic Verses.

Needless to say the whole saga was seen to be an amusing over-reaction to a novel by our slightly less extreme culture and the perfect use for it was found in giving humour to those on the footy field.

I'm sure these pioneers had — like any who coin what they think to be a cutting edge — world-changing ideas and great visions of grandeur of an epic legacy that would forever be known as the greatest social rugby team ever. If they have been keeping an eye on the past two decades they would be proud to see just this.

Each year fresh-faced Southland students trek north to Otago to ply their trade as scarfies and perhaps be fortunate enough to continue their illustrious rugby careers from first 15 level to everyone's ultimate dream of playing for the mighty Southland Stags.

For the rest of us, who would rather indulge in the finer points of student life, there is another equally rewarding path to follow — Verses Rugby.

The Verses offer everything great about rugby, the basic manly challenge of pitting yourself against your fellow man to see who is the alpha male, embracement of the lost art of southern rucking and, probably most importantly to beer-swilling students, good honest exercise on a Saturday.

All this comes with the bonus of no training, rolling subs and the free license to engage in any manner of unorthodox on-field practices aimed at not only baffling the opposition but providing endless entertainment which sets the Verses apart from the pack. Perhaps the Verses' most glorious and fulfilling achievements have happened off the field.

To avoid ruffling any PC feathers I will not delve into the after-match team-bonding court session culture, which has become legendary, but focus more on the team's fanatical support of the Southland Stags. This support culminated in the team leading an e-mail protest campaign against TV presenter Simon Doull after he ridiculously stated that the Stags should be omitted from the revamped NPC competition. The passionate fervor that followed saw a TV crew flown to Invercargill to interview Verses spokesmen and Mr Doull parading around Auckland in a Stags top, making a public apology.

Let's hope the current disillusionment with some forms of rugby also results in great innovations and success being born and that the Verses, now the oldest team in the OUSR competition, can go strong for another 20 years.

Congratulations to all former and current players for making a contribution towards a great two decades.

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