

"YOU HAVE TO BE PRETTY STRONG AND TWICE AS GOOD"

At 18, Robert Bush is a young man who has learned much from experience and who is quite certain of where he's going. These attributes are perhaps best reflected in that his fellow students at Gynea High School in Sydney have elected him to take the responsibility of being their school captain in 1973 and that later this year he will probably go to the United States as an exchange student.

This is a far cry from the boy who grew up in a family of ten at Darwin and spent much of every day in his early high school years in the waters of Narooma pool as a promising swimmer.

It is characteristic of Robert's outlook and achievement when he says: "If you're an Aboriginal and you want to get a good job, you have to be twice as good as anyone else. People are going to look at you and criticize. You have to be pretty strong to take it." There is no sign of bitterness when he says this, only confidence and wry amusement.

Robert was born and spent most of his early life in Darwin. It was there that he became involved in competitive swimming. Every 2 years he used to come down to Sydney for holidays. While spending one such break at Narooma with his sister, a swimming instructor at the local pool, the manager of the pool asked him to swim in a carnival.

Quick to recognize a talented athlete, the manager offered to train Robert. So he moved to the south coast of New South Wales, studying at the local school between training sessions. He reached the State championships in 1968-69, recording the 7th fastest time in Australia for the 100 metres breaststroke.

At this time Robert's headmaster at Narooma learned of *Kirinari* and urged him, now 15 and in his third year at high school, to go to the hostel in Sydney to complete his secondary studies. Robert has been at *Kirinari* for the past 3 years. He freely admits that "If I hadn't been here at *Kirinari*, I wouldn't be where I am now. If I'd kept swimming, I'd be all muscle and no brain."

In fourth form Robert was elected a school prefect. He passed his exams with three credits. He was a prefect again last year and in October was elected school captain.

Robert has applied to be an exchange student, studying for a year in American schools. If his application is successful it means leaving Australia in July of this year and returning in mid-1974, to complete his Higher School Certificate. The scheme is organized by the Australian-American Association in conjunction with American Field Services Scholarships. Although it would add an extra year to his schooling this does not worry Robert. Even if he fails a year he is quite prepared to repeat the attempt rather than give up. He has already travelled throughout most of Australia and looks forward to spending a year in the States, especially in either California or New York.

Although Robert seems to have lead a charmed life, it has not been quite as easy as it seems. He spends Friday nights and Sundays working at a local service station in Sylvania to keep him in pocket money and to save his fare to the States.

In the future Robert sees two options. His first preference is to do social work. When asked why social work, Robert replies "I'm interested in working with people and helping them. It's one way I can help the Aboriginal people." If not social work, Robert's second preference is to become a physical education teacher in secondary schools.

In either case he is intent on returning to Darwin to live. "There is no racial problem there, except for the case of newcomers from the south," he says. "It's an easy-going place and there aren't the social restrictions like you have in Sydney."

Robert's character is perhaps best summed-up in his reaction to an experience at school:

"One day I opened my bag and found one of those letters in there, the ones with stuff about telling blacks to keep in their place and out of sight. I just ignored it and threw it away. It's the only way to treat that sort of thing. Anyway a couple of weeks later I found another letter, this time apologising for the previous one and saying that he didn't mean it. I think what's wrong with people who write abusive letters and so forth is that they've got problems of their own which they can't cope with. So they need some way of getting it out of their system."