Behind the news

A new breed of football umpires have found their first year with the whistle an eye-opening experience. **MARK SMITH** reveals one of local footy’s success stories.

Parade College’s umpiring class of 2008.

**New umps on parade**

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AN AFL program dedicated to introducing young umpires into the Northern Football League has been heralded as a great decision.

The program, which helps foster the next generation of football officials and boosts boundary and field umpires through an after-school AFL umpiring academy, has just completed its pilot year at a Ballarat school.

Under the program, 18 Parade College students officiated Northern Football League matches during the 2008 season after receiving AFL academy training at the school.

The students attended weekly theory and practical sessions for two terms, as well as receiving paid work umpiring junior and senior matches with the Northern Football League.

Umpiring Academy director Gary Warren said it had been a fantastic success, not only in unearthing some talented young umpires but also teaching students valuable decision-making and leadership skills.

Year 10 student James, 16, said umpiring had given him a different perspective on the game he loved to play.

Umpiring under-18 matches, he said he had a new appreciation for the umpires after learning first-hand how difficult it could be to make split-second decisions.

He said while he had coped a bit of abuse from coaches and parents on the sidelines, the experience had been very positive and he would have a whistle back in his hand come next season.

Northern Football League umpiring director Kevin Smith said the academy had yielded positive results for the league and participants and would continue next year.

Several of the students were selected to coach junior grand finals, and year 10 student Darcy won the Umpires Association award for best first-year umpire. Mr Smith said while there could only be one academy in the northern area, the league hoped to offer umpiring activities, such as basic training courses, to other schools. Schools interested in taking part in the courses can phone the Northern Football League on 9435 8228.