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LIFE LESSONS: Rugby league great Mario Fenech spoke with Rutherford Technology High students about the importance of being fit and healthy yesterday

Maltese Falcon swoops in for Rutherford visit

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One of rugby league's most colourful characters Mario Fenech visited Rutherford Technology High School yesterday to spread the word about participating in sport and the benefits of staying fit and healthy.

Fenech, also known as the Maltese Falcon, was in Maitland as an ambassador of the NSW Premier's Sporting Challenge and the 44-year-old, who still fanatically manages his own fitness, addressed more than 100 students in the school hall before conducting a range of activities on the adjacent athletics field.

It was all part of the annual NSW Premier's Sporting Challenge, which is aimed at promoting physical activity in both primary and high schools across the state, and yesterday Fenech, who enjoyed 14 years at the top of Australian rugby league including two representative matches for NSW, spoke passionately from the heart in delivering his message.

"I tried to explain to the kids what they have to do and what decisions they have to make if they want to be successful," Fenech said.

"My love of sport and keeping fit has helped me to get where I am today, and it's important for these kids to know that living an active life will certainly go a long way in helping them achieve their goals.

"I hope that by spending time with these kids I can encourage them to lead healthier lives."

The children were certainly keen to have a go at some of Fenech's favourite rugby league drills and they were both surprised and attentive with his engaging speech – especially in relation to the topic of alcohol.

"I am an unusual species in rugby league in that I do not drink," Fenech said.

"The boys would say to me 'come on Falcon, have a beer'...so there was a shame associated with that.

"But you have got to have the guts to say no.

"I am not saying there is anything wrong with a few beers, you just need to be smart with how many you have, quantity is the key."

Fenech, who played with the South Sydney Rabbitohs, the North Sydney Bears and the South Queensland Crushers between 1981 to 1995, said another key was education.

This is a message that was instilled into him from his parents and it is a message he has instilled in his children – Joe, 15, and 13-year-old Bonnie.

"My father held me accountable for my education and I am grateful for that," Fenech said.

"An education is such an advantage to have because you can choose what you want to do."

Fenech said that education and physical activity were inextricably linked.

"Living a healthy and active life allows you to study and learn better at school through an active mind, which in turn helps you grow and develop as a person," Fenech said.

Acting principal of Rutherford Technology High School Greg Archibald said Fenech would help reinforce the positive lessons associated with the challenge.

"This is an exciting opportunity for students to meet with an elite athlete and hear first hand about the importance of good health and nutrition," Archibald said.

"This visit will consolidate lessons being learned as part of the NSW Premier's Sporting Challenge."