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Rugby Can Help Meet College Goals





Zack Purdy, lifted by Cole Huntley (front) and David Eastman, wins this "line out," in Lamo Rugby's February win against De La Salle, 51-0 Photo by Karen Drinkwater

Throughout high school, Miramonte's Zack Purdy and Campolindo's Ty Fach, now seniors, battled on the football field. Then at football season's end, they joined forces, playing together for the Lamorinda Rugby Field Club (Lamo Rugby), the largest rugby club in the United States.

Both athletes chose their intended collegiate sport based on love of the game - rugby. But that choice, says Lamo Rugby president Tony McKenzie, can help achieve college goals.

Last year, 12 Lamo Rugby players joined college rugby programs. Six now play rugby for Cal, a team that's won 24 of the last 28 NCAA national championships. Two play for Saint Mary's, a program consistently ranked top 10 nationally.

"These kids are getting the opportunity to get into great schools that they probably would not be able to attend without their rugby credentials," says McKenzie.

Purdy joined Lamo Rugby just three seasons ago to take a break from varsity basketball and water polo.

Says Purdy: "I loved rugby immediately. It is a sport of continuous action and hitting that is just made for me. I love the fact that everyone gets to run the ball as well as play both offense and defense."

Ty Fach, Lamo Rugby's player president, received his first rugby ball at nine while visiting England, where rugby has near national sport status (behind cricket). He was an instant fan. A few years later, Fach discovered that John Dixon, an MOL coach, was also involved with Lamo Rugby's youth program. Fach signed up and, according to family lore, "never looked back."

Rugby is one of the oldest collegiate sports in the United States, dating locally to 1882 at Cal and 1888 at SMC, whose website calls it a game of "elegant violence." Players hit and tackle hard, like football, but without pads and helmets.

Purdy and Fach got a taste of rugby's international popularity last summer on a Lamo Rugby trip to New Zealand, where rugby is the national sport and professional games are often played in filled-to-capacity stadiums that rival the American pro football experience.

"The first professional Super 14 Rugby game that we saw in Auckland was spectacular," said Fach. "I love the speed and power of the game. It is amazing how big and athletic those pro rugby players are."

Lamo Rugby's 350 members aren't all super-sized. But there are speed players like Campo's "Rocket" Rodriquez and Las Lomas star running back Chase Herring who fill out the 15-man varsity team.

Lamo Rugby doesn't make cuts, says McKenzie, even for high school players. Everyone plays some. How much depends on experience and capability. Kids as young as 1st grade play in youth leagues.

"Rugby is a game for all," says McKenzie.

Fach is waiting to hear from engineering programs and plans to play rugby in college.

Purdy has verbally committed to Cal's rugby program, along with Lamo Rugby teammate Cole Huntley, a former fullback on San Ramon Valley's football team.

In college, rugby is typically a club sport, with few scholarship opportunities nationwide. Cal rugby player families pay tuition, though they can access the same financial aid opportunities as any Cal student. At Cal, rugby players live in the athlete dorm and can access the school's athletic department advantages, including personal academic tutors.

And then there's the key to that an all-important door -- admissions department attention.

In today's competitive college environment, that's arguably a game-winning goal.

For more rugby information, go to lamorugby.com
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