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## A Tradition of Excellence

By Michael Sakoda



Captain Cooper Maloney was named MVP of the D1A Finals match. Photos provided

teams in the country over the past seven years?

"The key to our success has been Tim O'Brien and John Everett," said assistant coach Tony Samaniego. "Since they took over 13 years ago, they've put in a strong platform for success."

O'Brien is a former US Eagles player. He is the director of rugby and head coach for the Gaels. He has indeed changed the culture at Saint Mary's since taking over, building a following he calls, "the best alumni in collegiate rugby," and establishing one of the most consistent programs over the last 12 years.

"We've built a model of trust between the volunteer coaches, the athletic department and the athletes, and through that model, we've developed leaders on the team," said O'Brien.

Among those leaders are the team's captains, six All-Americans: Cooper Maloney, Mike O'Neill, Kingsley McGowan, Brewer, Joey Reavey and Nick Schlobohm.

"I've always been on an underdog team," said Maloney. "We're not the Cal or BYU that's always praised for being the best, but we're right up there, and it's great to be on top."

Maloney was crowned MVP of the title match. "Being the MVP is an honor, but it doesn't mean much," said Maloney. "I'm much more proud to win the national championship with the team, for the program and the alumni."

Maloney was a key component of the Gaels' success both on the field and off.

"[Maloney] set a goal at the beginning of the season to win this National Championship," said Samaniego. "He really pushed everybody to buy into the program."

And the program was strict, with weight training three times a week and 6 a.m. daily runs, not to mention playing the toughest schedule in the country.

"Our philosophy is to play the best teams, from colleges, to universities, even men's clubs," said Samaniego.

On their way to an 18-1 season this year, Saint Mary's faced and defeated four of the top men's club teams, the Diablo Gaels (107-7), the Olympic Club (36-29), the Santa Rosa Men's Club (57-19) and men's club national champions, San Francisco Golden Gate (60-20), upset No. 1 ranked BYU, and soundly thumped local rival California.

"It's been a crazy year, definitely a humbling experience after having to sit out in the championship game," said McGowan, who missed 15 months after injuring his knee early last year.

Saint Mary's College took home the USA Rugby Division 1A National Championship in May, as they defeated defending champion, Life University, 21-6. While the victory marks the first national title in school history, it's just the latest achievement in what has been over a decade of excellence in rugby at the college.

In 2011, the Gaels finished fourth in the country, losing in the semifinals, and last year, the team was the runner-up after losing to Life in the title match.

"A bit of sweet revenge after losing to [Life] last year," said team captain Garrett Brewer. "We started out a bit slow, but our kicker, Dylan Audsley, came up huge, made key plays in the second half that helped us take the lead."

But how does a school of less than 3,000 students, with a 3-to-2 female-to-male ratio, build a rugby team that has been among the top five

"Getting the opportunity to contribute this year was a total 180."

Both McGowan and Brewer have been invited to try out for the US Eagles, the American National team, for a chance to compete in the Rugby World Cup in London.

And what does the championship mean to the school?

"It means everything," said Samaniego. "It's great for the school, the community and the Bay Area, and it leaves no doubt that the best rugby is played in Northern California."

It means rugby has become a tradition at Saint Mary's.



Garrett Brewer leads the SMC offense.



Kingsley going for the pass.

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