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## SMC Rugby Wins Second Straight National Title

By Spencer Silva



Photo provided

Saint Mary's College returned to the Division 1A Rugby National Championship with one goal-to win a second title. The Gaels defeated Life University (Marietta, Ga.) 30-24 for the second year in a row to take a second straight title on May 9. It was the third year in a row they played the Running Eagles in the 1A National Championship game.

Last spring, the two teams met at Stanford University. The Gaels triumphed in front of a sympathetic home crowd, beating the Running Eagles by a score of 26-6. This year, the game took place in Life's backyard - at Third Bank Stadium at Kennesaw State University - just a 10-mile drive north from Life's campus.

The match was largely defensive and neither team dominated for any large swath of time. "Defense on both sides was very strong," said assistant coach Tony Samaniego. "We knew it was

going to be that way."

The Gaels jumped out to an early lead when game MVP Dylan Audsley scored a try and conversion in the middle of the first half - they led 13-10 at the half.

With 20 minutes left, Life nearly staged a comeback when it scored a try on a chip-kick over the Saint Mary's defense. The conversion afterward brought the score to an uncomfortable 27-24. Fortunately for the Gaels, Audsley converted a difficult penalty kick from far away minutes later to bring the score to 30-24.

In the last five minutes, up 30-24, Saint Mary's fumbled the ball over, which nearly cost them the game. With no time left, the two teams found themselves in a scrum near Saint Mary's try line. It was then that Kingsley McGowen, a U.S. National team hopeful, stole the ball and punted it out of bounds to save the day - the referees whistled the game over seconds later.

"The game lived up to the hype," explained Samaniego. "Both teams came out with a strong desire to win back the title of the best team in the country."

All-American honors will be announced sometime this week and several Saint Mary's players are likely to be recognized. Seven players earned the distinction last year, when the Gaels were unanimously voted the No. 1 team in the country. Senior Captain Cooper Maloney - last year's national title-game MVP - along with McGowen, Audsley and co-captain Mike O'Neill, have formed the core of one of the most successful teams in school history.

The school will send a Sevens team to Colorado this weekend in hopes of capturing yet another national title. Sevens is a variation of traditional rugby, where seven players play from each team, instead of 15, for shorter periods of time. It's set to make its debut as an Olympic sport in Rio de Janeiro next summer, perhaps with some former Gaels on the squad.

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