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Miramonte's Mike MacDonald's career as a rugby player and coach

By Jon Kingdon



MacDonald on the U.S. national team Photo provided

With such highly-rated high schools in Lamorinda, it's no wonder that so many people would like to attend either Acalanes, Campolindo or Miramonte and why it has become so difficult to transfer in from outside the district.

For Mike MacDonald, in the 1990s, it wasn't difficult to transfer in from out of the district: "Growing up, we had a family friend who had moved to Orinda and mentioned how great the education system was throughout Lamorinda. So, my parents (Mack and Maureen) got a head start on it and I was able transfer in from El Cerrito in the sixth grade."

When he began his freshman year at Miramonte, MacDonald was 5'8" and 235 pounds and would grow to just over 6 feet by the time he graduated. MacDonald was familiar with football when he began high school, but he would soon be exposed to two new sports, wrestling and rugby, both of which MacDonald would participate in with great success.

"When I was a freshman, Roger Durant was the wrestling coach," MacDonald said. "He needed a heavyweight on the team and told me that I was going to wrestle or get an F in physical education. So, I wrestled on the varsity as a freshman."

From such humble beginnings, MacDonald would eventually finish third in the state tournament as a senior which he attributed to the quality of his coaches: "Mike Reamer and Dan Abina had been college coaches with a lot of wrestling experience. Jack Gonzalez, who was a student at Saint Mary's and had been a heavyweight wrestler himself helped me with throws and leverage. I also wrestled against Coach Abina who was lightning in a bottle. They would not allow me to be a big, lumbering heavyweight. They saw more than that in me and I went on to win the North Coast sectionals as a junior and senior."

MacDonald played on the offensive line for the Matadors under head coach Floyd Burnsed. As in wrestling, MacDonald was told to play a different position out of the blue: "On the bus heading to a playoff game my junior year, Paul Yrberri who was our defensive coordinator, told me we're going to play you over the center on short yardage plays and want you to bull rush. I went on to play both ways as a senior."

It was his sophomore year when MacDonald began playing rugby for the Lamorinda Rugby Club at the urging of his brother Joe, who was a senior, and it was love at first sight: "Joe taught me the basics like how to pass the ball and started my progression from there. Rugby is more than a sport. It teaches many things like problem solving on the run, not specializing on one thing and many life lessons."

It was the amalgam of wrestling and football that all came together for MacDonald on the rugby pitch: "It was a perfect storm where the leverage and explosion I learned in wrestling and the running contact in football were the perfect platform to lead me into rugby. My coach was Ned Anderson who had been the head coach at Cal, and we ended up winning the state tournament and came in fifth at the nationals in 1998."

MacDonald was well prepared to go to UC Berkeley both academically and athletically: "All of the high schools in Lamorinda are excellent so they prepare you for anything you are going to do. Luckily enough, I was at Miramonte when the sports were firing on all cylinders. I was in the right place at the right time and with my major in American Studies."

MacDonald was recruited by schools to wrestle but California was his first choice where he played football as a freshman, but it was rugby that became his ultimate sport though it wasn't an easy transition from high school club to college rugby: "It was a huge eye opener for me. I had to learn that we don't play rugby to get fit, we get fit to play rugby. With the skill acquisition and improvement of my fitness, it was a steep learning curve for me."

Steep for some but not so much for MacDonald as he would go on to be named All-American for the next

five seasons, with Cal winning the national championship four of those five seasons, accomplishments MacDonald attributes to his coaches Jack Clark and Tom Billups and his teammates: "I was blessed to have awesome players around me. One year in the national semis and the national championship, we started 28 out of 30 different players in the positions, which was an example of how great our teams were at Cal. I learned something from everyone in every aspect of the game."

While at Cal, MacDonald also played for the United States national team from 2000 to 2012, playing in three Rugby World Cups in 2003, 2007 and 2011, where Clark was the team's general manager and the coach was Billups. When he was done, MacDonald held the U.S. record with 67 caps (appearances with the national team) and 11 appearances in Rugby World Cup matches.

After Berkeley, MacDonald chose to play professionally in England, something not a lot of Americans do, MacDonald said: "I did get plenty of shtick being the American on the team and initially heard that 'Yanks don't rugby' but I think that my teammates came to respect me and I proved that I belong."

MacDonald would play for Worcester for one year and went on to play for Leeds through 2012. "It was a fully professional outfit and I made enough to live and ply my trade day in and day out. I was very lucky to be able to play a sport that I loved while also being able to represent my country, so I was fortunate to have all of these things fall into place."

MacDonald did have to adjust to the weather in Leeds, coming from California: "I came from a place where it's sunny and lived in a place where for one third of the year, it was dark at 4 p.m. and sleeting. Leeds is the third largest city in England, and it was very metropolitan, and I enjoyed my time immensely there."

MacDonald was a key player for Leeds during the 2006-07 season, which saw Leeds win National League 1 and gain promotion to the premiership league. Other highlights for him were being named Leeds Player of the season twice in 2007-2008, as voted by the fans and players, and becoming team captain for the 2008-09 season.

For the last nine years, MacDonald has been working as an assistant coach for California, an opportunity that ironically came about due to an injury he had suffered while playing in England: "In my last season in England, I hurt my shoulder and had surgery after the season so my playing options were limited. At this point, I was back in Berkeley getting rehab and was asked by Coach Clark and Coach Billups if I wanted to do some volunteer work with the team. I jumped at the chance and threw myself into it. Playing rugby is what I have done since I was 15 and it's something that I'm passionate about and I'm lucky to be able to continue to be affiliated with the game."

Lamorinda continues to be a source of talent for the California rugby team with three residents currently on their roster - Sophomore Miles Beaubelle (Orinda), senior Niki Moore (Moraga) and senior Kevin Tuholski (Lafayette). "With so many Cal graduates living in the area, there continues to be a great connection with the players moving on from Lamorinda to Berkeley," said MacDonald.

As with most players, it was something of a revelation for MacDonald to discover the difference between coaching and playing: "It's the amount of detail that has to go into the preparation and how labor intensive it is. As a player, the game plan gets put in front of you and your job is to follow it."

MacDonald believes that it is the history and culture of the Cal program whose initial year was 1882, which is most important to the overall success of the program: "It's the way that everyone approaches the game with no one greater than the sum of its parts. Everyone buys into the system, the ethos of the team and staying humble and being known by your deeds. You learn to be grateful for everything and entitled to nothing. You're standing on the shoulders of the people that came before you. There's a lot on the plate for the players that walk in as freshman and sophomores and they soon realize that it's a real privilege to play for the team."



Mike MacDonald on the Cal rugby team Photo provided

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