

Published April 27th, 2022

Saint Mary's rugby team heads to national championships

By Jon Kingdon



SMC's Erich Storti runs with the ball; in back, from left: Hunter Chulantseff, Josh Allen and Karl Keane Photo Grace Kiesel

drive the tempo."

After Cal scored the first three times in the second half to close the score to 28-26, the Gaels defense settled down. "We did a lot of nice things today on defense," O'Brien said. "The guys had the defensive mindset of just wanting to get up and get out there and get the body profile right. We did create a lot of turnovers, but we also had a few big misses on defense due to our over aggressiveness."

The offense was led by juniors Inoke Waqavesi and Karl Keane. "We had our share of missed opportunities but Inoke and Karl both had good games and Karl was just a fraction away from being pulled," O'Brien said.

After a final score by Saint Mary's to close out the scoring, O'Brien could not restrain his satisfaction at defeating a program like Cal after their early season loss: "Every time you're playing rugby, you learn something. That's the beauty of the sport. We need more games like this where there's a big disparity in the talent levels in our programs, but I love the competition and what Cal has done for the college game. We need more rivalries like this. Every player on Cal is one of the top players in the country and we're like the island of misfit toys but we just find a way to get it done. We've had every kid come to practice for the last two weeks during the breaks when other people went away. We always expect to be playing in the last week of the season and we've done all the right things to be here, so we're not shy to say it."

The Gaels will be in Houston next Saturday to take on Army for the national championship, but O'Brien allowed himself to enjoy the victory over Cal for a little bit longer: "I'm not sure how we're going to address Army, but I'll start looking at film when I get home."

Since O'Brien became the head coach at Saint Mary's in 2007, they've had a run of success that can stand up against the top teams in any sport and the results speak for themselves:

2007-08 National semi-finals, ranked No. 2; 2011-12 - Undefeated season up to national semifinals; 2012-13 Lost in national finals; 2013-14 National champions; 2014-15 National champions; 2016-17 National champions; 2018-19 Undefeated, no playoffs; 2019-20 Undefeated, no playoffs;

2020-21 Undefeated, no playoffs; 2021-22 Heading to the national finals.

For Marty Storti, the assistant vice president for club athletics and revenue at Saint Mary's, the formula for the success of the rugby team is simple: "Unlike at a school like California, where rugby is a varsity sport with all of its advantages and resources, at Saint Mary's, we just happen to have a great coach and passionate players that are willing to put in the time and effort to learn the game and play it in a dynamic way. The fact that most of the funds that go into the rugby program (\$300,000 to \$400,000) are raised with the very generous help of our alumni groups makes the success of the program all the more impressive."

For Storti, it's much more than talent that has elevated the program at Saint Mary's. "We have great players but it's the culture that O'Brien has created and developed that is very supportive and encouraging for leadership. It's being held accountable by your peers and it has proven to be extremely successful," Storti said. "The amount of time and effort that he has the players studying the game, watching the game and his

There were two things on the minds of the Saint Mary's rugby team when they went to Berkeley to play Cal in the national semifinal championship game - making it to the championship game and exacting revenge against Cal for their only loss this season.

The Gaels scored in the first two minutes of the game and toward the end of the half, they were up 28-0 before Cal scored a goal, but missed their try, to make the score 28-5 heading in to the second half. "I was pretty much surprised when the score was 28-0 early on," Saint Mary's head coach Tim O'Brien said. "A lot of breaks came our way in the first half, but we almost penalized ourselves off the field in the second half."

The adjustments O'Brien made from the first time they played Cal proved effective. "The last time we played Cal, we made some errors that we wanted to correct," O'Brien said. "We wanted to play vertical rugby this game. We played the way we trained, and we wanted to

design of a physical offensive and defensive attack have all contributed to the success of the team. We have a culture that supports that style, taking the higher risk on offense that is harder to defend and that is really making a difference."

In the end what O'Brien feels makes his teams so successful is that they are just that: a team. "We don't recruit. We just have boys that come out in September, wearing a white T-shirt that has their name on it and off we go. Everybody practices and trains together and they all understand each other's position and profile and what their assignments are. We're pretty much all in and it's a pleasure to be a part of it."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA