

# LAMORINDA SPORTS

## St. Mary's Rugby team's unique championship style

By Jon Kingdon



Erich Storti

Photos Rebecca Harper

There are a lot of ways to measure the success of a team – it's win-loss record, winning championships, and the post-season recognition of its players. This past season, St. Mary's touched all the bases – a national championship, an undefeated season, and just recently, the Gaels rugby team led the Professional Rugby three round draft with six players taken in a 36-player draft with only two other teams having three players drafted overall.

In the first round, the Gaels selected were Erich Storti (1), Kaipono Kayoshi (4) and Inoke Waqavesi (7). In the second round, it was Hunter Chuslansteff (19) and Jake Legrette (20), and in the third round, Lleyton Delzell (33).

Though established in 1888, it wasn't until 2013 that the team made it to the finals, and, in a total of seven trips to the finals, they have won the national championship in 2014, 2015, 2017 and 2024.

Since 2001, the one constant for the rugby team has been their head coach Tim O'Brien. O'Brien began playing rugby at the age of 17 and went on to great success as a player at California, winning two national championships in 1980 and 1981 and seven of nine men's D1 Titles with the Old Blues from 1979 to 1987 and he has brought that success to St. Mary's.

"When John Everett and I came to St. Mary's, they had a different mindset – they were competitive but lacked a drive to be their best in this 'rugby endeavor' which we embraced in college," O'Brien said. "Johnny and I were from a culture that was 100%

about winning championships. Starting out, we did things that were pretty up tempo, particularly playing with an 'attack what's in front of you' mentality and developing the skill set necessary to deliver an even more competitive team than we had when we arrived."

O'Brien and Everett were not ones to accept the status quo: "We are continually striving to evolve and improve, though evolution threatens many. I welcome change, possibly failing, changing more, and failing more – it's not a perfect science but you do a disservice to the game and the people involved by staying with the same old, same old."

The evolution process has continued with O'Brien's assistant coaches, three-time captain Andrew Cook and Mark Bass, who, with O'Brien, played in their first games together. They "strive to embrace the high performance and 'keeping the real and balanced' elements of the sport," O'Brien said.

For O'Brien and his team, that has been an ongoing process that has been revered and highly respected by both past and present players. When talking with O'Brien and his players, you hear terms that you wouldn't expect to hear connected with rugby – synergy, composure, relaxation, breathing periods, and problem solving, along with recognizing the history of the team and the players that helped make the program what it has become.

Ironically, with so many players selected in the rugby draft, O'Brien does virtually no recruiting. Kayoshi came

to St. Mary's knowing nothing about the rugby team. "My twin sister applied to St. Mary's, and I wanted to stick with her," he said. "I did play rugby in high school and just by luck I stepped into a great program with a great coach in Tim O'Brien though I had never heard of him before."

Ronnie McElligott (2023), was familiar with the team's record and reputation, but the program proved to be a revelation to him. "You don't know what goes on at St. Mary's until you arrive here," McElligott said. "Keeping yourself accountable and doing everything to the fullest are the biggest things for the team. If you don't meet those standards, you're just not going to make it, so everybody buys in really quickly and if they don't, they leave."

Storti was one of the few that knew exactly what to expect on his arrival at St. Mary's. "I was around rugby a lot since my dad was coaching at St. Mary's but at that time, it was mostly my brother and I wrestling in the soccer nets," Storti said.

It was in September 2013 when O'Brien connected with Bo Hansen, who medaled as a rower three times for Australia and went on to work within the sport and the business sector delivering leadership, management, and coach development.

"A lot of my evolution developed after reading a piece by Bo 'Achieving Synergy in Your Rowing Crew.' I hadn't finished the article before I called him looking to connect. That connection was a significant moment in time for me and SMC rugby. Over

the past eleven years 'evolving,' we have gone sideways but we have not gone backwards and have had overall great success since winning our first championship in 2014."

Relaxation technique was a foreign concept initially for the players but something that connected with them, on and off the field. "It was weird at first, but it was really good for getting the guys together, to be centered with each other," McElligott said. "We always did synchronized breathing before practice and it gave everybody a moment to relax before we started. Rugby is a chaotic sport so if you can find peace in the storm a lot of the time, it'll help you play better, allowing you to slow things down."

"We took those breathing techniques to heart, and it has shown in the results," Kayoshi said. "Whether we got scored on or before practices, it helps to calm our mind and sharpen our skills."

Storti carried this over away from the team. "I had a class where before it would start, we would do a realignment and reconnecting things, talking about why we would do that, and it was very similar to what we did on the field," Storti said. "In those chaotic moments on the field, it's a way to realign and reconnect through a breath. No one's talking and it's just a good moment for the team."

As in many things, O'Brien gives the players their space for "breathing time." The goal of breathing time is getting the team to relax and focus. "It's a time reserved for the athletes to find inner peace, strength and resolve without the coaches yelling at them," O'Brien said.

Synergy is an interaction or cooperation giving rise to a whole that is greater than the simple sum of its parts. O'Brien has made it clear to his players that this is a key aspect of the team's success and analogizes it to an eight-man rowing crew.

"When one man is off beat, a domino effect can take place, leading to poor results. When you have synergy in rowing and rugby, everything seemingly falls into place and that's the beauty of the sport," O'Brien said.



Kaipono Kayoshi

It's clear that the players have adopted that belief as well. "It's not just knowing your own role but everyone's role, being able to pick up off each other," Kayoshi said. "Our teams just have a great chemistry, and we can tell if something or someone is off and we're able to fix it."

O'Brien focuses on accountability, responsibility, and each team striving to be equal or better than the previous year's squad. "Each journey is unique in and of itself," O'Brien said. "We are nowhere without the leadership and synergy of the players. The players manage the ship, the coaches plot the course, and together we navigate towards the ultimate goal."

The leaders know that if they feel a change needs to be made, O'Brien is there to listen: "After a disappointing game versus Central Washington, Junior Waqavesi grabbed me and said that we need to change the lineup and who would know better than the players. I want to listen to them and empower them to make those decisions."

Playing like you practice is easy to say but hard to pull off. "It did take some adjustment to get used to the velocity and dedication demanded of us," McElligott said. "Tim's not going to shortchange us, so he expects no less from his players. Getting used to his way of coaching, the commitment, and the culture of the veteran players was definitely a shock to me, and it took me a few months to get used to it."

O'Brien has also made it clear to the players that they are responsible for their own success. "I'm just the coordinator of the people and the process,"

O'Brien proclaims and Kaipono confirms it. "Coach O'Brien is really the good word coordinator, and he gives us the recipe and we tweak it to the players based on the ingredients we have and it's heaven on earth."

The commitment that O'Brien has for his players carries over away from the field. Storti (MBA), McElligott (MBA) and Kaipono (Communications) have all received their master's degrees. "Tim not only looks at us as players, but as people as well," Kayoshi said. "The game does not last forever so it's important to find something outside of rugby and be ready for that when that time comes, and getting a master's degree certainly helps that transition."

It's also crucial for the current players to understand what and who came before them by bringing generations of players together by having group outings like going to Yosemite Backcountry or taking ski trips together. "We share stories, and they're kind of similar, but different in their own way and having former players like Mike McCarthy and Kevin O'Connor, and others who have won multiple championships for St. Mary's, still giving back on these trips means a lot," Kayoshi said.

Storti echoes those sentiments. "There are legends in the club that you just hear about, and it gets passed down through the years. As freshmen, we looked up to the fifth years and they were like storied war heroes and as we got older, we saw the younger guys looking up to us so it's a cycle, and the names stick around and that really gives the heart and soul to our program."

Submit sports stories and story ideas to [sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com)

Classified • Classified • Classified • Classified • Classified • Classified

### Tree Service

#### East Bay Tree Service

Tree removal, stump removal, Juniper removal to meet fire regulations.

925-377-TREE

Serving Lamorinda for over 30 years.

### Plot for sale

Cemetery plot for sale Queen of Heaven Catholic Cemetery, Lafayette Section St. Mary, Row 13, Plot 29, purchased 2019

Have all paper work needed to transfer title, \$12,000 contract Roni Barger bargeroni@sbcglobal.net

### Tutoring

#### MATH & SCIENCE TUTOR

20+ years of experience. Tairi Nishizawa 510-332-9864 entropically.com

### Rototilling

#### Ken's Rototilling

#### 4-wheel-drive

#### Traction

#### Hillside Weed Cutting

#### Juniper & Brush Removal

#### To Fire Dept. Regulations

Free estimates! 925-938-9836 licensed, bonded & insured. CA#667491

[www.kensrototilling.com](http://www.kensrototilling.com)

### Plumbing



WE HOP TO IT!

(925) 377-6600

[LeapFrogPlumbing.com](http://LeapFrogPlumbing.com)

### Fencing

#### Custom Quality Fencing



925-938-9836

- Good Neighbor Fence
- Deer Fencing
- Picket/Split Rail
- RV Gates
- Trellis and Arbors
- Retaining Walls
- Insurance/Storm Repairs

licensed, bonded & insured. CA#667491

### Structural Repairs

Since 1989

#### Alameda Engineering

#### DRAINAGE SYSTEMS

#### RETAINING WALLS

#### FOUNDATIONS

#### UNDERPINNING

#### LANDSLIDE REPAIRS

510-537-6550

General Engineering Contractors

Lic. # 562641

[alamedaengineering@comcast.net](mailto:alamedaengineering@comcast.net)

[alameda-engineering.com](http://alameda-engineering.com)

\$21 per 1/2" classified ad height. Email to: [classified@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:classified@lamorindaweekly.com)