

The Miami Herald

St. Thomas University rugby and lacrosse programs finding niche in South Florida

BY Walter Villa
Miami Herald Writer
Jan. 18, 2024

There's a reason why Gavin McLeavy played rugby as a youth in England.

"Rugby kept me out of jail," McLeavy joked. "I grew up in a tough town (Barrow) – coal mines ... They build nuclear submarines there, and there wasn't much else to do in town."

McLeavy went on to play pro rugby in England and Spain. "I love the sport," said McLeavy, 45. "The people are friendly. You beat the crap out of each other during games and then go have a beer."



STU Rugby

These days, McLeavy is in his second year as the head coach of St. Thomas University's men's rugby program. The Bobcats went 7-1 last season in the first year of the program. The program is growing – the roster had 21 players last year, and McLeavy has 52 on the squad this season.

McLeavy said in future years he will cap the roster to 70 players, giving him an "A" team, a "B" team and a developmental squad. In addition, the Bobcats are trying to grow the women's roster, which has 15 players for 2024. (Rugby is played with 15 players on each side and up to eight reserves per squad.) The sport's

roots date back to Great Britain in 1823, but it has only been openly professional since 1995.



STU LACROSSE

There are more than 10 million players globally, including 1.6 million in the U.S. In 2017, organizers created Major League Rugby. The sport's first big-time American pro league, MLR has grown to 12 teams, including the Miami Sharks, a 2024 expansion franchise that will share a stadium with Inter Miami soccer.

The 2031 Rugby World Cup will be held in the U.S., which should help grow the sport even further. It will be the first time the event has been held in the Americas.

The Sharks' tryouts were held at St. Thomas, which was great exposure for the Bobcats, who have players on their roster from the U.S., Argentina, England, South Africa, Chile, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe.

Prior to STU, McLeavy coached an elite youth club team, the Okapi Wanderers. That connection has allowed McLeavy to construct a formidable side at STU.

"I'd like to have a crack at nationals this year," McLeavy said of the Collegiate Rugby Association of America championships, which is run by USA Rugby. "If we don't get there this year. then certainly next year."

The Bobcats are one of the few Florida colleges with rugby as one of their official sports, and STU's women's lacrosse program – coached by Ceinwen Simpson – has a similar niche in the market. Simpson is a native of Baltimore, where lacrosse is wildly popular.

St. Thomas University women's lacrosse coach Ceinwen Simpson leads the Bobcats in the second season of their program. Courtesy of St. Thomas University She and the Bobcats started their lacrosse program last season, going 4-10.

STU had 17 players on its roster last year. This year, the Bobcats have 22 players with plans to ultimately grow to 40. After scrimmages against North Florida and Florida Gulf Coast, the Bobcats will start their 2024 season on Feb. 13 against visiting Keiser.

STU's roster includes 17 Floridians and just one player from the northeast (New Jersey). Simpson said that she plans to get more players from the lacrosse-crazy northeast once her program becomes more well known.

"People up north don't know a lot about us yet – they think we're located in the Caribbean," Simpson said. "I think we'll be on their radar after this season. "But we don't want to just be in the recruits' conversation. We want to be the conversation."

Simpson said prep lacrosse in South Florida is improving, although she wants to see more kids playing as early as elementary school. American Heritage coach Corey Engelhard said STU is offering South Florida girls a chance to play college lacrosse without leaving their home area.

"This market was ready for someone to offer college lacrosse," Engelhard said. "This is an unbelievable market. What kid in the northeast or Midwest doesn't want to be in South Florida?" Simpson said there's one other key factor. In her view, lacrosse is a great sport. But it's more than that for her. "It's about helping to create strong, independent women," Simpson said. "It's about empowering women and letting them know they can prioritize themselves instead of always taking care of others."