

An Interview with Team Canada Rugby Stars and CDS Grads McKinley Hunt and Claire Gallagher

By Jim Stewart

McKinley Hunt and Claire Gallagher took time from their busy rugby commitments to Team Canada and pro team Saracens in North London to respond to our interview questions about defeating powerhouse New Zealand, identifying personal highlights during the Pacific 4 championships, and reflecting on their time as student-athletes at The Country Day School in King City:

Citizen: Describe your feelings as the match was winding down and your Canadian squad was tasked with holding a 22-19 lead against the perennial world champions on their home turf in Christchurch, New Zealand.

McKinley Hunt: ?There were definitely some nerves because a game can swing at any moment, but I also felt an overwhelming sense of calmness. We had battled the entire game and I had complete trust in my teammates to finish the job. Our squad truly believes that it takes everyone on the roster to be successful and it was really special to see that come to fruition. I will say, that with about 2 minutes left, I really had the realization that we were going to win, and nothing could beat that feeling of utter shock and excitement that we had actually done it.?

Citizen: How satisfying was it to score a try and put your team up 15-14 to help win this high-profile rugby match over powerhouse New Zealand?

MH:??It is always great when you can contribute points in a game of that magnitude. I can't take too much credit for that moment, as it was a true forwards try with a strong mauling platform for us to build from. It is always great to have a momentum builder and to start the second half start with a try was exactly what we needed.?

Citizen: Was there a personal moment in the victory that you will especially cherish?

MH:??Running back onto the pitch after the final whistle was so special. Very few people see and understand the sacrifices we make to get ourselves to moments like that, so to be able to celebrate with the people who have been on the journey with you is extra special. We also always knew we could be in contention for winning the World Cup next year and it was nice for us to prove to the world that we are serious about our goals and abilities, and that it doesn't matter who we are up against.?

Citizen:??Reflecting on your high school rugby career at The Country Day School, how did your work on the pitch during high school ??nd with your club teams ??repare you for this significant rugby victory over New Zealand?

MH: ?I owe a lot to CDS for my rugby career. Girls' rugby was always ?the' sport to play at school, and I don't think I would have picked up a rugby ball if I hadn't had that exposure. My coaches always made sure rugby was fun and that enjoyment of the sport has been crucial in my success. My club coaches also played a significant role in my development, especially Matt Rietkoetter and Mike Symes from Barrie RFC, and Kevin Jones from the Aurora Barbs. They were some of the first people who made me realize that I could pursue rugby at the elite level, and they have always supported me on my journey. I have had an unlucky road at times, with multiple serious injuries and they have always been the ones reminding me what I am capable of and to savour the little moments and people you impact along the way. My CDS and club coaches have shared in every step of my journey, and they continue to be some of the first people I text when I am away competing. They were the first people I messaged when I knew I had made the World Cup roster in 2022 and they were the first people I had messages from after our win against New Zealand.?

Citizen: Describe your feelings as the match was winding down and your Canadian squad was tasked with holding a 22-19 lead against the perennial world champions on their home turf in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Claire Gallagher: ?It was a pretty surreal feeling; we knew the Black Ferns wouldn't let up until the last minute so despite being in

the lead, we had to be locked in every moment. We could've built up this big mountain to climb with the game being in New Zealand and having never beaten them before; however, that was not in our minds. As the game progressed, we just wanted to focus on ourselves and the things we could directly control.?

Citizen: Was there a personal moment in the victory that you will especially cherish?

CG: ?Looking back at the win, we're pretty proud of all aspects of our game; we had been working all tour on many different attacking tools which we really implemented. A highlight moment for me personally was in the second half when we had over 30 phases of defense and held them off from scoring. To me, it really showed our grit and dedication to each other.?

Citizen:?Reflecting on your high school rugby career at The Country Day School, how did your work on the pitch during high school ??nd with your club teams ??repare you for this significant rugby victory over New Zealand?

CG:??Looking back to the start of my career at CDS is really special to me. I had not even heard of rugby before joining the team in Grade 9. Led by our coaches, the team environment was a really fun place which a lot of people wanted to be part of. A few years later, when I joined the Aurora Barbarians Rugby Club, I was able to get a better understanding of the game and play with girls who had a lot more experience than I did. I was also lucky to have McKinley Hunt to look up to in both of these environments. She was a few years older than me and without knowing it showed me all the places rugby could take you and the opportunities within the sport. Having these role models and fond memories at the grassroots level has allowed me to fall in love with the sport and remind me of why I dedicate so much time into it.?