

CDS Cyclone Rugby grads Claire Gallagher & McKinley Hunt capture Pacific Four Series in historic win over New Zealand

By Jim Stewart

Country Day School rugby coaches Dave Downer and Andrea Leacock could not contain their excitement upon seeing two of their former players star on the international stage for Team Canada during a recent championship game victory over New Zealand.

They watched with a high degree of satisfaction as Canada's Women's Rugby Team beat the Black Ferns for the first time in team history to win the coveted 2024 Pacific Four Series. The 22-19 comeback victory over the reigning champions ? following compelling wins over the USA and Australia ??oved Canada into second in the women's world rankings, the highest they've been ranked since November 2016.

Gracing the pitch for Team Canada in Christchurch, New Zealand were two Country Day School rugby grads: Claire Gallagher and McKinley Hunt. Coach Downer, who's been patrolling the sidelines as a rugby coach for 30 years at CDS and with the Aurora Barbarians, saw the National Team potential of Gallagher and Hunt when they starred together for the Cyclone almost 10 years ago.

The two on-field catalysts led the squad to a CISAA Varsity Girls' championship in 2015 and Downer assessed their prowess on the pitch.

?Both had the ability to read a field. They could make it happen and have any problem on the field quickly under control. Both had terrific tenacity and resilience, but also great humility. When McKinley came in for a visit earlier in the spring, she thought that New Zealand was beatable this year. When they did it, it was historic and we were ecstatic. I'm over the moon.?

Coach Leacock, who's been coaching rugby alongside Downer for eleven years, was pleased to see Gallagher and Hunt triumph in New Zealand.

?These girls deserved it. So much time and effort and energy and sacrifice have been devoted to achieve this kind of success. They've chosen to delay major life choices to dedicate themselves to Team Canada and the sisterhood of rugby. We have so much pride in their decisions and success.?

Coaches Downer and Leacock offered insights into the former Cyclones' athletic careers at CDS.

Hunt, a graduate of Queen's University and a Gaels' rugby player, played basketball and volleyball as well at the King City private school. Coach Leacock noted that ?McKinley decided at the end of Grade 8 that she was going to dedicate herself to become a rugby player. She had a very supportive family and built herself physically into a force on the field. She was so strong starting in Grade 9 and played virtually at all positions for us for four years on the varsity teams.?

Coach Downer added that Gallagher, a graduate of the University of Ottawa and a member of Gee-Gees' rugby team, made an early commitment to become a national-calibre athlete.

?Claire started playing rugby in Grade 9, but she was a rep soccer player and thought she was going to earn a university scholarship for soccer. After Grade 10, she made a full commitment to playing rugby and both Claire and McKinley became the full package ??mart players who showed great levels of leadership and skill who led by example and enthusiasm.?

When asked what was the most satisfying part of coaching brilliant competitors like Gallagher and Hunt, Coach Downer acknowledged both players' level of commitment.

?They have bought into the international culture of rugby. They look out for one another. They're in a sisterhood as we mentioned

earlier and they share the sport's heritage.?

Coach Leacock echoed her coaching partner's insights: ?What's most satisfying for me is seeing them follow their dreams. They both have their degrees and accomplished what they set out to do. They had a chance to make the national team and accomplished that, too.?

Winning a world championship against the most dominant global power in rugby suggests that Claire Gallagher and McKinley Hunt have accomplished much as CDS grads and the Cyclone community is proud of their international achievements. The sky is clearly the limit for this pair of inspirational student-athletes.