

## DeGroot Rugby Roots Showing in DII Playoffs

Written by Ann Marie Bowlus  
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Family resemblance runs deeper than facial features, build and mannerisms in the Withers/DeGroot family. When Middlebury wing, Zachary Withers, takes the field Saturday in the Emirates Airline USA Rugby DII College Semifinal, he will be continuing an 87-year family rugby tradition. Dudley DeGroot, Withers' great grandfather was captain of the gritty, rough-and-tumble Gold Medal-winning 1924 Olympic rugby team.

DeGroot was someone who "carved pathways in all his endeavors," according to his granddaughter, Sani Withers.

He made unforgettable impressions in every sport he participated in from swimming, to football, to rugby, winning accolades and awards on a regular basis. A natural leader and talented athlete, it seemed DeGroot could master any sport on offer.

As the family story goes, after DeGroot's graduation from Stanford in 1922, he wanted to continue his football career, but with no professional league to play in he capitalized on the opportunity to play international rugby.

Not only did DeGroot's homegrown USA rugby team qualify for the 1924 Summer Olympic Games, the unlikely group of Americans beat France - the hosts of the 1924 Games - by a score of 17-3.

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According to accounts from that game, the newly-crowned Olympic Champions were congratulated by dodging a shower of rocks, bottles, and various other projectiles launched from the vehement and bitter crowd as they tried to exit the stadium.

This was the last time rugby would be played in the Olympics (until rugby sevens makes its Olympic debut in the 2016 Games in Brazil, of course).

After returning to the USA an Olympic champion, DeGroot made a career as a football coach, calling plays for teams such as the Washington Redskins, University of West Virginia, the Los Angeles Dons and the University of New Mexico. His coaching efforts earned him a spot in New Mexico Football Hall of Fame and he has one of the highest winning percentages of any professional football coach ever.

“We all have physical and, to some degree, mental similarities,” said Withers reflecting on the traits he inherited from the DeGroot side. But unlike his great grandfather, Zach never really gravitated towards gridiron.

“Football culture never really appealed to me on or off the pitch,” Withers said.

Withers relishes in the cerebral aspect of rugby and feels that football players have earned a reputation as some of the “duller crayons in the box.”

The Middlebury senior picked up rugby in college unaware of his great grandfather’s historical accomplishments in the sport. It wasn’t until his recent rugby successes that his mother, Sani, thought of the connection to her grandfather.

Though Zach never had the opportunity to meet his great grandfather, his mother commented on how similar they are in both their tall, lanky build and their competitive nature.

When Zach found out his family’s prestigious rugby tradition, he said, “It made sense...it just

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kind of fit in with the type of player I strive to be.”

Withers holds onto his great grandfather’s legendary victories, in his possession is the captain’s strap DeGroot wore during the 1924 Games. But this physical reminder of success doesn’t answer the questions he would have had for his great grandfather, especially with the weight of a National Championship on the line.

“I would ask him what he would do to stay calm. Can you imagine the amount of pressure he was under playing in France?” Withers said, acknowledging the weight of the game he is set to play on Saturday as well as DeGroot’s ability to thrive in the high-pressure game in 1924.

Withers might have a taste of the glory that his great grandfather experienced nearly 90 years ago in Paris by being crowned as a rugby champion. Middlebury is set to take on Salisbury in the Emirates Airline USA Rugby 2011 Division II Men’s College Semifinals on Saturday April 30 at Founders Field in Pittsburgh, Penn. The game will be webcast on [www.ustream.tv/usarugby](http://www.ustream.tv/usarugby)

A win in that game will advance Middlebury to the National Championship game and a shot to reclaim the national title that has eluded them since 2009. Win or lose, Withers is a rugby player for life. After graduation he plans on using rugby as a social avenue wherever he lands, playing for club teams whenever possible and competing as his grandfather did nearly 90 years go.