

Sacramento Bee Profiles Scully

Written by Eric Gilmore
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When he graduated from Jesuit High School five years ago, Sacramento's Blaine Scully had never played rugby.

Now he's a four-time college All-American and a member of the U.S. National Team, vying to make the 30-man squad that will compete in September's Rugby World Cup in New Zealand.

Scully, a senior co-captain this season on an undefeated Cal team that survived a tumultuous year to win the national championship, the Bears' 19th in 21 years, said he wants to play

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professional rugby overseas. And he hopes to compete in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Rugby will return to the Games for the first time since 1924 (with a seven-a-side format instead of the traditional 15-a-side).

The past two years, Scully has competed twice in Scotland and once in England for coach Al Caravelli's U.S. National Sevens Team.

"If he continues to work, I don't see any reason why he can't be on the squad that will challenge to be on the podium in 2016," said Caravelli, who hopes to coach that U.S. Olympic team. "He strives for perfection all the time."

Scully graduated from Cal with a history degree, and he has long thought about attending law school, but for now he'll continue to "chase the rugby rainbow" and see where it leads him.

Scully began this unlikely journey during his freshman year at UCLA after arriving as an all-around athlete without a team. He lettered in basketball, swimming and water polo at Jesuit, and planned to play water polo in college but he had a change of heart.

Scully can thank former Jesuit rugby star Pierce Cooley, his high school friend, for launching his love of rugby.

Cooley was playing rugby at UCLA, and he made what turned out to be a brilliant suggestion.

"He said, 'Hey, you should try out for the team,' " Scully said.

For Scully, it was love at first scrum.

Scully enjoys contact

Scully quickly discovered he was a natural with his combination of speed, power, leaping ability and grit. By his second season, he earned All-American honors. Then he transferred to Cal to join coach Jack Clark's national powerhouse program, and his rugby skills skyrocketed.

"It was by far the best decision I've ever made in my entire life," Scully said of transferring to Cal. "It just shaped my life in every respect, from being a student and an athlete."

Clark and assistant coach Tom Billups helped hone Scully's rugby skills, but he came to Berkeley with plenty of qualities that can't be taught.

"He's a highly competitive guy," Clark said. "He's not afraid of a battle of physical wills. Contact is not something he shies away from. Rugby's an 80-minute contest and no timeouts. You've got to grind. You've got to be willing to keep going."

Although Scully didn't play rugby or football in high school, he said his love for bone-jarring contact is "kind of in my blood." His late father, Steve, played football at Santa Clara, where he was a hard-hitting safety. His older brother, Sean, played football at Saint Mary's College and Sacramento State.

"I love the physical aspect (of rugby)," Scully said. "That just came naturally to me."

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Scully credits his mother, Jan, for his resiliency and drive. In 1994, Scully's father Steven, an attorney, suffered a fatal heart attack while working out. He died during Jan's first run for Sacramento County District Attorney, a race she won. She has held the job ever since.

"I really can't say enough about my mom and what she did for me and my sister (Tara) as well," Scully said. "Her ability to shoulder the entire burden of losing the person she loved most and holding the family together, and also having a very demanding job with a lot on the line – just an incredible person. A lot of people might have fallen apart at that point. Nothing stopped her. She's my true role model."

Jan Scully held the family together for a few years before marrying Brian Royce, a Sacramento area oral surgeon, who adopted her children and became, "just like a real dad for me," Blaine said.

"Blaine has always valued his family and people around him that he loves," Jan said. "He just loves his family. He likes to make us proud. He just has a good heart."

Cal rugby saved

That heart helped Scully become a leader of Cal's rugby team during trying times this season. For starters, the Bears didn't play a true home match because construction on Memorial Stadium forced them to turn Witter Rugby Field into a practice facility for multiple sports, including football.

Then there were problems with the newly installed artificial turf that limited the area available for practice.

That wasn't the worst news. In September, Cal's storied rugby program was slated to be downgraded to a club sport. It took a fund raising drive to save the program, which was reinstated in February.

"There's a lot of angst with that," Clark said. "Internally, it took a steady hand. Blaine was remarkable."

Said Scully: "Our entire (rugby) community raised us from the dead."

Cal capped its perfect season with a 21-14 victory over BYU at Rio Tinto Stadium near Salt Lake City. It was the second title in Scully's three years at Cal.

"It was an uphill climb the whole way, but we just wouldn't quit until we got to the top," Scully said.

Next, Scully will join fellow All-Americans for three matches this month against a visiting team from New Zealand, concluding July 16 at Stanford. Then he'll join the U.S. National Team in the Denver area to prepare for two matches against Canada and one against Japan.

On June 18 in Worcester, England, Scully played in his first official "test game" for the U.S. National Team against Russia. He started at fullback in the bowl final of the Churchill Cup. After a tentative start, Scully came on strong in a 32-25 victory.

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Four other former Bears played for the United States that day – Jesuit graduates Colin Hawley, Louis Stanfill and Eric Fry, along with Chris Biller. Those familiar faces helped Scully adjust to his new, high-stress surroundings.

"It was a learning experience," Scully said. "It took me about 20 minutes to kind of settle myself into the game. That's when I got my first touch of the ball. After that it all kind of made sense."

Scully will have to continue his strong play to earn a spot of the World Cup roster.

"I wouldn't bet against him," Clark said.