

Published September 14th, 2022

SMC's Chase Jones drafted by NOLA in Major League Rugby

By Jon Kingdon



Chase Jones Photo Karen Drinkwater

With limited success, going back to the 1930s, there have been several attempts to create a professional rugby league in the United States. As a rule, if a college rugby player was looking to play professionally, they were forced to look overseas where there were many options to choose from. Since 2018, Major League Rugby has shown steady growth to a point that there are now 13 teams, and they recently held their draft on TV.

In the last five years, Chase Jones has been a mainstay on the Saint Mary's rugby team and a top student in the classroom, receiving two degrees - an undergraduate degree in business administration and his master's in business administration.

"That was a real highlight for me," Jones said. "With those degrees from Saint Mary's, I'm set for life. I was able to enter into the graduate program and a lot of my classes crossed over so staying the fifth year enabled me to graduate with both degrees."

Jones had a second dream fulfilled on Aug. 18. That was when he learned that he was the fifth player taken overall in the draft by the NOLA Gold rugby team located in Metairie, Louisiana (a suburb of New Orleans). "I was watching the draft with my family and buddies," Jones said. "It was unbelievable to hear my name called out. You don't expect anything like that to occur even when you've been told it's going to happen. When it comes to achieving the opportunity to pursue your dream, it just

didn't seem real."

There are many reasons why someone begins to play a sport like rugby. In Jones' case, it was because he was not a good basketball player, and his mother did not want him to play football because she was concerned he would get injured.

"I've been wanting to play a professional sport ever since I started playing sports," said Jones, who grew up in Davis, Calif. "Growing up, I thought about playing for the Sacramento Kings or the 49ers. I didn't make the freshman basketball team and I needed to play a sport because sports have always provided a structure for my life," Jones said. "I saw a poster in the school hallway that said full contact rugby and that's how I found out about it. I'm a sweetheart but I enjoy using my strength and being aggressive and I was instantly hooked on the sport."

Jones told his mother that rugby was like soccer, and she did not get to see him play until his second season. "It was then she saw her first game of rugby," Jones said. "At that point, I was already head over heels in love with the sport so there was no way I was going to let her tell me I couldn't continue to do it, and the rest is history."

Jones played for Coach Andy Malpas at Davis, which was one of the few public schools that had its own rugby team. Jones played there his first two years and then it merged with Dixon High School to become a premier club team.

At that point, in picking a college, fate and Jones' father intervened. "I was going to go to Western Washington to play Division 3 rugby, because they were offering me more money and I had had a really good visit to their campus," Jones said. "My dad said that they would help me out if I went to Western Washington, but would not pay the whole thing, but if I went to Saint Mary's, they would pay the full tuition. As a senior in high school, I admit I was pretty ignorant as to the opportunities that were being presented at Saint Mary's. My dad just helped me make the right decision there."

Saint Mary's head coach Tim O'Brien was not at all familiar with Jones at that point. "Chase just showed up when we were practicing and then came to a match the next Saturday and he then announced that he was coming to Saint Mary's," O'Brien said. "He felt that this was a great spot for him, with or without rugby."

Jones was bit of a late bloomer, measuring 5'11" as a freshman and growing to 6'4" by his senior year though only weighing 185. "Believe it or not, I'm the runt of my family," Jones said. "My dad is 6'7", my mom is 6'0", my older brother is 6'10" and my 16-year-old sister is 6'1. I'm 230 now so I am the heaviest."

How does one put on so much weight in just a couple of years? "Non-stop eating and weight room work," Jones said. "My first two years at Saint Mary's, I put on 30 pounds of muscle - I'm now about 230 and hope to be 240 beginning my pro career."

That may be only scratching the surface, according to O'Brien: "With Chase, the NOLA team has picked up a kid that has an enormous upside and his ability to contribute will be significant. He still has room to grow, and he won't be maxed out for another five or six years."

In coming out for the rugby team at Saint Mary's, Jones was soon to learn that everyone was starting from scratch with O'Brien. "Tim is not concerned with anyone's history," Jones said. "What matters is what you do with the Saint Mary's white T-shirt that has your last name on it. He wants players who want to be there and not to have to drag someone over. Of course, he was very encouraging and once I got there, like everyone else, he gave us everything we needed. It was then that he put us through the wringer making us prove ourselves. Tim's been incredibly influential in my life."

O'Brien came to appreciate Jones as much off the field as he did as a player. "Chase just understands the game and how it works and at times he can be like a coach on the field," O'Brien said. "Plus, he really understands, from going to school here and paying the tuition, the economics, and the importance of his education. That being said, he is comfortable now to try and go out and play pro rugby."

In talking with rugby players at every level, the one word that comes up consistently is camaraderie. "At Saint Mary's, it was like we were a family," Jones said. "A lot of those boys will be in my life forever. In that environment, it makes it so much easier for you to put your body on the line for each other. I'm definitely looking to build that at NOLA."

Jones, a lock flanker, is currently rehabbing from a shoulder injury suffered in the Cal semifinal championship game but still went back to Louisiana for preliminary work with the team. "It's a matter of learning the system and the team and to create some camaraderie so that we can hit the ground running rather than trying to figure each other out right before the season," Jones said.

With all of the distractions that went on the past few years, O'Brien sees it in a way that may help Jones' pro career. "Chase has not played a lot of rugby the last few years due to the pandemic and having missed some games with injuries so there is not a lot of mileage on his body," O'Brien said.

Jones is already familiar with some of his teammates and there are a number of Gaels on the various teams in the league: "I played with Aaron Matthews and Dino Waldren at Saint Mary's, and they are on the NOLA team, and I know a couple players in the league," Jones said. "Rugby is a small, tight-knit community. Eventually, everyone knows everybody."

In his time at Saint Mary's, there were undefeated seasons though no national championships after those seasons due to the coronavirus and this year the team made it to the national championship coming up short against Army, though Jones did not play due to his injury. Still, the ultimate highlight for Jones was not the end result but the process in getting there.

"The biggest takeaway that I'll keep with me for the rest of my life was embracing the suffering," Jones said. "If you want to be really good at something, you're going to have to go through the hardest struggles and you're going to have to just put your head down and say, 'You know what? I'm going to get through it.' Tim taught us how to control our body when we were suffering the most, pushing us all to the point where we were on the side of the hill thinking we're going to be sick, feeling dehydrated and physically exhausted. But we were with our brothers, and it just shows that support through hard times creates a bond that is unbreakable."

O'Brien did not argue the point. "There is a bit of shared suffering for sure," O'Brien said. "Chase is one of those guys that's all about it. He had some days when he needed support and wanted to understand what was occurring. As long as he was clear as to why we were doing things a certain way, he was fine."

It's never easy for a coach to lose a player of Chase's caliber to graduation. "Chase's graduating is a big loss for us, both as a player and as a person," O'Brien said. "I will miss his personality and his contributions on and off the field. You could see playing is a joy for him and he is a good dude to be around."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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