



RUGBY

ANNUAL REPORT

2022-23

CAROLINA RUGBY FOUNDATION

This annual report is published by the
Carolina Rugby Foundation.

Robert Balmer '89, *Chairman*
Phil Harris '08, *Vice Chair*
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Bill Rhoden '91, *Treasurer*
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A Word from the Chairman



This year our beloved Gamecocks captured their second consecutive 7s conference championship, returned to nationals, finished runner

up in the conference in 15s, defeated Clemson for the first time in recent memory and were ranked 7th in the nation.

These amazing achievements excite our fans, parents, and alumni. But they represent just a fraction of our 2022-23 milestones. Beyond the pitch, your Carolina Foundation continued to broaden and professionalize our outreach and engagement. Those efforts, launched nearly three years ago, bore spectacular fruit this year.

During the past 12 months, the Foundation – working with players, coaches, parents, and alumni, have:

- Raised approximately \$170,000 from 165 donors to support the Carolina Rugby Endowment.
- Expanded the Jeffrey S. Smolka and John S. Roberts Endowed Rugby Fund through a \$25,000 gift from Coach Jeff Smolka.
- Published the Foundation's first annual report.

- Provided scholarship assistance to 15 current players through the Smolka Scholarship fund.
- Hosted alumni outreach events in Charleston, S.C., and Washington, D.C.
- Executed in-person recruiting trips to Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York.
- Raised more than \$12,000 through our Rent-a-Rugger program that puts our players to work in the local community to raise funds for team expenses.
- Raised nearly \$80,000 last November during the weeks after our "With You Weekend".
- Raised \$36,000 during Give4Garnet, the university's annual giving day.
- Received commitments from 16 high school rugby recruits who will join the team this fall.

Many of these achievements are represented in this annual report. We hope that it inspires, excites, and encourages your future involvement and philanthropy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Balmer". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Robert Balmer
Chairman





USC's Rugby Man

For the past 40 years, **Jeff Smolka '89** has been the single continuous thread woven through the USC rugby tapestry.

There's not a role he's left unserved: head coach, assistant coach, player, volunteer, and member of the Carolina Rugby Foundation. But his lasting and most impactful role has been benefactor. As an assistant forward's coach in 2014 and Chairman of USA Rugby's Rugby Committee, Smolka surveyed the college rugby landscape.

While USC had had numerous successes on the pitch (the Gamecocks won the SCRC (Southeastern Collegiate Rugby Conference) that year and qualified for nationals), Smolka, a former Gamecock hooker, looked around and noticed that premiere rugby programs around the nation were elevating their game off the pitch.

Some were being promoted to varsity status. Others were raising funds to support coaching salaries. He wanted to do something that would lay the groundwork for future Gamecock rugby success and give the program he loved a competitive advantage.

Working with school officials, Smolka established the Carolina Men's Rugby Endowment in 2014 and contributed \$25,000 of his own funds to jumpstart the endowment. For the first time in program history, alumni, parents, and friends had the opportunity to give to rugby through the university.

In 2015, he established the Jeffery S. Smolka Endowed Scholarship fund with a gift of \$25,000. The program would extend in-state tuition costs to out-of-state students. Recipients of the award must maintain a 3.0 grade point average and have completed a minimum of 12 college credit hours. The fund also extends \$500 grants to in-state students.

For USC's 50th Alumni reunion, Jeff started the Coaches, Captains, Classes, and Founders Endowed Scholarship to honor the rugby club founders and create a channel for Alumni to donate. USC is one of the few rugby programs that has a record of all its captains and coaches.

"Knowing that we were recruiting many students from the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, we wanted to do something that would help us to attract and retain these student athletes," said Smolka. "Carolina rugby has meant so much to me and my family. This is my way of paying back."

Since that time, more than 50 Gamecock rugby players have benefitted from the program. Financial aid extended through the endowment has exceeded \$600,000. Today, most scholarship recipients benefit from their annual tuition costs between \$6,000 for Merit scholarships upgrades or \$16,000 for students that do not have an incoming scholarship.

In 2021, Smolka rejoined the USC rugby coaching staff at the behest of Coach Roberts. Roberts and Smolka first met as USC teammates in 1987 and have been close friends since. Smolka has played a pivotal role as the club prospered, capturing two SCRC 7s championships, finishing runner-up in 15s while logging milestone victories over our rival Clemson.

In August 2022, Smolka launched the "Carolina Rugby Ambassadors Program" which funds rugby





Jeff Smolka (center) with our 2023-24 Smolka Scholarship recipients during our Spring awards banquet.

dues for international rugby players. To date, he has donated \$2,000 to that effort.

In the spring of 2023, to celebrate Coach Roberts and the rugby team's accomplishments, he challenged 150 alumni, players, and parents to donate to the program's endowment with a gift during Give4Garnet (the university's annual giving day on April 19).

Alumni, parents and the team pulled together to reach the goal. In the process, the team raised an additional \$11,267 for the endowment to help pay for nationals. In all, rugby supporters accounted for 45 percent of the funds raised for Student Life.

Smolka's latest gift ensures the financial stability of the endowment, allowing the program to fund

more scholarships and attract more athletes. His generosity bore immediate fruit last month when the club awarded 14 Smolka scholarships and its first Graduate Fellowship award to Dan Golden. Over the last decade, Smolka has contributed over \$100,000 to Carolina Rugby.

"We will be forever grateful to Jeff and all he has done as player, administrator, coach, volunteer and donor," said Carolina Rugby Foundation Chairman **Robert Balmer '89**. "No one has given more of their time and treasure to Gamecock rugby than Jeff. He is a giant in our program and his legacy will be everlasting."

Our Podcast Personality

Today, **Phil Harris '08** feels like he's on top of the rugby world.

When the New England Free Jacks captured the Major League Rugby Championship on July 8 with a nail-biting 25-24 victory over the San Diego Legion, Harris and his friends spilled onto the pitch to celebrate.

He drank from the Eastern Conference Champions Cup, hoisted the MLR Shield, hugged players and was given a championship medal that he wore for seven days.

As director of the popular Jack's Rangers podcast, Harris has chronicled the Free Jacks journey since January while conducting interviews with players, managers, and team personnel. To date, he has produced 87 episodes.

Through that journey, the Free Jacks compiled a remarkable 14-2 record. And Harris developed a close bond with the players, coaches, staff and owner. When the Free Jacks lifted the championship cup, Harris was not on the roster. But he was a member of the Free Jacks family.

"Phil has become a crucial voice and connection between players, management, the community, and a key link for new fans to the game to the Free Jacks family," said Alex Magleby, co-founder, co-owner and CEO of Free Jacks. "His efforts have had a real cascading effect on fan engagement and the passion Free Jacks fans are known for throughout the world now."

Harris's remarkable path to the championship – and his two-decade love affair with rugby – began with an Internet search.

It was 2002 when the junior at rural Kings Mountain High School in North Carolina happened upon some online rugby videos. He was fascinated by the game's grit, contact and camaraderie.

He wanted to play.

At the time, there was no high school rugby nearby. So, he bought a rugby ball off eBay and gathered some chums. Together they taught themselves.

When Harris and his friends showed up at a Charlotte Rugby Football club practice in 2003, the veteran players were confused and amused.

"I mean here we were, just some high school guys who were self-taught and playing intramural. And we wanted to join one of the best men's clubs in the country," said Harris.

Charlotte brought Harris and his friends into the fold. After graduating from high school, Harris played two seasons at Catawba College, transferred to USC in 2006, and played one season for the Gamecocks.

While Harris never earned fame as a player, his passion for the game only grew. In April 2021, he found the perfect vehicle to channel his love for the game. Living in New Hampshire, Harris reached out to the Boston-based Free Jacks and pitched the idea of the podcast.

The Jack's Rangers Show quickly became a fan favorite, offering insights into the team's training and preparation. Moreover, it gave the Free Jacks players a voice. It put their personality on full display.



"Content and social media is king," said Harris, who serves as Vice Chairman of the Carolina Rugby Foundation and produces The Ruckin' Rooster Show. "It's important for sports teams to produce engaging content. It helps fans connect with their program."

Harris, who works as a government contractor, jokes that he has no children, just a girlfriend (Caitlin McGuire) and a cat. So, he has a lot of free time to devote to growing rugby.

"I have devoted my life to advancing this wonderful game," he said. "I absolutely love doing The Jack's Rangers Show and The Ruckin' Roosters Show because they expand rugby's footprint and bring more attention to the two programs I hold dear."

Phil Harris and his girlfriend, Caitlin McGuire, with the MLR championship trophy.



Our Timeline of Success

A LOOK BACK AT THE EVENTS THAT SHAPED USC RUGBY THIS YEAR

2022

AUGUST 11

Gamecocks launch the program's first ever preseason rugby camp. Two-a-day practices and lots of shared suffering.

AUGUST 20

The team visits Fort Jackson for Sergeant's Day. Obstacle courses, repelling and much sweating in the Columbia heat.



AUGUST 25

Foundation hosts annual season kick-off with "Meet the Coaches and Captains" event at Savage Craft.

SEPTEMBER 18

USC begins livestreaming games.



SEPTEMBER 24

Foundation hosts "Meet the Foundation" tailgate before the Charlotte football game.

OCTOBER 8

Gamecocks defeat Clemson 12-10 to capture the Palmetto Cup...the first 15s win over our rival in over a decade.



OCTOBER 11

USC rises to #3 Men's Division 1-AA ranking by NCR.



NOVEMBER 4-5

Nearly 200 alumni, parents, and friends attend With You Weekend, raising close to \$80,000 thanks to a matching gift from an anonymous donor.



NOVEMBER 12

Gamecocks drop heartbreaking 27-22 loss to Tennessee in SCRC final, but become one of only 8 teams to advance to NCR National Championship Tournament.

MARCH 18

USC wins the Gamecock Invitational 7s tournament with 19-17 finals win over Queens.



APRIL 19

We raised \$36,167 during Give4Garnet, the university's annual giving day. 121 donors participated.



DECEMBER 17

Finish fall ranked #7 in final NCR coach's poll.

2023

APRIL 30

Carolina goes 1-2 in Collegiate Rugby 7's Championship (Washington, D.C.) while competing in the Premier Division. Finish with 18-6 record.

FEBRUARY 11-12

Coach Roberts attends two high school showcase events in Connecticut and New Jersey.



NOVEMBER 19

USC bows out of play-offs with loss to Louisville. The Cardinals would go on to lose in the finals.

DECEMBER 10

The rugby club participates in the Families Helping Families holiday Adopt a Family program by buying and wrapping Christmas gifts for a Columbia-area family.



APRIL 15

USC defeats Tennessee on the final play of the SCRC finals 26-24 to repeat as conference 7s champions. USC B side finishes 5th in the tournament.

The Best Among Us

FOUNDATION LAUNCHES GAMECOCK RUGBY HALL OF FAME

This spring the Carolina Rugby Foundation will induct the program's inaugural Hall of Fame Class.

Gamecock Rugby alumni, parents and donors are welcome to submit nominations through the club website. Nominees may be former players, coaches, and supporters.

Nominations will be reviewed by members of the Foundation's Hall of Fame Committee which include **Phil Harris '08** (chair), **Rick Lebel '75**, **Philip Rockefeller '89**, **Deklan Reid '19** and **Alexander Feltman '17**. Members of this group will submit their collective nominee(s) to the Foundation board for approval.

The Foundation and USC Rugby club plan to induct the inaugural class during an April on-campus celebration.

"Our Foundation has been working to develop a nomination process over the last six months," said Harris. "We felt it necessary to appoint a committee to oversee the nomination process, examine nominations and plan our induction ceremony."

The Gamecocks have played rugby for more than five decades. Harris said the Foundation worked intentionally to include both young and older alumni on its selection committee.

"Our board and program continue to evolve and grow," said Harris. "Induction into the Gamecock Rugby Hall of Fame will be the ultimate honor. We have many alumni, coaches and supporters who are worthy of this recognition. We hope that this annual event and induction ceremony will unite our Carolina Rugby Family in celebrating our history and those who have given so much to our program."



Welcome Home

GAMECOCKS WELCOME NEW PLAYERS



Coach Roberts attended high school showcases in New Jersey, Connecticut, Charleston, S.C., and Charlotte this year. During this time, Coach met with youth coaches and hundreds of players. Alumni **Jay Monrad '93** and **Butch Setser '92** participated in the outreach events.

The team also hosted nearly 20 recruits who visited the campus throughout the fall and the spring. After meeting with Coach, the recruits and their parents met with current players for lunch. The experience gave the recruits an opportunity to learn about our player experiences as an athlete and student.

The efforts were a fine investment. This year, the Gamecocks collected commitments from 16 incoming freshmen and transfer students. Last year's recruiting effort netted 15 players who will return to the team this fall as sophomores.

INCOMING FRESHMEN AND TRANSFER STUDENTS:

AJ Deangelis

Prop, Staples High School and transfer from University of New Hampshire, Westport, CN

Sasha Barker-Pilsworth

Wing, exchange student, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, England

Jamie Franchock

Center, Xavier High School, New York City

Jack Gallagher

Center, La Salle College High School, Wyndmoor, PA

Paul Cervellero

Flanker, La Salle College High School, Wyndmoor, PA

Stergos Trintis

Center, Loyola Blakefield, Townsend, MD

Michael Dostillio

Center, St. Augustine Prep, Richland, NJ

Soloman Jacobs

Center, Spring Hill High School, Chapin, SC

Gavin Curran

Eight-man, St. Augustine Prep, Richland, NJ

Zack Goetzee

Lock, Affies High School, Pretoria, South Africa

Ben Tummonds

Flanker, Whitman High School (Maryland Exiles), Bethesda, MD

Charlie Colvin

Prop, Chatham High School (Morris County Lions), Chatham, NJ

Connor McPhail

Wing, Gonzaga High School, Washington, D.C.

Dylan Seymour

Hooker, Loyola Blakefield, Towson, MD

Jack Kellen

Prop, Independence High School, Loudon, VA

Joshua Cancro

Lock, Methacton Highschool, Eagleville, PA



Our All-American

Throughout our 56-year history many fine players have worn the garnet and black. In the 1980s two players, **Mark Rockefeller '87** and **Kim Pipkin '89**, were named USA Junior Eagles. Pipkin was also an All-American.

Now we have our second All-American.

Last fall, senior captain and club president Grant Howard was named to the National College Rugby (NCR) D-1AA All-American squad.

The All-American team included 23 players. Only three Southeastern Collegiate Rugby Conference (SCRC) players were named to the squad.

"I am extremely honored to have received this award," said Howard. "I credit my teammates and coaches as I am nothing without them. Hopefully we can have more Gamecocks receive this recognition in the future."

The son of Mark and Cynthia Howard, Grant is from Rye, New York. The sports management

major enters his fourth season as a Gamecock. During much of his time in garnet, Howard has played 8-man. He was named to the All-SCRC team his sophomore and junior years.

"Grant is the consummate teammate and captain," said Coach John Roberts. "He is extremely competitive and plays with great zeal and grit. Moreover, he is a great leader and exhibits unmatched respect and sportsmanship."

Off the pitch, Howard helps oversee the program's five working committees and is a member of the University of South Carolina Club Sports Executive Council.

"The product that we put on display on the pitch represents just a small part of our club," said Roberts. "From marketing to recruiting and operations, there is a tremendous amount of work that goes on behind the scenes. And Grant is the glue that holds all this together. He has a tremendous capacity for work."

Unleash the Potential: Carolina Rugby's Journey of Success and Impact

BY CHRIS MURPHY '91



I could not be more proud to be a part of Carolina Rugby. A little over three years ago, we set out on a mission to elevate our beloved program by bringing on board our first paid rugby coach. The journey was not easy, but it was essential to keep pace with our rivals and take our program to new heights.

At the time, we had few rowers in our a boat, and we knew that to succeed, our reach had to be broad and deep.

With the dedication of our early contributors, we welcomed Coach John Roberts who was destined to transform the program. The initial results were promising, but what happened next was truly extraordinary. During the spring of 2021, our team turned a corner and achieved what we all knew would happen, maybe just not so quickly - winning the SCRC 7s championship and earning a remarkable record at national tournaments.

This incredible achievement inspired more individuals to join our boat, united by the shared vision of a thriving Carolina Rugby program. Parents, witnessing the transformative impact on their sons, stepped up their support. Older and younger alumni took notice, showing their love for the sport through philanthropy and volunteerism. Our boat grew, and so did our on-the-pitch successes.

In the past year, the team continued to make waves, finishing as runners-up in the SCRC 15s, defending our 7s championship, and making a strong showing at nationals. Off the field, we

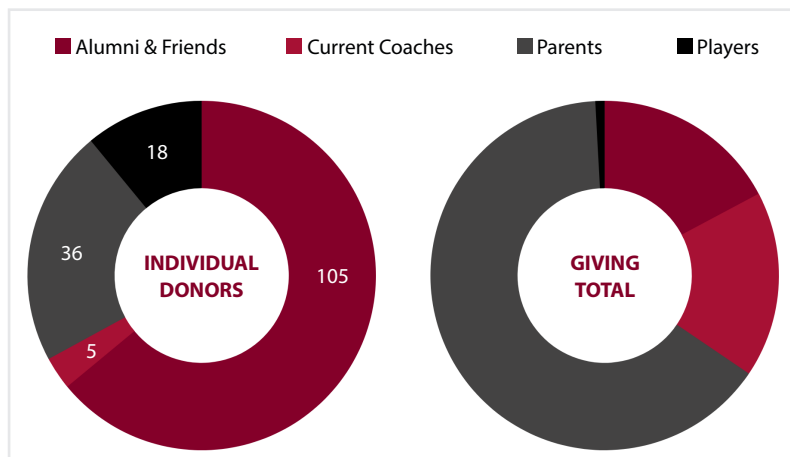
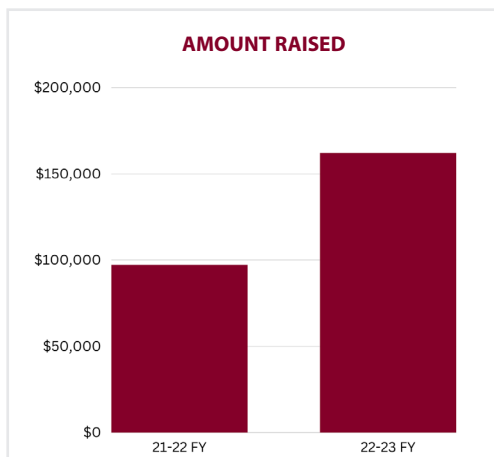
achieved even more significant milestones, doubling the number of donors and raising over \$160,000, a testament to the unwavering dedication of our supporters.

However, our boat has yet to reach its full potential. We know we can go even further, and that's where you come in. Today, we stand with more than 80 rowers in our USC rugby boat, but we have a long way to go. Currently, just 10 percent of our 1,000-member alumni base has contributed to the Carolina Rugby endowment. I invite and encourage each one of you to pick up an oar and be part of our journey towards greatness.

Imagine the incredible impact if just half of our alumni made a modest monthly gift of \$25. Together, we could generate a truly transformative amount, securing a world class coaching staff and providing vital funds for scholarships, and team travel.

Large gifts are undoubtedly appreciated, but what truly matters is participation. Every single contribution, no matter the size, makes a difference. If you are already in our boat, we extend our heartfelt thanks for your unwavering support, and we encourage you to consider matching or increasing your philanthropy this fiscal year. For those not yet on board, we warmly invite you to join us and make a lasting impact on the future of Carolina Rugby.

As we look ahead to our "With You Weekend" on October 28-29, we eagerly anticipate seeing all of you there. Until then, let us row on together toward a future of unmatched success and teamwork.



Thank you, thank you!

The University of South Carolina Men's Rugby Team and the Carolina Rugby Foundation are eternally grateful to the following individuals and organizations who made a gift to our endowment during fiscal year 22-23 (July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023). **We encourage new gifts and invite existing donors to match or increase your donation this fiscal year by visiting uscrugby.net/support.**

Platinum

Annual Gift of \$10,000 or more

William and Cindy McKernan (parents)

Jeff Smolka (coach)

Chris Murphy (board member)

Werner M. Minshall

Mark and Cynthia H. Howard (parents)

Gold

\$4,800 to \$9,999

None

Silver

\$2,400 to \$4,799

Bill Rhoden (board member)

Bronze

\$1,200 to \$2,399

Danny A. Johnson

George Geiser

Bronze *(Continued)*

\$1,200 to \$2,399

Joseph Mahaffey (parent)
Thomas Q. Allison (parent)
Patrick M. Kelly (parent)
Benton Blackburn (parent)
Zach Roberts
Joseph A. Giardina
Robert T. Lacy
Larry Brescio (parent)
Rick LeBel
Balmer & Associates
Jonathon Harvey
Pipkin Built

Garnet

\$600 to \$1,199

John Kantner
Paul Morrow (parent)
John C. Golden (parent)
John S. Roberts (coach)
Dana Gruebl
Lynn Moore
Gretchen T. Hendricks
Damon W. Shepherd (board member)
Dominic DuBois

Garnet *(Continued)*

\$600 to \$1,199

Phillip C. Harris (board member)

W A. Anderson

Leslie Elken (parent)

Black

\$300 to \$599

John Phelan (parent)

Kyle Elken (parent)

Thomas F. Brady (parent)

William K. Easley

Steve Ruhlen (parent)

Howard Hunt (former coach)

Mark J. Rockefeller

Carl J. Casper

Mark A. Morris (former coach)

Roger A. LeCroy

Deklan P. Reid

Francis X. Walton

Jay Monrad

John M. Stiles

Warren H. Muir

Wilber L. Harwell

Michael Reese (parent)

Individual

\$100 to \$299

Philip A. Rockefeller

Raymond H. Setser

Douglas Smith (parent)

Kevin Murphy

Marjorie F. Whiteford

Lyle Richards

Nicholas D. Rebarick

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Stephen Nett

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Mary Brescio (parent)

Megan Edwards (parent)

Robert C. Balmer
(board member)

Paul S. Bell

Dana Corcoran

James Pond

Garrett Smith

Mark Swearinger

Ronny West

If you see an error in our donor list, please contact Coach Roberts at jsr7@mailbox.sc.edu.

Please join us for

Family Weekend & With You

September 22-23, 2023 | October 28-29, 2023

Alumni and parents are invited to attend Family Weekend (September 22-23) and With You Weekend (October 28-29). Family Weekend includes a Friday night rugby game against Georgia. And we have reserved a few adjoining football tailgate spots for everyone on Saturday. With You Weekend includes a Saturday alumni game and a nice celebratory event Saturday evening. As we get closer to the event, we will post more information and RSVP forms on uscragby.net.



RUGBY

With You!

A Carolina Rugby Campaign supporting
Coaching * Scholarships * Program Excellence

DONATE TODAY



Donations and contributions to the "With You" campaign are applied to the Carolina Men's Rugby Endowment Fund (b21857) through the University of South Carolina Office of Gift Processing and are tax deductible to the extent as allowed by law.