

FOREVERSTRONG

Directed By Ryan Little



ick Penning (Sean Faris, *Never Back Down*) lives life just like he plays rugby; fast, hard-hitting and intense. When life on the edge lands him in jail, social worker Marcus Tate (Sean Astin, *The Lord of the Rings*) offers him a chance to get back in the game by playing for his rival, Highland Rugby. Reluctantly Rick joins the team where he must adopt the grueling training schedule and unique code of conduct enforced by Coach Gelwix (Gary Cole, *Office Space*), or finish out the season behind bars. Egos clash as bitter competitors struggle to become a team. An unlikely brotherhood is formed just as Rick is released from jail and sent back home to rejoin his team, coached by his strict father (Neal McDonough, *Minority Report*). Heading into a face off with Highland at the National Championship, Rick is forced to choose where his loyalty lies.

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

A hybrid of real events, *Forever Strong* is based on the story of the Highland Rugby Club. Having volunteered for the past 30 years, Coach Larry Gelwix aims to shape the lives of young men through the discipline of rugby. His motto "Be forever strong on the field, so you can be forever strong off the field," has become the theme and driving force behind the Highland Rugby Club. Coach Gelwix's dedication to the team and the hard work of the players,

have led the team to a career 379 wins and 9 losses along with an impressive 18 national championship titles.

FROM ACTORS TO RUGBY PLAYERS

Forever Strong producers wanted to stay as accurate as possible when it came to playing the game of rugby. In preparation for the film, they asked Coach Larry Gelwix to take part in the interview process. "A block away from the interview location, there was a city park. I had some rugby balls and the film execs wanted me to make an athletic evaluation of the actors. They dribbled the ball, threw the ball, and ran differently than real athletes. At first I thought, 'What are we going to do? How are we going to be able to turn these guys into rugby players?' After several drills, I gave the director and producer a list of the actors I thought I could work with," said Coach Gelwix.

The producers asked Gelwix if he would hold a one week training session for Sean Faris, Penn Badgley, Nathan West and the other actors who portrayed the Highland Rugby team. Gelwix ran a two-a-day rugby "boot camp" in order to train the actors. They would meet in the morning and run drills, stopping at lunch time to eat and rest. In the afternoon they would watch rugby films and talk logistics of the sport, and then head back to the field for more drills.

"At first it was really hard, I don't think any of us anticipated what really goes into rugby," said lead actor Sean Faris. "Luckily we had the alumni and Coach Gelwix to teach us every last bit and make sure we picked it up so we could do this film justice."

Coach Gelwix didn't want to burn

the actors out by training them exactly like his own team, but at their request he did just that. For that week they trained just like the players of Highland Rugby would during the season.

"When asked if I was too hard on them each actor chimed in 'No we want the real experience. Anything you would do with the team, we want.' So I gave them the same fitness training as the team," said Gelwix.

Not only did the real Coach Gelwix train the cast for the film, a number of current players and Highland Rugby alumni participated in the training as well, including Hiloti Ngata now a defensive tackle for the Baltimore Ravens.

"The Highland players were very welcoming. They took us under their wing and really showed us what Highland Rugby is all about. It was very important to them that we represented them well and in turn we as the actors developed a strong bond with them and wanted to show what these guys really go through," said Faris.

THE HIGHLAND RUGBY WAY

Highland Rugby has a number of key mottos that the team lives by, the main one being "Kia Kaha" a Maori phrase which means "Forever Strong". Other mottos include "It doesn't matter who scores, it only matters that we score", "Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent", as well as "No regrets".

As a part of the rugby boot camp the actors lived the same code of conduct as the Highland team members. The Highland Rugby mottos became a part of the whole filming process with everyone involved from the actors to the film crew reiterating them.

Throughout his years of coaching, Coach



Gelwix has created a unique leadership style where he treats everyone as an equal, but with different roles to play.

"My responsibilities as head coach are very different than that of the captains or the ninth grade players, but we all are important to the success of the team. The team has a lot of discipline because we hold both players and coaches accountable. The expectation is that players are on time to practice and ready to play, same with the coaches. If you play for Highland Rugby you abide by our rules. In horizontal leadership we praise in public and correct in private. These principles of leadership work," said Gelwix.

It is this leadership style that has brought them success and the impressive record of only 9 losses in 33 years. It is this same style of leadership and love of the game and his players that helped transform a cast of Hollywood actors into champion rugby players in just over a week.

"Larry is an incredible human being. I've never in my life met somebody who cares so much about his players and about us, his 'rookies'. He really shows you a different perspective on life and makes you want to be a better person," said Faris. "Once you're in Highland Rugby, you're in Highland Rugby for life. Even us actors, we are a part of Highland Rugby."

Forever Strong captures on film, the heart and soul of the Highland Rugby Club. *Forever Strong* produced by Go Films and Picturerock Entertainment, distributed by Crane Movie Co. will be released in theaters this September. Catch the rugby spirit and watch the trailer online at www.rugbymovie.com.

