

The Gamecock forward pack simulates a scrum down against a tank at Ft. Jackson.



ANNUAL REPORT

2024-25

CAROLINA RUGBY FOUNDATION

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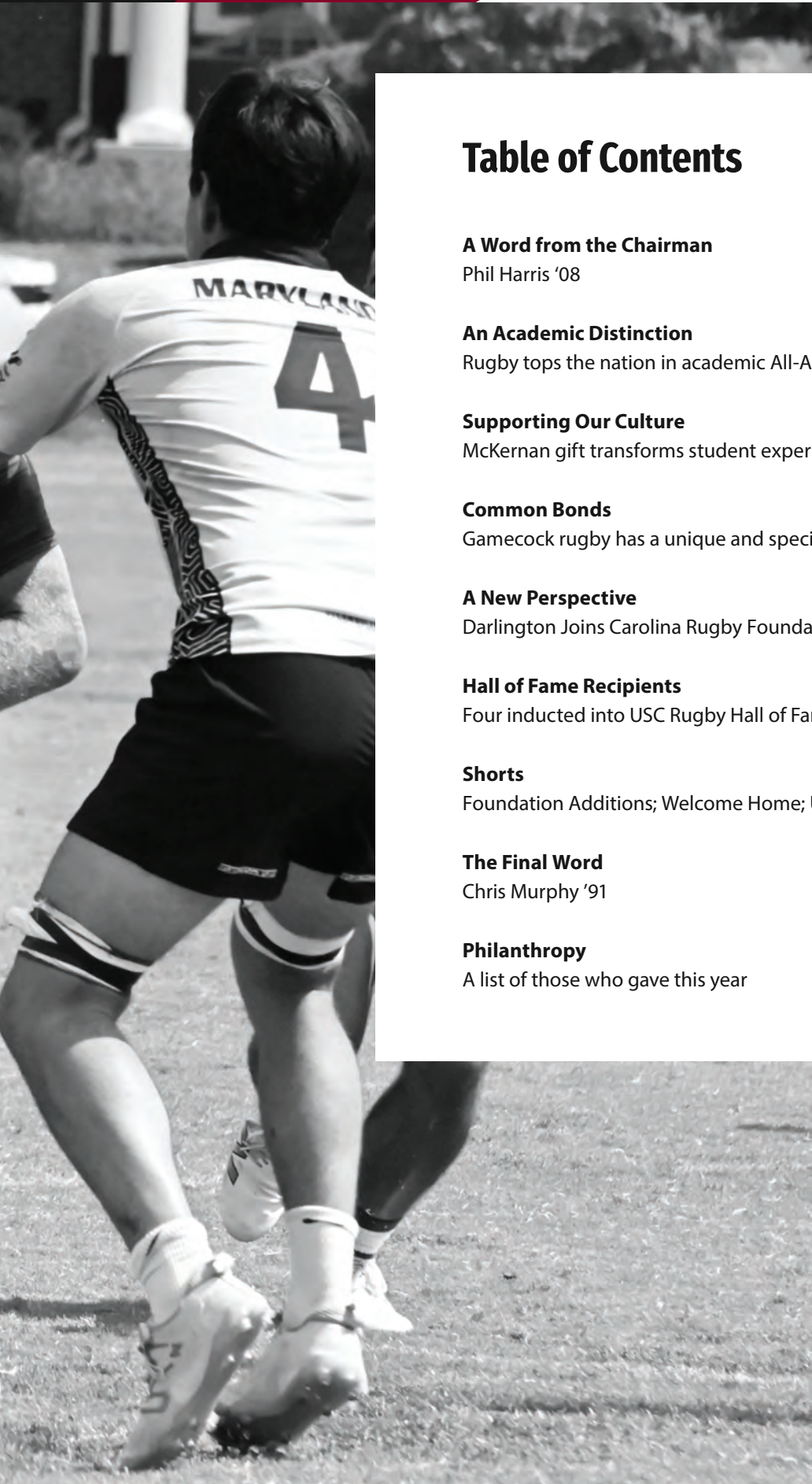


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Left: Senior Jack Edwards fights for space against University of Maryland.

On the Cover: The Gamecock forward pack simulates a scrum down against a tank at Ft. Jackson.

A Word from the Chairman



Just win baby!"

The phrase, first proclaimed in 1969 by Raiders coach and general manager Al Davis, is iconic and oft quoted.

To be sure, South Carolina has racked up many wins over the

last four years. The team has collected three Southeastern Collegiate Rugby Conference (SCRC) Championships, more than any other program during this time period.

Winning consistently, particularly when you're playing top competition and close games, is a tough road. Players get hurt. Sometimes you miss kicks. Or the bounce does not go your way. Those are things you cannot control.

Through the ups and downs, though, programs can shape their culture and student experiences. USC rugby has long enjoyed a unique camaraderie that has connected our alumni. Over the past four years, our culture and student experiences have been completely transformed into something that should amaze our alumni. Our player experiences and culture may be tops among all D1-AA programs.

Three years ago, we introduced a pre-season rugby camp. It's six days of two-a-day trainings that condition our boys for the season and classroom sessions to introduce them to our club history and culture. Ask any current team member to name the founder and the year the club started. They know. The camp also includes an extraordinary one-day confidence-building event at Ft. Jackson.

Thanks to generous gifts from Bill and Cindy McKernan, our team travels to away games in charter buses, enjoys program-funded meals on the road and four on-campus team dinners with guest speakers. Another parent, Tianna Mandukich – an accounts director at a global travel firm – books our away game hotels, ensuring that our boys enjoy top flight accommodations.

We've dramatically increased our Smolka rugby scholarships from six in 2022 to 42 this year, making college more affordable for our rugby families.

Our foundation rebranded our alumni weekend, which used to attract about 20 alumni, into our With You Weekend, an event that now attracts more than 200 parents, players and alumni. We launched a Hall of Fame event that has been equally successful.

These experiences cultivate a culture that connects our players. They support one another beyond the field and in the classroom. This past year this culture manifested itself in two ways.

Last spring when player Erik Elken was diagnosed with cancer, the team bonded together to support him. They raised more than \$3,000 in a one-day "head-shaving event" that attracted nation-wide media coverage. And they prayed for him at each training session. Donations from parents and some alumni poured into a fund to support his care.

And this summer, 23 players were named NCR Academic All-Americans, tops among all D1-AA programs in the nation. More than half of the current squad have a GPA higher than 3.5.

In this issue, you will read stories about some of these accomplishments and events that are unique to us. They paint a picture of a program that is more than a rugby team. It's a caring, supportive community. We hope these stories inspire your philanthropy and participation.

Spurs Up!

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Phil Harris".

Phil Harris '08
Chairman

An Academic Distinction

RUGBY TOPS THE NATION IN ACADEMIC ALL-AMERICANS

What do Dartmouth, Brown, Georgetown and the University of South Carolina have in common?

Not much you might think.

Dartmouth and Brown are Northeast Ivy League universities. Georgetown is also an elite institution. USC is a big southern school. And it's in the South.

So, when National Collegiate Rugby (NCR) released a list of their Academic All-American players, South Carolina raised some eyebrows with 23 members. That's more than any other Division I-AA team and second only to Georgetown (27) Brown (29) and more than Dartmouth (22).

South Carolina Coach John Roberts was not surprised. "When I arrived four years ago, I was quickly impressed by the emphasis of academics on the team," he said. "But it wasn't talked about much. Since that time, we have worked to celebrate our classroom successes and promote them as distinctive."

To qualify as academic all-americans athletes must maintain a 3.5 GPA or higher for the academic year and be rostered for at least 50 percent of A-side matches during either the Fall 15s or Spring 7s seasons.

Coach Roy Hulse, who tracks player's grades, says more than half of USC's roster has a GPA of 3.5 or above.

"If NCR had allowed us to include our B-side guys on the list, we would have 35 or more on the list," he said. "We have a very smart team."

In all, (NCR) named 1,284 student-athletes as 2024–25 Scholastic All Americans, a 21% increase from last year's total of 1,060 recipients. This year's honorees include 564 women and 719 men representing 220 teams across 177 colleges and universities.

While the ranking gives alumni a cause to celebrate, the news really reverberates with parents and university administrators.

"For sure the school wants us to do well on the field," said Roberts. "But they take more notice when they see our boys doing well in the classroom, graduating in four years and overall having an exceptional experience."

Below: Senior Nick DuBois was one of 23 Gamecocks named Academic All-American.



Supporting Our Culture

MCKERNAN GIFT TRANSFORMS STUDENT EXPERIENCES

When Cindy McKernan packed up her eldest son, Will, to attend college and play rugby at the University of South Carolina nearly four years ago, she was nervous.

Will, a graduate of St. Joseph's Preparatory School in Philadelphia, thrived in high school. Will had been nurtured by a close brotherhood of players and shaped by caring coaches.

For sure, the team was competitive. But the rugby village at "The Prep" was truly rare and remarkable. Parents, administrators and coaches had developed a culture that stressed player development, emphasizing accountability, academics and resilience.

Now as Will prepared to enroll at the University of South Carolina, a big southern school, Cindy doubted that he would walk into the same culture.

"With him heading so far away, my protective instinct kicked in—I just wanted to put him in bubble wrap," she said.

A few days into preseason rugby camp (in the sticky oppressive heat of Columbia) an elated Will called home. His roommate, Erik Elken, had become a good friend. And several upperclassmen – Grant Howard, Peter Blackburn, Quinn Lafferty and Tom Allison – had taken him under their wing. The practices were hard but fun.

"There was this instant caring among the team," she said. "They looked out for the freshmen. Transitioning into college can be hard and life changing. But thanks to rugby, Will settled in and felt like he was part of something. He was happy."

Later that Fall, Cindy and her husband Bill attended the Carolina Rugby Foundation's inaugural With You

Weekend. They met the coaches, players, alumni and developed a fondness for the program and the first-year coach who was working to shape the team culture and inspire philanthropy from parents and alumni.

"What impressed us most was the sense of belonging. Every player, no matter their role, wanted to be part of this team and community. That really won us over."

Bill and Cindy's own story began in Philadelphia, where they met in high school—he at The Prep, she at the Academy of Notre Dame. Both went on to Villanova University, later marrying and raising four children: Danielle, Will, Charlie, and Ella.

Their children followed family tradition, with the girls attending Notre Dame and the boys attending The Prep. The McKernans have long been committed to giving back. Over the years, they've served on boards, supported athletics, and directed their philanthropy toward institutions that shaped their family.



**We love this program
because of what it
has meant to Will
and how it is shaping
players' lives...**



Bill, now president of Ignyte Insurance, and Cindy continue to champion the values of faith, education, and community that defined their own upbringing.

As Will was completing his freshman year, the McKernans learned that the sole funding for club travel and accommodations (the largest single budget item) was player dues. The team rented 15 passenger vans, stayed in budget hotels and often scrambled to assemble eligible drivers for away contests.

“The coaches and senior players were behind the wheel, and the team didn’t have meals provided on the road,” Cindy said. “We wanted to step in so players and coaches could focus on rugby, not logistics.”

During the summer of 2023, the McKernans contacted Rebecca Lancaster, Senior Director of Development at USC, and launched the Rugby Student Experiences Fund. The effort provides funds for charter bus travel, meals on the road and four on-campus team dinners each year.

Their philanthropy dramatically improved player experiences and gave coaches and parents piece of mind.

“During my first year, we spent more mental energy and worry on away travel than game-planning the opponent,” said Coach John Roberts. “We often had to rent four or five vans, and we were worried about accidents and players arriving at the same time.”

Moreover, the dinners allowed members of the team to connect with rugby alumni and learn more about the club’s history. Last year, former coaches Geoff Mason, Mark Morris and Howard Hunt served as guest speakers.

“Our players and coaches now have unmatched experiences

that were unimaginable four years ago,” said Roberts. “Our players, rugby families and alumni are eternally grateful to the McKernans.”

For the McKernans, their support is about more than logistics—it’s about gratitude.

“We love this program because of what it has meant to Will and how it is shaping players’ lives,” Cindy said. “Just as we continue to support The Prep and Notre Dame, we’ll stay involved with USC rugby long after Will graduates.”



Above: Cindy, Will and Bill McKernan at the University of Maryland game September 6.

Common Bonds

GAMECOCK RUGBY HAS A UNIQUE AND SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH FT. JACKSON

Rugby and the military share many traits.

Both are gritty occupations. They are hard, dirty and not for the weak kneed. The guys who wear a rugby jersey and camouflage are uncommonly patriotic. They love the flag and revel in combat activities.

There's a 16th century adage: "Birds of a feather flock together."



That's why many soldiers love rugby. And most rugby players have uncommon respect for those who serve. Both are unique brotherhoods.

At USC, the bond between the military and rugby is particularly sturdy.

It begins each August. At the end of rugby camp players and coaches visit nearby Fort Jackson for an event affectionately known as Sergeant's Saturday. Under the guidance and vocal prodding of drill sergeants, the players climb obstacles, repel and are put through exercises that require teamwork and communication.

The highlight of the day: a fit-to-win obstacle course race. Crawling under nets and over barricades. Treks through the red-dirt mud. Exhausted legs. Spent lungs. And, at the end of the day, huge smiles. Common suffering breeds uncommon brotherhood.

The origins of the trip began more than 10 years ago through a chance connection.

Former coach Geoff Mason, an Australian, was serving as chief of staff for the South Carolina Department of Mental Health. One day he found himself in the same room with Kevin Shwedo, executive director of the South Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles. A retired colonel, Shwedo was also a rugby player and the former garrison commander of Ft. Jackson.

Shwedo heard Mason's accent and sized up the robust Australian as a possible rugger. He introduced himself and launched a friendship that continues today.

Fast-forward several years later. Micah Stewart, captain of the 2016 squad, saw a story about the Gamecock Football team taking part in Sergeant's Day. It piqued his interest, and he contacted Coach Jeff Smolka who had befriended Shwedo through Mason.

Smolka called Shwedo. That first year took a lot of planning. But they made it work in 2017 and each year afterwards, except during COVID.

“Our day at Ft. Jackson is a terrific way to connect with the base, and it builds connections in the team that are deeper than the rugby pitch,” said sophomore Charlie Dwyer. “The comradery and brotherhood on display this day is something I am so grateful for. It is a rare and special experience.”

This year, the sergeants and officers were honored when team leadership revealed camouflaged kits that the team would wear during USC’s military appreciation game on

Friday, September 12. They invited the team to a military appreciation event and a photo shoot at the base.

The connection between soldiers at Fort Jackson and USC extends beyond the one-day event. Peppered among the fans at home rugby games, you’ll almost always see a few uniforms. And many other service men attend in civilian clothes.

“I don’t know of any other rugby program that does something like this,” said Smolka who has been coordinating the event for years. “The Ft. Jackson-USC rugby relationship is one of mutual admiration and shared values.”

A New Perspective

DARLINGTON JOINS CAROLINA RUGBY FOUNDATION AS PARENT LIAISON

Tom Darlington, recently appointed Parent Liaison to the Carolina Rugby Foundation, brings a wealth of experience and a fresh perspective to this new position.

A Penn State alumnus, Darlington has been involved in rugby since his high school days. He is the father of sophomore Tommy Darlington and previously served on the board of directors for Conestoga Rugby, the oldest high school rugby club in the U.S., founded in 1971. At Conestoga, he managed finances, helped launch the team store, assisted with gameday operations, and played a key role in Senior Day activities. Darlington was also instrumental in community outreach, attracting sponsors and spearheading a fundraising initiative that supported a team tour to Wales.

This summer, seeking greater parent input on fundraising and events, the Foundation invited USC rugby parents to nominate a representative for board calls and



events. Darlington, an account manager at Amazon, quickly rose to the top of the list.

Now chairing the new Member Parent Council—meeting regularly throughout the year—Darlington works alongside Cynthia Howard, co chair and parent of freshman Brady and graduate Grant (former president and captain). Together, they re launching initiatives to enhance the game day experience and boost fundraising during With You Weekend.

Originally from Devon, Pennsylvania, Darlington was a three sport athlete before moving to Chicago post college, where he worked in sales and marketing for IBM. There he met his wife Cathy, a Loyola graduate, teacher and Artist. In 2012, they returned to the Philadelphia suburbs, settling in Devon. They have two children: Tommy and Brooklyn, a ninth grader.

“I have always loved rugby. It is such a great community, said Darlington. “I am very proud to deepen my involvement with USC rugby because I believe in the culture, the coaches, and the entire organization. It means so much to my son and our family, and this is my way of giving back.

Hall of Fame Recipients

FOUR INDUCTED INTO USC RUGBY HALL OF FAME

More than 160 USC Rugby alumni, players, parents and friends attended the USC Rugby Club's 2nd annual Hall of Fame and Team awards banquet April 19 in the Capstone room.

Hosted by the Carolina Rugby Foundation, alumni Rick LeBel, Dr. Frank Walton, Warren Muir and Jeff Smolka were inducted into the second hall of fame class. They join club founder (the late) Sandy Frazier, (the late) Jim Wynn and Matt Godek, who were inducted into the inaugural class in 2024.

LeBel, graduated in 1975 and played wing forward on some of the dominant teams of the early 70s. He participated in the first two USA National Collegiate Rugby Championship Tournaments held in Lexington, Virginia (1972) and Davenport, Iowa (1973). LeBel is a founding member of the Carolina Rugby Foundation, organized USC's early alumni games and has been a steady communication link between the team and rugby alumni from the 1970s and early 80s.

A member of the John Carroll University Football Hall of Fame, Dr. Frank Walton booted up nearly 100 time for the Gamecocks during the 1970s and was referred to the "Big Gun" by the student newspaper, The Gamecock.

In 1974, Dr. Walton was responsible for 59 of the 125 points the team scored. Sadly, Dr. Walton passed away October 8 after suffering complications from a stroke.

An All-American fullback for the USC football team, Warren Muir was, perhaps, the most dominant player to wear the garnet jersey. After USC, he continued to play rugby for men's teams in Columbia and Greenville. His football celebrity brought more attention to the growing sport in South Carolina. In 2024, the Carolina Rugby Foundation awarded him with a lifetime achievement award.

No one has given more of their time and treasure to USC rugby than Jeff Smolka. He played for the Gamecocks from 1984 to 1988 and captained the team in 1987 and 1988. Smolka has remained connected to USC's program for five decades where he has served as an assistant and head coach. He founded the original Carolina Men's Rugby Endowment in 2014. The next year, he launched the Gamecock Rugby Scholarship program which now supports 42 players.

For complete bios, see the Hall of Fame page on the club's website at uscragby.net.



Rick LeBel



Dr. Frank Walton



Warren Muir



Jeff Smolka

Foundations Additions

The Carolina Rugby Foundation added two new members this fall.

Katie Lewis is a 2025 Sport and Entertainment Management Graduate from USC, is serving as Events Chair. She spent three years at Carolina as the rugby intern where she excelled in events management.

After graduating, Lewis moved back to her hometown of Annapolis and works as the Golf Shop Coordinator at TPC Potomac in. She is also the Vice President of the Board of Managers for GiGi's Playhouse Annapolis and the National Youth Board Advisor for the organization, which provides free services to individuals with Down syndrome.

Shelby Rosen, a sophomore at USC, is serving as the Foundation's rugby intern. A sports management major, she is a member of the Chi Omega sorority

and serves on the philanthropy team. Rosen is also on the fundraising staff for Dance Marathon, a student led organization benefiting children's hospitals.

After graduation, she hopes to work with non-profits or foundations linked to professional sports. She is from Bedminster, New Jersey.



Katie Lewis



Shelby Rosen

Welcome Home

The Gamecocks welcomed 12 first-year players (8 freshman and three graduate students) to the squad this fall. (From left to right) Brett Sparks, Brady Howard, Anthony Blachman, Ryan Feilke, Mason Flax, Owen Emch, Louis Leveque, Tom Regan, Aidan Hendry, Michael Yost, Carter Mason and Alex Early (not pictured).



Update on Big E

As many of you know, Erik Elken, a senior on the team, was diagnosed with a rare form of Sarcoma less than a year ago.

He left school in the Spring and returned to Pennsylvania to undergo treatment. At this writing, he had undergone a successful surgery and is battling the disease with grit and a positive attitude.

His condition continues to evolve. We encourage prayers for Erik and his family. And we invite you to follow his progress through CaringBridge.org.



The Final Word

OUR STRENGTH IN NUMBERS



I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to everyone who has contributed to our club over the years. Your dedication has not gone unnoticed, and we deeply appreciate the key role each of you have played in building the foundation of our success.

Founded 58 years ago, our club proudly has thousands of alumni and friends. With minimal financial support from the university, our continued progress relies entirely on your generosity and commitment.

Nearly five years ago, we made a pivotal decision to change the trajectory of the program by hiring Coach Roberts—our first full-time, university-employed coach. Since then, we have made significant strides with enhanced communications, elevated events, and the establishment of our Hall of Fame. These achievements were made possible by prioritizing fundraising through the Foundation's efforts.

Historically, only about a dozen alumni made contributions to support our mission. Today, over 150 of you are investing in our future. That's meaningful progress—but we still have room to grow.

Our strength truly lies in our numbers. Increasing engagement and participation across our entire community is critical to sustaining and accelerating our success. Even modest gifts collectively make a tremendous difference.

Your Opportunity to Support

Alumni:

The impact USC Rugby has had on countless alumni is immeasurable. By contributing today, you help preserve and strengthen the legacy built by the previous generations. This is an opportunity to give back to a program that gave so much to you. Your gift is more than a donation, it's a way to invest in future generations. Giving keeps you connected to your roots and gives you the satisfaction of knowing you helped uphold a proud tradition.

Parents:

You have the unique opportunity to enrich your son's experience at USC. Your support enhances your son's collegiate journey in real, tangible ways. Please consider supporting the program at whatever level you can. Every gift is fully committed to enhancing the program with coaching, travel, and equipment. The Foundation is fully volunteer-led, and 100% of your contribution directly supports program enhancements.

Our Call to Action

Together, we have the power to create an exceptional experience for today's team—and ensure that this tradition endures for years to come. Let us unite our collective strengths and invest in the future of the club. We all share the responsibility to leave the program in better shape than when we joined it. Thank you for continuing to make that possible.

Chris Murphy '91
Sergeant at Arms



Thank you, thank you!

The Carolina Rugby Foundation is the fundraising and governance body supporting the SC Men's Rugby Football Club. Donations and contributions to the "With You" campaign are applied to the Carolina Men's Rugby Endowment Fund (a32829) through the University of South Carolina Office of Gift Processing and are tax deductible to the extent as allowed by law. These gifts reflect giving during FY 24-25.

If you see an error or have any questions, contact Coach Roberts at jsr7@mailbox.sc.edu.

Platinum

Annual Gift of \$10,000 or more

Bill and Cindy McKernan (parent)

Chris and Christine Murphy

Jeff and Margaret Smolka

Janet Smolka

Gold

\$4,800 to \$9,999

Linda Reing

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Bill and Angela Rhoden

Zach Roberts

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Sean Lafferty (parent)
Stephen McPhail (parent)
Paul Morrow (parent)
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Douglas Smith (parent)
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Stephen Walsh (parent)
William Wynn

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Thomas C. Brady
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Alexander M. Feltman
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