Kia Kaha (Forever Strong):
A Rugby Club Strengthened Through Hardship

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Kia kaha; a phrase in Maori, the language of the original inhabitants of New Zealand, means *stay strong*. It had been used by the Royals after the 2019 Christchurch shootings, the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, and is used as words of affirmation by New Zealanders. Ben Anderson, a former Highland Rugby player, wrote it in an article for Bleacher Report on the former team. While many sayings have been used in rugby, none would seem more appropriate for the 2019-20 White Plains rugby team than Kia kaha, for this season would have a defining impact on the club for years to come.

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On a windy day at Iona College on the ninth of November 2019, White Plains Rugby players were warming up for the match on a field. The grass was glistening with the frost from the bitter wintry temperature. The cold bit into the players. Some players made sure to wear padded shirts under their jerseys to help with the near-concrete feel of the turf.

The field was a repurposed soccer field. It's very rare to find a sports field that caters strictly to rugby in North America. A sizable crowd had shown up, with the majority from White Plains, ready to cheer on their local club, nicknamed the War Pigs.

For many of these men, this was the biggest match of their lives. The Empire GU Championship would be played between Buffalo Rugby and the War Pigs, with the victor moving onto the playoffs during the spring season. Buffalo was a stalwart opponent, the only team to defeat White Plains Rugby Football Club during the regular season. White Plains hadn't won the championship in the past 10 years and with that long history of shortcomings came a desire to right the wrongs. The tension could be felt on the pitch, with the players nearly high with anticipation to get the game started.

White Plains head coach Andrew Britt said of the game plan heading into the match, "The game plan was to build everything around defense and physicality. We knew that Buffalo would be tough in the forwards, so we had to nullify that early on. Once we had worn them down physically, I knew that we could put points on them."

With the temperature dropping into the 20s, any team would've caved to the cold, but the War Pigs had proven resilient throughout their dominant fall season, finishing with a record of 8-1. Captain Mike Stivale gathered his players into the huddle and hyped them up with his typical chant, "White Plains on three! One, two, three, White Plains!" As Britt had said, WPRFC went with a game plan centered on strong defensive play and ball control. They did not wish to let Buffalo gain any sense of momentum, by trying to wear their skill players down.

Players such as David Greiner, George Reis and Austin Fehringer put big hits on the Buffalo players. Fehringer, known as a hard-nose runner, was seen bashing Buffalo players all match. A chameleon in ways, Fehringer was all smiles before the match began, laughing and having fun, but as soon as the whistle was blown, his face was as if it was made of marble. He was a stone-cold executioner of tackles and callouts. Fehringer grabbed a hold of a Buffalo player with the ball and proceeded to lay him into the ground with enough force that it seemed as though the air was kicked out of him. Even though Fehringer only played for five minutes, he made his presence felt early on and helped in setting a tone for the rest of the match.

By the end of the first half, it was 15-0 in favor of White Plains, with Giorgi "Gaga" Maisuradze, a 27-year-old flanker from the Eurasian country of Georgia, who arrived in America in 2015, helping dominate Buffalo. He scored two tries early in the match, the rough equivalent of touchdowns in football, worth five points each. If the team successfully kicks the ball through the uprights after, that's another two points. With a large crowd of supporters gathered to cheer

on a historic day for White Plains Rugby, the second half started perfectly for the War Pigs. Early on, Maisuradze scored his third try of the game; a successful kick made the score 22-0.

Throughout the match, players like Stivale were dishing out big hits on the Buffalo players. Several times, Stivale efficiently wrapped his arms around the opposing ballcarrier's legs and pummeled him into the frozen turf. The White Plains players had a game plan of efficiency in mind, and it showed. No matter what Buffalo tried to do, the War Pigs made excellent use of their ball-handling skills, thoughtfully controlling the clock with every successful lateral or backward pass, with one goal in mind; keep the ball out of Buffalo's control.

No matter how many hits their players took, White Plains rarely gave up control in the match, showcasing their mental fortitude and superior communication. Maisuradze was Man of the Match for a reason, not only for his multiple scores, but for the massive hits he gave to Buffalo throughout the match. Multiple times, he would ram his bulky frame into Buffalo players, effectively giving them shell-shock every time they touched the ball.

"We knew how to beat them since the first game we lost against them," Maisuradze said. "I came out really prepared and motivated, and I was always trying to stay wide so I could attack their backs, and I think that's how I scored those three tries."

With their lead firmly in place, the War Pigs elected to play for the clock and use up as much time as possible. Their aggressive style had left Buffalo's starters winded far too quickly into the match and forced them to substitute players earlier than they wanted.

On the style of play they adopted, wing Camilo Ortiz said, "To put it in simple words, everyone had one job, and everyone understood that and got it done. For a team to stay composed and not fall apart until the end is very impressive."

Ortiz, hailing from Medellín, Colombia, praised his teammates, as he noticed they made little to no mistakes the entire match and made all the necessary tackles and passes expected from a seasoned club. Being on the side of the field gave Britt a great view of the lines, enabling him to take advantage of Buffalo's numerous mistakes, allowing him to make coaching adjustments through callouts to get WPRFC downfield with little effort. A callout is when a player notices a hole in the opposing team's line and makes it known to his teammates. The callout could be for plays the team will execute next, what style of defense to switch to, etc.

With the game slipping away from Buffalo, they grew desperate and made the mistake of committing several penalties throughout the match. They even drew two yellow cards for a high tackle, as well as a late hit on Tom Strachan, the scrumhalf.

Late in the match, Angus Duckett, one of the War Pigs flown over from New Zealand to briefly play for the team, scored a third try to put the match out of reach for Buffalo. Although Buffalo did go on to manage to score 15 points, it was far too late to come back into the game. With Buffalo exhausted, a massive gap in their line was prime for the taking. Duckett saw this and exploited the obvious weakness, taking off with the speed of a cheetah. With each stride, it seemed as though Duckett was running away with Buffalo's hopes and dreams.

Tom Strachan, the scrum half and a 19-year-old New Zealander who returned home not long after the match, said on his experience with WPRFC: "I was pretty stoked to get the job done and win the title and end the club's title drought of 10 or so years. Was a very cool experience playing with this group of lads. Every one of them welcomed us kiwi boys with open arms, which made things much easier settling in. We were all lucky enough to meet some life-long mates over here and we're hoping to be back in the spring to finish the job off."

Club member and former player Tony Joyce gave a comment on the season saying, “It’s an exciting time for our club. Things really came together. We had a great coaching staff and support from the old boys. All the players were committed and willing to put the work in every week and didn’t stop till the job was done. We just got to carry it over and get ready for the national playoff series this spring.”

After the match, Britt, the head coach, gave a speech to the players and supporters. “We said defense would win this game. We took it to them, and we just kept going and going and going. And look around you, this is the White Plains family. This is what it means to be from here. To be a part of this club. You’ll remember this for the rest of your lives. And one more thing: Let’s enjoy those beers tonight!”

Unfortunately, despite the great victory, what none of the players and White Plains Rugby Football Club community realized, was the harrowing truth that this was to be the last time they would be gathered together for an unknown amount of time. Little did they know that the Spring Playoffs would be cancelled and that the surrounding world of rugby, both globally and locally, would be changed forever. The COVID-19 pandemic had started to encroach on rugby and the world and would lead to the exodus of the White Plains rugby community, perhaps permanently.

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CHAPTER 1: A Rough Existence

Rugby is a sport born out of blood and sweat, a sport that cannot be won through one amazing player, but by teamwork and chemistry. Winston Churchill once famously said, “Rugby is a hooligans game played by gentlemen.” Although rugby is a sport more than a century older than American football, it has fallen far behind in popularity in the United States.

Clubs fill their rosters with players aged 18 and older and who have to balance a normal career with rugby on the side—although the players would have you know that it's the other way around. Teams like White Plains are committed to strengthening the popularity of the sport in the U.S. and is full of men from all over the world who love the sport. Committed players, such as Stivale, an accountant who also happens to be the captain of the team, or Brock Duncan, a high school football coach, sacrifice their professional lives and personal safety to continue to be members of the club and help it in its never-ending quest for growth. Even Andrew Britt, a New Zealand native who coaches the club full-time, must work a separate job to support his family.

At this stage, America's rugby pay is trying to keep pace with Major League Soccer, where players and coaches can support themselves with their sport alone. For example, the average salary of a Major League Rugby employee is $58,425. According to mlsplayers.org, the lowest player salary was $56,244.60 for Noble Okello of Toronto FC, with the highest being $7.2 million for Zlatan Ibrahimović of LA Galaxy. This also doesn't account for the fact that players for minor clubs such as WPRFC aren't paid at all. They play for their love for the game and to help the game grow. All of these men ended up being involved with this club through various circumstances and have committed their bodies and minds to this sport for personal reasons.

Nevertheless, rugby in America is improving its status. It is divided into multiple leagues under USA Rugby, with the White Plains team being part of the Empire Rugby Football Union Geographical Union (Empire GU), which manages more than 100 men's and women's clubs in New York state, Northern New Jersey and Fairfield County, Connecticut. This GU, or Geographical Union, is one of four that has been created by USA Rugby to help simplify the

American rugby atmosphere. Starting in 2012, it took over three separate rugby conferences, the Northeast, The New York State Rugby Conference and the Metropolitan New York RFU.

White Plains Rugby is just one of many clubs located within this GU but has been around for much longer. According to its website, the club was founded in 1972 by former IBM employees and has enjoyed consistent success over its lifespan. It has qualified for the national club playoffs 18 times, and it was the Eastern Rugby Union champions in 1988. The WPRFC also fields both a D2 and D3 rugby union side, with another rugby-sevens side that participates during the summer 7s season.

(Most Americans don't know that rugby includes not just one, but three main versions of play. For example, rugby union is played with 15 players per side, has two 40-minute halves, and is the most prominent form of rugby across the world. It is generally slower, which makes it difficult to hold the attention of the average American. On the opposite side of the spectrum is rugby sevens, more commonly known as Sevens. This is a variant of rugby union that features seven players per side and has seven-minute halves.)

CHAPTER 2: Humble Beginnings

Since its founding in 1972, WPRFC has made the national club playoffs 18 times since its inception, winning a number of different titles to go along with that achievement. The team was Eastern Rugby Union champions in 1988; Hong Kong 10's finalists in 1993; National 7's finalists in 1996 and 1997; and Cam Am North America champions in 1989, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2006 and 2007. (Can Am is a rugby tournament based in the Adirondacks region.)

Besides a long history of sustained success, the team has also embarked on several international tours. They played in England/Scotland in 1984, Ireland in 1987, Zimbabwe in 1990, Hong Kong in 1993 and a Europe/England tour in 1996.

The team has remained committed to their primary goal, which according to their website is, "…to promote the growth and development of the game of rugby football, to develop youth rugby and support local high school and college rugby programs[;] high-level competition is not all that this club is about."

With the addition of both a youth rugby team that current player David Greiner helps coach, WPRFC has shown a vested interest in getting youth started in rugby from a younger age to help make sure the game of rugby becomes a standard in the U.S. in the years to come. From Sept. 22 to Nov. 10, 2019, WPRFC operated a youth rugby clinic, with Greiner running it with Anna Mackay. Current and former WPRFC players assisted with the event to help teach kids and their parents the main aspects of rugby. Coupled with a women's team that often practices on the same field as the men, WPRFC had been at the forefront of extending rugby forward in 2020 across the region.

With its history of success and commitment to youth and women's teams, the club also runs a charity for a former player, Matthew "Jojo" Moore. Moore is a former WPRFC player who suffered a severe spinal injury during an Old Boys Rugby match in 1991 and is a quadriplegic. After this tragic event that saw some members of the club retire, WPRFC created the "JoJo" Moore Fundraiser and Golf Outing. The aim for this annual event is to raise money to help provide for Moore and his family, as well as bring players and the community together.

"It's very important we show their support by attending the event," said Tony Joyce, a former player who helps run the club. In 2019, the club held the event at Putnam County Golf Course in Mahopac, New York. Current player Steve Arango said, "It's a great way to get to know the Old Boys and support one of our brothers."

Erick Nicklas, the current Team President, is passionate about the JoJo Fundraiser. “That day changed his life forever and it also changed the club forever,” Nicklas said. “When we say we take care of our own, we live it every day. JoJo is a great man and a great club member. This is an important event for all involved with the club.”

After a dominant 8-1 fall season, the club achieved its initial goal, as well as capping it off with two playoff victories, with a dominant 29-15 performance over Buffalo, in late November.

With the victory, WPRFC was riding high. “White Plains has a long history of success,” said George Reis, a personal trainer and star player. “Since we began, we’ve established ourselves as one of the best teams in the nation and this spring we take the next step in restoring that success and meeting fans’ expectations.”

Then the novel coronavirus changed everything.

CHAPTER 3: ‘This Complicated Time’

Unfortunately, despite a strong start to the season and aspirations for a national championship victory, the season came to an untimely end due to the COVID-19 crisis. As the club was working out during the winter months, players weren’t optimistic about the season taking place.

USA Rugby issued a memo to every club under their leadership on March 16, 2020, to clarify that all rugby activities were indeed cancelled. The memo stated, “Participating in rugby activities of any variety are prohibited and ultimately irresponsible at this stage. Given the collective and contact nature of the sport, holding competition and/or training is at risk of possible spread of COVID-19. We ask all clubs, administrators and members to respect social responsibility and the instruction of health officials during this complicated time.”

The league had been releasing memos since March 5, on the crisis, with guidelines ever changing. In a league memo published on March 20, USA Rugby declared all rugby activities, including future events possibly beyond 2020, were cancelled. It also mentioned that all liability claims, as well as accident claims, would not be accepted. However, the most damning announcement was the declaration of the filing of Chapter 11 Bankruptcy by USA Rugby. Captain Mike Stivale wrote in an email on the revelation, "Well, they were in a precarious position before March, but now a majority of their funds (our cipp dues) aren't coming in this spring with seasons being cancelled, and that's what pushed them over the edge."

Team President Eric Nicklas said in a phone call on how the club found out about the bankruptcy: "I think there was a message sent out to the local unions and the local unions distributed the message, but it came through the EGU. Honestly, it's really hard to say [how it will affect the club]. I think there will still be club rugby, but there's gonna be more effort for local or regional structures and organizations."

On whether WPRFC had a plan for future competition, if/when USA Rugby goes under, Stivale wrote, "It might be a little disorganized moving forward, but a lot of the unions will be stepping in and running themselves independently. So it will require some coordination for club rugby going forward. But most likely there will be a new governing body that comes of this that focuses solely on club rugby."

Stivale went on to write, "Most likely there will be a new organization that steps in or they'll be reorganized, but it won't be USA Rugby anymore."

Nicklas said that WPRFC was in the process of moving their club to American Rugby Premiership, a new premier rugby league. "It's kind of the old division one." Division One is the highest form of competition for the EGU, with White Plains having a team for Division Two and

Division Three. The original plan pre-pandemic was to move up to Division One. Nicklas explained, "Clubs that went Super League and then when Super League folded, these teams didn't want to [fold] and [they] said let's organize ourselves."

Nicklas said that the league will not have open invitations and will be looking for clubs "…that will help strengthen ARP." In other words, ARP is not going to let any club in that officials do not believe is worthy. Despite the pandemic, it is appearing that ARP will not let COVID dilute the quality of their competition. Quality over quantity seems to be the idea. Nicklas added that he thinks the fact that the league will be filled with the most competitive rugby clubs that are non-professional will make it an attractive destination for other clubs looking for a home.

However, this plan is not set in stone, and it is very possible it doesn't happen at all. All of the clubs involved have a long history of competing against each other and are still in the process of negotiating a possible plan for the future of their teams. This is yet another example of how the unpredictable nature of the global pandemic can alter plans at a moment's notice.

Austin Fehringer, a longtime WPRFC player, expressed in an email his sorrow on the end of the season and possibly for his rugby playing days, writing, "As far as dealing with being away from rugby, I'm upset I'll likely never get another shot at a national championship. It was the first time the club won a championship in over a decade. There's a good chance this is the last action of rugby I'll see at this skill level due to age and life priorities. I've been very preoccupied with the new addition coming to my family with a little girl due in three months."

Brock Duncan, a 27-year-old WPRFC player, physical trainer and assistant high school football coach, tore his ACL and PCL in April 2019 during the previous spring season. It took

Duncan until this spring to attempt a return from his injury, only to see the season be taken away by COVID-19.

Duncan said on his frustrations with the injury while watching the team win against Buffalo, “It was probably tears of joy, you know; I was happy, as a White Plains rugby player, that our team was moving in the right direction. But I was angry because, you know, watching from the sideline and knowing I have nothing to do with the forward progress that our team is making.” On the end of the season due to COVID-19, Duncan said, “I guess from my personal feelings, one, it sucks because I don’t know what it could’ve been for me, but I’m happy because I have more time to heal and come back stronger for the fall season. I think if I tried to rush it, I was only nine months out of surgery and for the average injury for me, it takes 12-14 months for me to heal. It’s unfortunate, but as much as I care about rugby, it’s hard to be selfish when people are losing much more than me. As far as looking at me and some other guys, we’re at that cross age where we’re about to be Austin [Fehringer], so it’s puts things into perspective for me.”

Some players have expressed how they have been dealing with protocols to social distance. Dominick Ricotta wrote in an email, “COVID-19 screwed up not only my spring season, but also my summer rugby league season. It’s very difficult not having rugby right now. I think I’ve gained a couple pounds, but it’s a very sad situation and I would give anything to play right now and can’t wait for the season start up again.”

On his home fitness situation, Ricotta wrote, “I go for a run twice a week and try to do as many home workouts as I can. I’m just trying to stay healthy until this is all over and we can play again.”

Arber Cobaj, a former player, said on trying to stay sane during quarantine: “Meditating. That’s been helping me a ton. Trying to keep the routine. Working out in the apartment feels different, so I try to get outside a little. I applied to foster a dog, so hopefully that happens.”

Diego Carranza, 23, is hopeful the club can return to play sooner rather than later, writing in an email, “I’ve been bummed out because it’s my favorite hobby, but I’m sure it will be back one day. So optimistic is a good word for it.”

Samjo Samson, 19, a newer player from Yonkers, New York, said on the crisis, “Life without rugby right now is definitely more boring. I find that I’ve slacked off with my fitness because I don’t have anything to really work towards. I want to stay optimistic, but it’s hard for me not to be cautious because I believe there will be a second wave in the fall, once it starts to get colder. I feel like we’ll all be ready and raring to go once the season starts back up again.”

On how the club is responding to the COVID-19 crisis and the future of their play, Nicklas said, “It disrupts things, but it doesn’t change our basic direction and plan. So, we just don’t know when we will be able to start things again to move forward. We’re just trying to keep in touch with guys and keep them engaged, which is important because that will help us when we get back and you know, you want to minimize how many guys drift off and lost touch.”

Nicklas said on the club’s future plans, “We’re gonna follow the directions of our governing bodies and the league that we’re part of. We plan to be ready to play and we’ll be looking at what we need to do to be ready to play when we can again. That’s all you can do.”

SOURCE LIST

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