

Meet the Nelson College Rugby Scholarship Alumni



2023 Recipients – Max Doerfler & Oliver Kirk

Max Doerfler applied as a 16-year-old junior and honor student from Saint Thomas Aquinas High School in Overland Park, Kansas, where he had compiled an excellent academic record. Doerfler played football and soccer as well as rugby at St. Thomas. In the summer of 2022 Max played with the Eagle Impact Rugby Academy (EIRA) U16 and U17 teams on their Ireland Tour.



Max told the USRF: “The Nelson College rugby scholarship offered an experience of a lifetime! I learned so much about the sport of rugby and developed myself in multiple aspects of rugby and grew as a man.”

Nick Withers, Nelson College’s Senior Economics teacher had this to say about Max:

“I had the privilege and pleasure of teaching Max Senior Economics. A great class with a diverse group of students. Max came to class with a great attitude to studies and life. He was focused on joining the US Armed Forces, something we seldom see amongst our teenage boys. He quickly had the respect of the class. He was mannerly, punctual, and academically a real asset. He was inclusive of everyone in class. Outstanding to see a young man of such grounded disposition, have focus, friendliness and motivated to learn.”

Max played rugby at St. Thomas his senior year and is currently at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and playing 2nd row on Army’s D1 Rugby Team.

Oliver Kirk applied as a 16-year-old junior from Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, a selective enrollment magnet high school in Chicago. He started playing rugby as a 5-year-old for the Chicago Wapiti Club. In the summer of 2022 Oliver played with the EIRA U16 and U17 teams on their tour of Ireland.

Oliver wrote to the USRF after his 2023 season in Nelson, “Traveling to New Zealand to live, attend school and play rugby at Nelson College has without a doubt been one of the best experiences of my life.”



Max Doerfler and Oliver Kirk were reunited over the 2023-2024 winter break when both were invited to participate in the USA U18 player winter camp out in California. Photo – Max on the right.



Oliver played on the Nelson College 1st XV for two seasons – 2023 & 2024; and, received “Player’s Player of the Year” award from teammates both years for leadership, commitment and character.

Oliver led the Nelson College 1st XV to an undefeated 2024 season, the Miles Toyota and South Island Championships, the #1 ranking among New Zealand High Schools and on to the New Zealand High School National Championship Final.

Upon his return to the U.S. after the just completed 2024 season in Nelson, Oliver wrote to the USRF: “I’m two days into orientation at University of California at Berkeley and have been thinking about the road that led me here. I’m certain that I wouldn’t be here today were it not for the belief and generous support of the U.S. Rugby Foundation.” Upon entering Cal Berkeley and joining the Cal Bears Rugby Team Oliver went out and earned, as a true Freshman, a starting front row position on the Cal Varsity 1st XV.

On May 3rd, 2025, Cal beat Life University 55-38 to win the 2025 U.S. D1A National College Rugby Championship, with Oliver scoring an impressive try. At season’s end, Oliver was named a rugby Collegiate All American. Just turning 19 in February he was also selected for the USA Rugby U23 team on their undefeated tour of South Africa this past summer.

Dan Kirk, Oliver’s dad, told the USRF: “Carolyn [Oliver’s mom] and I cannot thank the Foundation enough for the support. This was an enormous boost to Oliver’s rugby and, more importantly, his life experience. The people he met, the travels he experienced, the self-discipline he developed – all of it has established such a strong base for him to begin his collegiate career. We are deeply grateful.”

2024 Recipients – Connor Bender & JW Sarkees

Connor Bender applied as a 17-year-old junior and an honor student at Saint Ignatius High School in Cleveland and the incoming captain of the school’s rugby team. He was named MVP of the team, which won the Midwest Tournament. A multi-sport athlete (football, lacrosse, baseball, swimming, and basketball), Bender narrowed his high school focus to football and rugby. Bender was invited to play for the EIRA touring side on their Ireland tour the summer of 2023.

Connor wrote to the USRF: “Thank you very much for affording me this opportunity to attend Nelson College and allowing me to grow my rugby career. I truly enjoyed my time there. One of the program's biggest highlights was meeting and becoming friends with so many of the kids there. Another thing that was the coaches and their passion for coaching. They truly want to make sure you are getting better and have your best interests in mind. Another thing that I loved about Nelson College was the kids in the boarding house and all their different personalities. Being at the boarding house felt like you were a part of a big family. I also loved walking around the city of Nelson, even though it is a small town it is fun and easily walkable from the school.”



Nick Withers, Nelson College’s Senior Economics teacher had this to say about Connor:

“As a teacher, sports coach and manager (and father) every now and again you can find yourself in a situation which has an everlasting positive effect on you. Conner Bender was instrumental in leaving me one such impression.

After a hard Rugby Tournament (which Nelson College did well in, and Conner played brilliantly) I found myself driving a long mountain pass back to Nelson. In the dark hours the boys started singing ... Nelson College songs. Conner led the way, with all the guys singing from the top of their lungs. I drove through the night, with these tired boys, just loving the comradery, the sport, the trip. In the days that followed I found myself telling others of the joy and privilege I had in taking Conner and his team mates away.”

Fall of 2024 Conner returned to St. Ignatius High School and completed his senior year as captain the rugby team. Under Connor’s leadership, in the Spring of 2025 St. Ignatius went on to win the 2025 U.S. National High School Rugby Championship.

This Fall 2025 Connor is entering The U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis where he will begin his collegiate rugby career at Navy’s D1 rugby team.

JW Sarkees, who has been playing rugby since the 4th grade, applied as a 17-year-old honor student at D. W. Daniel High School in Central, South Carolina. He is the fly-half and captain of the Greer 76ers Rugby Club and played for the USA Rugby South Panthers team in 2021; the EIRA U16s in 2021; and the EIRA Ireland Tour Team in 2022 and 2023. Sarkees also plays varsity soccer at Daniel HS, helping his team to the State Championship in 2022 and 2023.

Upon his return to the U.S. from Nelson in August 2024 JW wrote to the USRF: “My experience living in New Zealand and attending Nelson College as a recipient of the US Rugby Foundation’s scholarship program has been life changing for me. It has opened more doors than I can count, both in rugby and life, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity. I left New Zealand with friendships and memories that will last a lifetime.



I loved the fast paced rugby that we were playing and see that as one of the biggest differences between U.S. and International rugby. Also, the team was always on the same page, and everybody would do their job. There was accountability and respect and a lot of fun. Hands down, the coaches at Nelson were incredible. Not only were they top quality coaches with the best experience and taught me a bunch of new skills but they also helped me to sharpen my old ones. They were also great role models and great people off the field. Their rugby coaching skills were just one part of who they really were. I also loved the multiple trainings per day. For the first time in my life, I was constantly playing rugby nonstop. And I never grew tired of this.

The teams we played against were off-the-charts good. They were all quality sides coached by super smart coaches. I believe that good competition makes the game even more fun to play. I also enjoyed trading gear with them and seeing the various hakas. The country of New Zealand was also beautiful, there was so much green. The sunsets and sunrises were so pretty, and I got to explore with my family [who visited JW during the 2-week term break in July] all down the South Island which was amazing.

The team and community in Nelson really embraced me, Connor Bender and Oliver Kirk. Various families opened their homes to us to share meals or stay the weekend with them. Everybody was very kindhearted and down to earth. It felt like I was a part of another family. It truly felt like every single boy on the team would do anything it took to help the team and to help each other.”

Joey Sarkees. JW’s mom and a former rugby player, wrote to the USRF: “We spent time with JW and had the opportunity to watch him play and meet his peers, coaches and friends. The community has really embraced all the boys and it’s clear they are loved. JW’s play has improved incredibly based on what we saw. He seems to be embracing every moment even outside of rugby events as well as embracing the culture. It’s been life changing for him.

We also had the opportunity to spend time with both Connor Bender and Oliver Kirk's families as we all met for dinner in Nelson. All in all, we are grateful for this experience and what it has brought to JW and the boys especially as we are now beginning college applications / recruiting. The U.S. Rugby Foundation nailed it with this scholarship program. Thank you all for all you do!"

Martin Sarkees, JW's dad and also a former rugby player, wrote to Jono and the USRF:

"JW's been home for a little over three weeks. I cannot thank all of you for such a wonderful experience. As time builds, the experience will only become sweeter and sweeter for him. Everything we experienced was first class and we always felt the boys' best interest was at heart. Not easy to say in today's world. JW was embraced by not just the players and coaches but the entire community. That kind of communitywide culture of care and affection starts at the top. "Thank you" Jono [Jono Phillips, 1st XV Head Coach] and congrats on a great season."

Fall of 2024 JW returned to D.W. Daniel to complete his senior year and as captain of the Greer 76ers Rugby Club. This Fall of 2025 JW is entering Penn State on a rugby scholarship.

"Tres Amigos" at Nelson College: With Oliver Kirk returning to Nelson College for the 2024 rugby season he was happy to serve as a welcoming party of sorts to Connor Bender and JW Sarkees upon their arrival and during their early days at Nelson. Showing them the ropes and introducing them around. Since then, all three have bonded and formed a strong friendship.

The photo at right shows the boys celebrating with the two trophies Nelson won at Marlborough, NZ earlier in the summer of 2024: Whangamoa Challenge Trophy (between Nelson and Marlborough) and the Trustee Bank Cup (between all the South Island teams). Sarkees, Bender, Kirk (left to right)



2025 Recipients – Jamie Clegg, Chuck Gehl & Kolo Kahanu

Jamie Clegg, a 6' 4" / 215 lb. second row forward for Bozeman's Gallatin Wranglers, applied as a 17-year-old Senior at Gallatin High School in Bozeman, MT. His family having recently moved from Ft. Collins, CO to Bozeman and Clegg had been selected for both the Colorado U-18 All-State and the Montana U-19 All-State Sides. A karate black belt, Clegg narrowed

his high school focus to rugby, student leadership, animal rescue, and youth sports recruitment. Clegg attended the Northampton Saints Stowe 5-day Camp in the UK, the Haka Rugby Global Camp in Denver, the Leinster Camp at Syracuse University, and, this past December, the Eagle Impact Rugby Academy's (EIRA) 5-day winter invitational camp in Arizona.

As Clegg was wrapping up his time down in Nelson he wrote to the Foundation: "With my time in New Zealand almost up, I have been taking a moment to reflect on the experience before I leave. I am incredibly grateful to have been given this wonderful opportunity.

During my time here, I have worked hard and feel I've improved in just about every way possible. Frankly, I'm a whole new rugby player. I've made some incredible connections and experienced some truly remarkable things. Learning how rugby is played here, the expectations, the way things are taught, and how to execute at the next level, has left me feeling significantly more prepared for my leap into college rugby. I am very excited for what the future holds."



Jamie returned to the U.S. this August and will be entering the University of Arizona in Tucson this Fall to begin his freshman year and to embark on his collegiate rugby career as a member of the Arizona Wildcats D1 Rugby Team.

Chuck Gehl, applied as a 16-year-old High School Junior in Missoula, MT, and was a 6'0" / 250 lb. prop for the local High School Rugby team – the Missoula Stampede. Missoula Stampede has been the Montana State Champions – and Gehl has been their starting prop – every year since his freshman year. Gehl has been selected to play on the Montana U-16 and U-19 select sides each year as well. An avid downhill skier, hiker, and mountain biker, Gehl is also Captain, since his sophomore year, of the high school wrestling team and has qualified for the Montana State Varsity Heavyweight wrestling championship. Gehl attended the West Point Rugby Camp, and this past December attended the EIRA's 5-day winter camp in Arizona.



Chuck recently wrote to the Foundation: “I want to say how w grateful I am to be here. It has been an amazing experience. I still can’t believe that it has already been four and a half months. The rugby here is fantastic! The school experience has been great. I love being able to take the daily rugby classes here because back in the States, I could never imagine that happening. I have had an amazing time here and I just want to thank the U.S. Rugby Foundation for sending me. I am not only a better rugby player for being here, but I have also learned so much about the culture and the people that live here in Nelson. Everyone in the boarding house has been so nice, and it has been very cool to meet and make good friends with kids from all over the world.”

Chuck has returned to Missoula for his senior year and is looking forward to a very fun final high school rugby season. His team, the Missoula Stampede, has just won their third state championship in a row and will be going for a four-peat next year. He is planning on playing college rugby with Navy being his number one choice now. He would like to play for Navy while becoming a Marine, then play for the Marines after graduating. Chuck is also considering West Point, Penn State, Arizona, Cal Berkley, and Montana State.

Kolomona Kahanu applied as a 16 year-old Junior from Pahoia, HI and as a Junior at Timpview High School in Provo, UT. Kahanu is listed as a 6’0” / 180 lb. scrum half. Fearless on defense, he is very accomplished and can play anywhere along the back line. Kahanu has played on the Hawaiian State Championship team; on the 1st Place team in the 2023 U-16 States Tournament; was Player of the Match in the 2024 Utah Spider Fest; and was selected for the “Dream Team 7” during the 2024 National 7’s Tournament in Ohio. Fluent in Hawaiian, his first language, Kahanu led his high school team to a 2nd place finish in the Hawaiian State Soccer championship and a Hawaiian Island Championship in the competitive open ocean canoe racing. In December 2024, Kahanu attended the EIRA’s 5-day winter camp in Arizona.



Kolo recently wrote to the Foundation: “My time here in New Zealand has been amazing. The rugby was exactly how I thought it would be, tough, physical, and high-level. I’m proud that I got selected for every single 2nd XV game, which I know isn’t easy to do here. The

games have been challenging but fun, and I've learned a lot from the coaches and my teammates.

One of my favorite classes is Te Reo Māori (Māori language arts). I've really enjoyed learning the language and more about the culture. It's something I was looking forward to before I came, and it's been even better than I expected. (Note: Kolo is fluent in the native Hawaiian language, his first language.)

The culture here is awesome. Everyone's so close to each other and welcoming, which made it easy to fit in. Between school, rugby, church, and boarding, I've made some super good friends that I know I'll stay in touch with after I go back home.

Overall, I'm super grateful for this opportunity. I've learned a lot, had so many cool experiences, and made memories and friends I'll never forget. I can't wait to get home and share the experiences I've had here with my community."

"Ekola Hoa" – The 2025 version of the "Three Amigos". Two sturdy forwards from the Big Sky State and one fearless and versatile back from Hawaii's Big Island. Chuck, Kolo and Jamie (left to right) bonded well over their scholarship stays in Nelson.

This Fall, Kolo will stay in Hawaii and attend Hilo High School and play rugby on the Islands



Kolo ultimately aspires to be a pro rugby player and feels he may need to jump start his career via college. He is showing interest in Cal Berkeley, Grand Canyon and a few others. He will expand that list once his transition back into the States has settled down.

Upon his return to Hawaii, Kolo's family wrote to the Foundation:

"Aloha,

First off, Mahalo Nui for making this experience such a memorable one for Kolo and us. His stay in Nelson helped him develop as a young man, personally, socially and in academia as well as the sport that he loves and with hopes to become a professional rugby player.

Kolo said he had a blast!!! He shared with us stories, Haka, and Mele's that he learned while being there. He was well cared for and met some lifetime friends while there in New Zealand. Staff, Coaches, students and players were so kind to Kolo which made it even harder for him to leave as they all became Ohana.

We are so grateful for the opportunity given and are so humbled by the generosity from the Foundation.

Once again, MAHALO NUI.

Ohana Kahanu”

Nick Withers, Nelson’s Senior Economics teacher offered this about Jamie, Kolo and Chuck:

“Our international rugby boys from the U.S. always add to the favor and culture of our school, and its multicultural population. Kolo, Chuck and Jamieson certainly experienced the joys that are formed when boys from all walks of life come together with a common goal of playing as a unit in a sports team.

I will always remember arriving at our first rugby training; the kiwi boys had their homegrown NZ music playing, rugby balls were getting thrown around, and on the outskirts, Jamieson and Chuck stood, probably wondering what the heck they had flown halfway around the world to be a part of. (I was also teaching Jamieson Senior Economics so knew the guys and ensured they quickly got involved.)

Fast forward 5 months, many games of rugby later, many miles in school vans travelled, many friendships made, it was such a pleasure to see the guys play their final game with true passion and pride to represent Nelson College. A school they will always be a part of. Jamie, Kolo, Chuck – L. to R.

Highlights of the season include Jamieson leading the forwards in lineout calls and leading the team in the final few games. Watching Chuck hold his own in the tight five and growing with each game to become a great front row scrummager. And Kolo, who fitted into the backline with ease and pace to play some outstanding running rugby. I thought Kolo played a “man of the match” performance in our last game against our brother school Marlborough Boys High School.



All the American guys rapidly became not only part of the team but also comfortable around the school campus, thoroughly enjoying their rugby and classmates. Friendships have been made and memories created.

I’m sure, not too far down the road, a few kiwi boys will be heading up to the U.S. to rekindle the comraderies that were built when these young men came together, supported one another and fought for the common goal of touching the ball down over the try line.”