

The US Air Force Academy Rugby Team's Withdrawal from the Varsity Cup

The Air Force Academy Men's Rugby team elected to withdraw from participation in the Varsity Cup. Recent changes to how a club team's funds are managed at the Air Force Academy increased the cost of travel for our club exponentially. This forced the administrators, coaches, and cadets to sit down and decide in which tournament to participate (and pay for). On one hand, there is a national championship competition (D1A Championship) and, on the other, an invitational tournament (Varsity Cup). Air Force regulations that guide our club team (not a varsity team operating under our athletic department like many Varsity Cup schools) are very explicit with regards to competition. Air Force Academy regulation requires that competitive sports club teams prescribe to the following restriction: "the activity must hold a nationally sanctioned Regional/National Championship and entry into the championship must be earned through progressive competition (i.e., through league/conference play, etc.)." In other words we were not left with a decision really but a reality.

Plain and simple, the Varsity Cup does not meet these requirements in any fashion. What that means for the cadets that are part of our team is that Varsity Cup matches are second priority with regards to funding while D1A Playoffs and D1A conference matches are priority number one. Since we can now only fund one of these events, especially when it comes down to both competitions being played at the same time, we had to withdraw from the Varsity Cup. In the past, this financial burden was put on our players as we tried to play in both. The result is that our cadets essentially funded the Varsity Cup matches as an out-of-pocket expense, or through assistance from generous donors. This practice is not only unreasonable but also unsustainable as additional rules recently imposed by our institution no longer allow our cadets to pay out of pocket expenses for team travel.

There are additional, minor, factors that we also considered in our decision to leave the Varsity Cup. These factors were evaluated assuming we were able to somehow get lucky and come across funding, or if one of the two tournaments moved to a different time and no longer conflicted with the other. Foremost of these factors was the competition level of the Varsity Cup. Before, we state opinions, let us state fact. The Air Force Academy played Cal, BYU, Life and St. Mary's last year. Our cadets evaluated all of those teams and we are of the opinion that we can adequately judge the quality of the top tier teams in the nation from last year. Additionally, we played Utah, Army, Navy, Clemson and Colorado State. The only reason we didn't get to play Central Washington was because military airlift was cancelled and our cadets couldn't afford last minute plane tickets based on financial constraints listed above. The Air Force Academy rugby team put itself out there and attempted to play the best competition that both the D1A and the Varsity Cup had to offer. Our team's opinion is that there is no real difference in quality. St. Mary's or a Life rack and stack against any team in the Varsity Cup's top tier. Additionally, we assessed that most D1A second-tier teams are at least equal, if not better than, all the Varsity Cup second tier teams. So what does that say about the Varsity Cup? To us it says that Varsity Cup is nothing more than an invitational tournament that favors the couple of top-tier teams that are "invited" each year. It may be a

championship but it is not *the national* championship. To be the national champ you have to be willing to compete in games against the best where the best actually earned the right to be there. The D1A championship does this through conference and at large bids to those ranked highest, who have proven themselves during the current year of play. Varsity Cup invites great teams but no team truly earns its way in year in and year out.

An individual coach closely associated to the Varsity Cup administration has insinuated that the Air Force Academy did not have the caliber of team to compete at the Varsity Cup level and that is the reason we have decided to leave. That counters logic since we have beaten three out of four Varsity Cup opponents in the last six months. In a way, that individual is saying that at least those three teams must not be good enough either, which is sad because they are very good teams even if they have not yet achieved top-tier status. Maybe this coach's comment came out of hurt or anger of our withdrawal but that leads to another factor, camaraderie among the opponents.

Rugby has a long history of socialization and camaraderie amongst competitors. Some think that this social aspect detracts from the growth and quality of the game. We couldn't disagree more. Though this is not indicative of most teams in the Varsity Cup, we had some troubling experiences with camaraderie there. After one of our away matches last year against a top-tier Varsity Cup team, the team invited us to a hosting event. The fact that the top-team sent only a few players was insulting. The fact that the head coach of that team couldn't make an appearance, even for a brief moment, was highly insulting. The AFA cadet players looked up to this coach and these players because of the caliber of play the team brings to collegiate rugby and that team's historical success. That respect was obliterated. As successful as that team and coach may be, it is clear that as a whole that program lacks good character. Outstanding character is something that the AFA wants to develop in our cadets above all else. No win-loss record will ever be more important than good character. Another Varsity Cup team that we beat at home at least sent its players to our hosting event. However, the coach changed his mind and did not attend. Again, this is indicative of one's character and did not go unnoticed by our players and his. Regarding character Australian author Alison Goodman had this quote in one of her stories - "There was a saying that a man's true character was revealed in defeat. I thought it was also revealed in victory." That is what we want to teach our cadets and is just another of the myriad of reasons supporting our departure from the Varsity Cup and its informal leadership.

Finally, the Varsity Cup experiences difficulties in its management. Certain personalities dominate the forum and others are left tagging along. We feel the Varsity Cup brand diminished in the last year or two. The situation with BYU and how that situation developed and was publicized did not sit well with our team and its administrators. We are certainly not defending BYU or the Varsity Cup but we feel the situation could have been handled more appropriately. The fact that there was no real organization to the Varsity Cup was disappointing. The Varsity Cup website is atrocious and horribly outdated. It just isn't looking like the brand we want to be part of that is moving collegiate rugby, as a whole, forward in the United States. Other Varsity Cup teams are thinking the same even if they will never admit it out loud. The fact that Clemson, and Arkansas State are becoming affiliated with a D1A division as well as many of the PAC teams shows the growth of the D1A brand. Those schools may have the resources to

compete in both but we don't and the fact that they want a piece of a real, earned national championship is telling.

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