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World Cup Competitor

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World Cup competitor



When Nic Johnson '05 traded his basketball shoes for rugby cleats, little did he know that he would someday play on the world stage.

But that's just what he did during September as a member of the USA Eagles Rugby Team that competed

in the World Cup in New Zealand. The team played four matches, defeating Russia but falling to Ireland, Australia and Italy in their pool. Johnson was ecstatic to win one match, since the U.S. isn't a rugby powerhouse.

"Winning that game will always be a highlight for me, more than any individual play or achievement," he said.

During his junior year at Linfield, Johnson gave up basketball to pursue rugby, traveling to Portland to compete on the nearest team. After completing his degree in philosophy, he spent eight months training and playing in New Zealand. He returned to the U. S. and played for several clubs, making the U.S. Team in 2008. Rugby is a club sport in the U.S., and far behind its popularity in Europe, New Zealand and other countries that field professional teams.

Johnson spent six months playing professionally in Italy earlier this year before returning to Denver, Colo., where he makes his home with his wife and daughter.

"Whatever sport you play, you want to play professionally," he said. "It was great to get paid to play a game I love."

But playing rugby while balancing the responsibilities of home and family is challenging. He is a law clerk at his uncle's practice, which has given him the flexibility to come and go as needed.

"When I'm playing, I'm gone four weeks every summer and three to four weeks in the fall," Johnson said. "He's been really good about letting me come and go and most jobs don't allow that."

Although his wife supports his love of the sport, he is not sure how much longer he will play. "If I don't sign a contract overseas, I probably won't be able to play much longer. I need to grow up and get a real job," he said with a laugh. "And this really wears on your body, so I can't do it forever."

The World Cup was the pinnacle of competition.

"It was a long road to the World Cup, having played rugby non-stop since leaving Linfield," he said. "I was pretty emotional after the final game, thinking about all the sacrifices I have made and that people had made for me.

It was a journey I will never forget."

Lessons he learned at Linfield have served him well. The semester he spent in Austria was invaluable in preparing him for the last six years. "It helped by giving me a more open mind and the confidence to go anywhere and do anything," he said.

The support of faculty, especially Larry Doty '79, professor and head basketball coach, has added to his success.

"He (Doty) taught me that if I did my best – in anything – good things will come," Johnson said. "You don't have to be perfect, you just have to be the best you can be." 🐣



– Mardi Mileham

