Rugby Field

Furman University
Furman rugby has the advantage in John Roberts

When John Roberts has something to say, he leans in closer to you, and, unconsciously, you find yourself leaning in with him. It’s powerful. And a little disconcerting. But that intensity is more than likely the way he was able to take a team of mostly neophyte rugby players in 1998 and lead them to a national championship in 2003. And 2004. And, then again, in 2005. The team was runner-up in 2008 and 2009.

At the time the team started, Roberts was playing rugby with a club in town, the Greenville Griffins, but he had small children to raise, knees that were achy, and he was ready for a new challenge. So he and teammate Marc Roberts ‘99, a student at Furman, started a rugby team on campus.

In 2011, the team moved up to Division II from Division III and has been steadily climbing the ladder ever since. Furman ranked 18th in the nation in 2013. Going from a Division III team to Division II, while long term a good thing, has made for a couple of transitional years. But the transition hasn’t changed the way Roberts, also Furman’s communications director, leads the team.

“I focus on students making good decisions in both victory and defeat. Most importantly, we stress treating people and the game with respect, loving your teammates, and playing with passion and humility. It’s a tough game. There are a lot of young men who’ve grown up both physically and mentally on the field.”

And it’s that sentiment that led parents and players to name the new rugby stadium the John S. Roberts Rugby Field. "The players, parents, and alumni got together to determine what it would take to build the stadium. It would take $250k. So I started calling people. People I told for years that I might come calling," he smiles. "And when I finally did, 95 percent of the people I called contributed. Nearly SI00k in that first attempt. Which, for alumni that graduated beginning in '98, was a ton of money. It’s a testament to the sport. That it really meant something."

And it was clear that Roberts meant something, too. Because unbeknownst to him, the parents and alumni got together and decided to name it after him. "When they told me that they were going to name the field after me, I was deeply moved. Humbled. Even now, I don’t feel like I deserve it."

But he’s the only one that feels that way.

#WhyFurmanMatters

Furman matters to me because of the community and the relationships. As a coach, one of the greatest joys of my life is not just coaching the team, but keeping up with wives and children and seeing them every year at Homecoming. Furman is about community, and that’s what makes a Furman education distinctive from other schools.

— JOHN ROBERTS