

RUGBY ROOKIES

Mike Levitt

**James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers
Toronto**

Copyright © 2021 by Mike Levitt

Published in Canada in 2021. Published in the United States in 2021.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers acknowledges funding support from the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), an agency of the Government of Ontario. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada and with the support of Ontario Creates.



Canada Council
for the Arts
Conseil des arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario



ONTARIO
CREATES

Cover design: Tyler Cleroux

Cover image: Shutterstock

9781459415744

eBook also available 9781459415737

Cataloguing data for the hardcover edition is available from Library and Archives Canada.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication (Paperback)

Title: Rugby rookies / Mike Levitt.

Names: Levitt, Mike, 1957- author.

Series: Sports stories.

Description: Series statement: Sports stories

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200356437 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200356445

| ISBN 9781459415720 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459415737 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8623.E949 R833 2021 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published by:

James Lorimer &
Company Ltd., Publishers
117 Peter Street, Suite 304
Toronto, ON, Canada
M5V 0M3
www.lorimer.ca

Distributed in Canada by:

Formac Lorimer Books
5502 Atlantic Street
Halifax, NS, Canada
B3H 1G4

Distributed in the US by:

Lerner Publisher Services
241 1st Ave. N.
Minneapolis, MN, USA
55401
www.lernerbooks.com

Printed and bound in Canada.

Manufactured by Friesens in Altona, MB in January 2021.

Job #272117

For Kayla, an inspiration to all of us.



Contents

1	Stampeder Pride	7
2	The Pledge	12
3	Big Plans	17
4	Shot Down	24
5	Fail	30
6	One-on-One	36
7	Cop Outs	43
8	Jerks	50
9	Showdown	55
10	Just a Bunch of Girls with a Ball	58
11	Solo	63
12	A Coach with Cred	69
13	Bring It On	77

14	Big Money	82
15	Proof	89
16	All In	94
17	In the League	101
18	Curve Ball	108
19	The Old Rugby Juices	112
20	Game On	116
21	All Heart	121
	Acknowledgements	126

1 Stampeder PRIDE

The biggest guy on the field is like a runaway truck charging down the sideline. The ball crammed under his arm, he launches himself shoulder-first into the closest tackler. The two rain-slick bodies smack together with a slap so loud it shocks me. The defender bounces back, and he splats butt-first into a puddle of mud. The big guy staggers a step. Then he lurches into the next pair of tacklers. They lock arms around his waist and his beefy thighs.

I'm watching safely from the sideline with my three best friends. Half the school comes out when the boys get to play a home game. The bleachers are overflowing and the sidelines are crammed. But this is the first time I've really watched. I think rugby looks like the best game ever. I bet running with the ball is as wild as a hockey breakaway or a fast break in basketball. I'd love it!

Just thinking about playing makes my heart pound. I'm quick. I know that from soccer. And I'm fast. I've

Rugby Rookies

got half a dozen hundred-metre sprint medals on my wall.

I could do it! My breath catches in my throat.

The big guy starts falling to the turf but gets a pass away. It's a soft chest pass to the team captain, Ben Horvat. I've known Ben since forever. He's fifteen, a year older than me. Our families get together for Sunday dinners, camping, ski trips. He's like a big brother.

"That's an offload, Maddy," my friend Hailey tells me. "You make a pass just as you're getting hit. Tough to do." Hailey would be a great rugby player. She's super ripped. Hailey sometimes struts like her arms are too buff to fit at her sides.

On the field, Ben looks like he's in trouble. There are defenders coming at him from all sides. He fakes one way, then the other. He finds a sliver of space and takes off, racing downfield.

"Run!" Everleigh is shouting right next to me. "Go, Ben! That's what you wanna do. Go, Stampede, go!" Everleigh gets excited easily, and she talks a lot. She's one of my best friends. We're sharing a little umbrella and getting soaked. Everleigh's head full of crazy red curls is dripping wet. Hundreds of tiny ringlets still go in a million different directions.

Ben gets driven out of bounds near midfield. Both teams' forwards line up, facing each other on the sideline.

Stampeder Pride

“Line-out,” says Hailey. She ignores the rain that soaks her hair. She wears it short with long bangs. One side is shaved right to the skin. “The hooker has to throw the ball straight down the middle.”

Hailey is the only one of us who knows anything about rugby. She played junior girls rugby when she was living with her dad in the city last year. Her cousin Liam is on the team playing against ours.

“You’d be great in the line-out, Sarah.” Hailey gives Sarah a nudge. Sarah is the tallest girl in grade nine. She’s always the star of the All-Native Basketball Tournament.

“Me?” Sarah points to herself. “Are you kidding? That looks like some kind of a war.”

“Yeah, sure,” Hailey scoffs. “I’ve seen you out there.” She means on the basketball court, where Sarah is all business — knees and elbows. “You’re a beast!”

Sarah always has a smile in her eyes and she loves a good laugh. “You got it all wrong.” She lifts one eyebrow and shakes her head, trying to look innocent. “I’m all about peace and love.”

“One minute!” shouts the ref. “One minute to play.”

Ben is thirty metres out from the posts. He’s lining up a penalty kick. The crowd is quiet.

“There was a cheap shot in the line-out,” Hailey whispers to me. “The kick will give us the win.”

The boys’ rugby team is the pride of the school and

Rugby Rookies

some of the guys are pretty cocky. They've got team jackets and track suits, and they take a fancy charter bus to travel. Not the old yellow boneshaker we get for girls' volleyball.

Ben focuses on the ball, glances up at the posts and looks down again. He takes three steps forward and boots the ball like he's done it a million times. The ball sails over the crossbar and through the posts. The whistle blasts to end the game. The crowd erupts and our guys mob each other.

Hailey throws Sarah a high-five. Everleigh is bouncing. She throws herself at me for a hug. I stumble and thump into the person behind me. It's old Ms. Oblinski. I almost knock her off her cane.

I reach out to steady Ms. O. "Sorry!" I hold her elbow tight with both hands.

Ms. O is an English teacher. She's grey-haired and looks like she's ready for the retirement home. I'm surprised she's even out here.

"I'm all right," she shrugs.

"Sorry, Ms. O," I repeat.

"I'm fine." She turns and trudges toward the school. She leans on her cane with every step.

The teams shake hands and clap each other off the field. Ben gives a speech to thank the other team for the game. He gives their captain a flat of Gatorade. No one seems to notice the rain falling in a steady cold drizzle.

Stampeder Pride

“Hey, Cuz!” Hailey’s cousin Liam steps up to us with his arms open wide. Like all the players, he’s soaked to the skin. One of his ears is half clogged with mud and he’s got a good-sized nick on the bridge of his nose. A tiny trickle of blood runs down from it.

“Great game.” Hailey gives her muddy cousin a full-on bear hug.

“Close one.” Liam swipes at the blood with the back of his wrist.

“It looks like a blast!” says Everleigh. “I just love it! You’ve got a little bit of mud in your ear.” She points. “Right there. We’d love to play.” She looks at me, Hailey and Sarah. “Right?”

“You bet!” Hailey nods.

Liam is using his baby finger to dig the mud out of his ear as I hear myself say, “We should start our own team.”