

1 Tight GAME

Today is a perfect day for rugby. A drizzle of rain has turned into a steady downpour and the grass is torn up into a field of mud. This is a game we have to win. It's halftime and we're down 10–8. The pressure is on and I can't wait to get my hands back on the ball.

The ref blasts his whistle to start the second half. We're playing against the Fairview Falcons, and their white jerseys are covered in muck. They kick us a deep one. Our fullback stumbles in the mud. He makes a fingertip catch and boots it out at our forty. At the line-out I take my spot at the very back. I'm praying our hooker will throw the ball in straight.

"Right down the middle," the ref warns him.

Coach Kanavula wants me to get out quickly and help take down their powerhouse inside centre. The guy's nickname is Muscle because Fairview recruited him out of the weight room. When he's running right at you, it's like trying to tackle a truck.

Our whole team knows Fairview's plan. Get the

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ball out to Muscle. In the first half he scored all their points. I need to sprint from the back of the line-out and try to get a piece of him. The only way to stop this guy is a shoestring tackle. I have to hit him low and wrap up his ankles.

Fairview wins the line-out. Sure enough, the ball goes to Muscle. He runs straight at our inside centre, Travis Peters. Travis has been getting run over all day. He stands his ground, even though he's already got a black eye and a fat lip.

Muscle drops his shoulder and thunders forward. Travis dives for Muscle's knees. He can't hang on, but it's enough to make Muscle stagger a step. I launch myself shoulder first and clamp both arms around Muscle's shins. He crashes face first into a puddle of sludge and the ball squirts loose.

For the next twenty minutes they keep us pinned in our own half. They either feed Muscle or kick the ball deep. With only minutes left, there's a scrum on their forty, our put-in. My team looks over at our captain, Logan Reed. Logan looks more like a volleyball guy than a rugby player. But he's a smart fly-half and a good captain.

We need to score. There's only minutes left. And this is the very last game any of us will play for the North Shore Spartans.

"What's the play?" I ask Logan.

He holds up two fingers like a peace sign and

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everyone knows what's on.

Fairview has a hard-nosed scrum and we've had to grind it out every single set. We know this one is going to be just as tough.

"Crouch," calls the referee.

The props and hooker are already bound. That leaves our locks, who drop onto their knees. I nudge up right next to them and drop both my knees and a fist to the soggy turf.

"Bind," says the ref.

I reach across the back of our nearest lock and grip a handful of his mud-slick jersey.

"Set!"

I jam my right shoulder up under the cheek of our loose-head's butt. It's a solid fit.

Our scrum-half, Liam Grant, flips the ball into the tunnel and we heave forward. My back is ramrod straight. My legs flex like steel springs. All eight of us scrummers surge as one. It's a twelve-hundred-pound shove, and we barely move forward. But it is just enough for our hooker to get his foot on the ball and win the strike.

Liam takes a quick look down at the ball. Our number eight is doing a good job of controlling the ball at the back of the scrum. Liam plucks the ball from the number eight's feet and puts up a monster box kick. It's super high and more than thirty-metres deep. We race forward in a wave, hoping to get our hands on

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the ball. But the kick is just a bit too long. Fairview's winger makes a good catch and punts it out of bounds.

"One minute," says the ref.

"Red thirty-five!" Coach Kanavula bellows from the sideline. It's our line-out twenty-five metres from the goal line. All of us know the next play.

I hope it works. It's up to me.

This time I set up at the front of the line-out. The plan is a simple back wind. The throw goes long to Reese Rankin. He's called the Giraffe, because he's the tallest guy on the field, all arms and legs.

I take off racing for the back of the line-out. Reese catches the throw-in and drops me a perfect pass. I charge into open field. I sidestep their fly-half and jink inside a flanker, so there's only the fullback left to beat. I sprint to get past him, but he launches a tackle and gets both arms around my waist. I pump my legs with the ball clamped safe to my chest.

Their flanker catches up and hammers me hard. He wraps me up, ball and all.

As I'm going down, I pray for support. Coach Kanavula says I've got a great offload. Sometimes when there are two or even three tacklers on me, I find a way to squeeze out a pass.

Logan is right there. He stretches out a long volleyball arm and snatches up my little pop pass. He powers two long strides and dives over the goal line.

"Try scored!" The ref blasts his whistle.

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We're ahead 13–10!

“What a beauty!” I throw myself at Logan and nearly knock him over with a bear hug. A bunch of the guys leap on top of us. We all crash to the ground and there's a dog pile right there in the mud. That's the thing I love about rugby. We might not all be best buddies. But sometimes, like right now, it's the best. Like we're all brothers.

It's like we've won the World Cup. The win makes us second-last in the Okanagan North League. *Not* last.