



Discussion guide developed by Heartland Truly Moving Pictures to accompany *Forever Strong*, a Truly Moving Picture award winning film. A Truly Moving Picture award winner is a film that unlocks the vast potential of the human spirit and enables us to view stories that display courage, integrity and hope, taking entertainment to a higher level.



[www.TrulyMovingPictures.org](http://www.TrulyMovingPictures.org)

## One Film Can

Heartland Truly Moving Pictures, a non-profit organization, recognizes and honors films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life. We believe that one film can move us to laughter, to tears, or to make a difference. Forever Strong is a movie that demonstrates that One Film Can.

## Synopsis

Based on actual events, *Forever Strong* is the story of a volunteer American rugby coach who inspires his team on and off the field ultimately helping them claim the national title 18 times. A journey to victory, *Forever Strong* offers sports action, drama and shows the results of personal success.

Rick Penning (Sean Faris, *Never Back Down*) thought he had it all. He was in peak physical condition and the star of his rugby team fighting for the upcoming national title. But his spoiled attitude and a lifestyle laced with drugs and alcohol makes him reckless. Following a second DUI and an almost fatal car accident, Rick finds himself sentenced to a year behind bars in an out-of-state detention center, having disappointed his strict coach and father (Neal McDonough, *Minority Report*).

As the days crawl by, he is approached by prison ward Marcus Tate (Sean Astin, *Lord of the Rings*) with an opportunity to shorten his stay and return home in time for the anticipated rugby play-offs. Marcus offers Rick the opportunity to play for his rival team, Highland Rugby. Reluctantly Rick joins the team where he must adopt the grueling training schedule and unique code of conduct enforced by Coach Gelwix (Gary Cole, *Pineapple Express*), or finish out the season behind bars.

Coach Gelwix is a firm believer that service, honesty, hard work and dedication are the recipe for ultimate victory. He makes it very clear to Rick that lying or cheating will give a player a one-way ticket to the bench for the season, no excuses not. But through his loving father-like influence Coach Gelwix proves to Rick that he can be trusted as a fiercely loyal friend.

Egos clash on and off the field as Rick resists support and friendship from the other players and the Coach, but it doesn't take long for him to abandon his hard feelings and embrace his new team. The unlikely brotherhood with his fellow Highland teammates will eventually force him to choose where his loyalties lie.

A positive evaluation from Marcus sends Rick back to Arizona just before the championship game. Once at home he is pressured by his father and best friend Lars (Penn Badgley, *Gossip Girl*) to reveal "Highland's secrets". He refuses and his angry teammates set him up to get caught with drugs, which sends him back to jail. Rick, now a changed person, pleads with his Father to believe that he has changed his ways. It is not until someone steps forward to clear his name that Rick's jealous, anger-filled father comes to terms with his son's desires to play for the team that changed his life and allows him to return to play for Highland and for the coveted national title.



## RUGBY IN THE USA

*The following information is courtesy of Crane Movie Co.*

The United States has had a rollercoaster affair with the game of rugby. The game was first introduced in the early 1800's and found popularity among college campuses. From this pool of collegiate players, the U.S. found success in their first international tour. The U.S. rugby team won gold in the 1920 and 1924 Summer Olympic Games, much to the shock and awe of the rugby community worldwide. Following the 1924 Games, Rugby was no longer a part of the Olympics and the separation between America and the sport began. Almost 40 years later the sport saw a resurgence as it began to make a comeback in the late 1960s and 70s. In 1975 a governing body was instituted to represent U.S. rugby on an international level. The relationship between rugby and the U.S. has continued to grow stronger as proven by the fact that rugby is the fastest growing sport in the U.S. today.

### In the Beginning

- The sport of rugby was introduced to the United States in the 1800s by English soldiers and colonists. By 1872, rugby clubs were popping up at universities.
- The first recorded game was held at Cambridge University between Harvard University and McGill University May 14, 1874. This match-up ignited interest on college campuses all over the nation.
- Later, in 1910, players from Cal, Stanford, and the University of Nevada formed a combined rugby team and toured Australia and New Zealand. They shocked the international rugby community by upsetting both Rotorua RFC and Auckland RU.

### The Olympic Years

- Rugby was at one time a fixture at the Summer Olympics. The United States rugby team won gold in 1920 and 1924. 1924 was the last year rugby was included on the Olympic roster, so the last team to win the gold medal was the U.S. team.

### Revitalization of US Rugby

- After rugby was removed from the Olympics, the popularity of the sport waned in the States. However, the 1960s brought a rebirth to the sport and its popularity began to grow.
- The United States of America Rugby Football Union, now known as USA Rugby, was formed in 1975 as rugby's national governing body.

### US Rugby Today

- Today, rugby is the fastest growing sport in America. According to USA Rugby's 2007 yearend report, between 2002 and 2007 the number of high school players grew from 10,660 to 21,990. On the collegiate level it has grown from 20,350 to 28,700.



## **More important than building championship teams is building championship boys.**

*Larry Gelwix, Highland Rugby Head Coach and Founder*

*Forever Strong* is not based on one single story, but is made up of several different stories that Highland Rugby and Coach Larry Gelwix have encountered over the past 35 years. Although the stories might vary, Gelwix's coaching style in the movie reflects his true coaching style. In a 1998 interview with Wes Clark, Gelwix states,

I have a "no cut" policy, but as we get into training there is natural attrition. The teen years are a tough time. I have strong feelings about telling a young man who is willing to pay the price and do the work, "Sorry, but you're cut!" It sends the wrong message. I know that "cuts" are part of real life, but as long as I'm in charge of the team cuts won't be a part of it. Kids these days are too psychologically fragile. Our program is hard and it's demanding. It requires a lot, and many players are just not up to it. But every boy who is willing to do what we ask of him and put the time, we keep. Besides, we sometimes find a few "diamonds in the rough!"

*Highland Rugby, Utah High School Rugby Powerhouse, Wes Clark*  
[Wesclark.com/rrr/highland\\_rugby.html](http://Wesclark.com/rrr/highland_rugby.html)

## **Discussion Questions**

- Do you agree with Gelwix's coaching philosophy? What are the advantages and disadvantages of his coaching philosophy?
- Would you want to be coached or have your children coached by someone like Larry Gelwix? Why?
- How does Larry Gelwix's style of coaching as portrayed in the movie and in the above quote help shape your understanding of the team's success?
- Do you believe that Gelwix's philosophy is equally important to the success of Highland Rugby as the highly talented players?
- What other coaches in the history of coaching—in any sport—have shared a similar philosophy to Coach Gelwix's? Do the teams they coached have an impressive win/loss record?
- Did you have a person in your life like Coach Gelwix? How did that person impact your life?





**I believe in the message of the Haka and our players believe in the message of the Haka.**

*Larry Gelwix, Highland Rugby Head Coach and Founder*

A Haka is a traditional dance of the Maoris, the indigenous people of New Zealand . While there are many forms that this dance takes, most are likely familiar with the haka because of the All Blacks, New Zealand's rugby team. They perform a particular form of the haka – the “Ka Mate” – before international meets and it is a tribal chant with deep historical and cultural significance. Although there is some debate between different cultures about whether individuals who are not Maori or members of the All Blacks should perform this ritual, Highland Rugby does this ritual with care, making certain that all the boys on the team understand what it means to be engaging in this routine.

Performing the haka is just one of the traditions Highland embraces. Think about the other traditions Highland celebrates as you discuss the following questions.

### **Discussion Questions**

- In the movie, what is the significance of the Highland's routine of the “Ka Mate” haka before the games and how does Rick Penning's view of it change over the course of the movie?
- Are there traditions or rituals that you perform in your own life—whether it be for something sports related or otherwise—that give deeper meaning to what you do? What are they?
- Another tradition that Coach Gelwix makes a point of is having his past players communicate with his current players, as was demonstrated in the movie. What do you believe the significance of this communication is to the alumni? What do you believe the significance is to the team? Do you believe that this adds to the strength of the team and contributes to their winning record?
- Can you think of any teams – professional, college, or high school—that honor their history or traditions in significant ways like Highland? What are they?
- What are other traditions that Coach Gelwix emphasizes throughout the movie? What part does each of these traditions play in shaping a stronger Highland Rugby team?



## Truly Moving Moments

*Forever Strong* has been honored as a Heartland Truly Moving Picture Award-winning film. This award was created to honor films released theatrically that align with Heartland's mission to recognize and honor films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by artistically expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life.

These award-winning movies are made up of moving and inspiring moments – those moments that cause you to think, see something in your life differently, be inspired to do something. It's what makes the movie and its message remain with you well after you've left the theatre.

Think about *Forever Strong*. What were the moments that stood out to you? How did they make you feel? How will they cause you to think about things differently in the future? Share those Truly Moving moments with others at [www.TrulyMovingPictures.org](http://www.TrulyMovingPictures.org). Simply create a membership or login if you already have one and then search the movie list for *Forever Strong*. You can leave your review of the movie or thoughts about your Truly Moving Picture in the "Thoughts and Reviews" section.



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