

# Meet the Red Wolves rugby's eighthman

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About 8,990 miles from home, from his family, friends, girlfriend and everything he has ever known, he tries to keep busy.

Aaron Van Dyk is a first-year majoring in animal science production and management from East London, South Africa. He plays as one of the loose forwards for the Arkansas State University rugby team.

He also works as a resident assistant, as well as with the livestock on the Arkansas State University farm. Doing both of those jobs and playing rugby takes up the majority of his time. However, in all of that, he still finds time for his family and God.

## Rugby

Van Dyk has played rugby for almost 13 years. He typically plays as the eighthman and wears the number eight on his jersey and plans to play all four years at A-State.

A loose forward, specifically the eighthman, has many responsibilities, including tackling and running the ball through defensive lines.

An eighthman has to be good at both defense and offense.

"The reason I decided to play rugby was actually because of my dad. My dad played professional rugby when he was younger. I have kind of just grown up with a rugby ball in my hands," Van Dyk said.

His first memory of playing rugby was moving up from the second team, or B team, up to the first team, A team. At first, Van Dyk said he was apprehensive, but his grandfather convinced him to move up.

"I just couldn't bear the thought of leaving my B team because I had grown with these guys and I was their captain as well," Van Dyk said. "I thought I would be letting my coach down as well."

His grandfather was friends

with the coach of the A team, and was the person who convinced Van Dyk to move up.

"I ended up moving up to the A team but I wasn't very happy about it," Van Dyk said. "But I enjoyed it nonetheless."

Rugby is a cathartic experience for Van Dyk as it allows him to channel negative emotions.

"I'd say my favorite part of playing rugby is the physical side of things," Van Dyk said. "It's a big outlet for anything that I'm dealing with personally. I get to output that energy into something good and productive because it's exercise."

Coach Dominic Shaw has noticed the effort Van Dyk puts into rugby and said he is a person other players can count on.

"Aaron has been a fantastic addition to the Arkansas State Rugby team. He is the standard of what a freshman player should look to aspire to. He has strong Christian values, impeccable work ethic and humility. He is the ideal team man," Shaw said.

Rugby was initially on Van Dyk's horizon when he came to America. He was originally just going to study farming.

That changed when Shaw contacted a close friend of Van Dyk. He said he wanted to see what would happen if he reached out to Shaw and that the rest was history.

Warrick Day, a sophomore agricultural business major from Komga, South Africa has seen Van Dyk grow since coming to America.

"Aaron has become more of a leader within our team since last semester and has not only done well with the rugby team but he has flourished as an A-State student. His grades are impeccable and he has become well-known around campus by students and staff of A-State," Day said.

## Culture

Coming to the United States was a bit of a shock for Van Dyk.



Aaron Van Dyk (center with ball), playing for the provincial team in high school. He attended high school at Seaborne College.

Van Dyk said that the food was a new experience for him and said he was surprised lamb wasn't a popular food in Arkansas.

"Everything tastes a little bit like plastic here compared to home. But yeah, you adapt, you grow," Van Dyk said.

One of the meals he misses the most from home is his mom's Greek lamb stew, which has risotto rice, a tomato base and a mixture of herbs and spices. The other is his dad's aartappel rys and vleis, which Van Dyk said is close to barbeque.

Despite only being able to speak Afrikaans or Xhosa with a few members of the rugby team, Van Dyk said

speaking other languages does not impact his day-to-day life.

"We speak English back home. I mean sure there might be lingos and things we don't necessarily use that are the same, but I can pick up on that," Van Dyk said.

Coming to A-State meant not seeing his family, friends and girlfriend for an entire school year. However, everyone around Van Dyk was supportive of his choice to come to America.

"I was expecting them to kind of look at me a bit like, 'What are you doing? That's a bit crazy' but they didn't. They actually all climbed on board and said they're going to be very upset with me if I turn down

the opportunity," Van Dyk said.

He tries to call them every day when he is eating lunch.

His girlfriend of almost two years, Megan Schwartz, was extremely supportive of his decision to come to America even though it meant they would be separated.

"She's been a real blessing, especially since I've been here as well. She's been so supportive. I'm just very, very thankful for her," Van Dyk said.

## Farming

Van Dyk grew up around farming, but shifted away from it when his family moved further into East London. However, when the family took on a boarder who was a farmer, Van

Dyk would help him care for his livestock every chance he got.

"I sort of started gaining that love for it again. I realized this is actually what I want to do. This is where I want to be. I want to be out here, I want to be with animals. I want to be in the bush experiencing new things every day," Van Dyk said.

Van Dyk's goal is to own a livestock farm, specifically, a beef farm with the possibility of adding sheep into the mix. He said he might consider growing crops to make his own animal feed.

Currently, he works on the A-State farm, cleaning and taking care of the animals.

## Religion

Religion was one of the things that gave Van Dyk solace after his first semester at A-State.

Back home, Van Dyk was raised in the Roman Catholic church, where he said he was not fully committed to God like he is now.

"I'd listen in and try my best to figure out what's really happening here and all of that, but I didn't really have a relationship with God," Van Dyk said.

However, after coming to A-State, Van Dyk realized this could be a place for him to grow more in his faith. Van Dyk reads his Bible every morning when he wakes up, taking the time to be with God and meditating before he begins his busy day.

"I also have a deep belief that the reason I'm here is because God put me here to grow my relationship with him. I thought 'This is the time for me to grow my faith.' I'd say that I have and I'm continuing to do that," Van Dyk said.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AARON DYK

Aaron Van Dyk (left) and his girlfriend Megan Schwartz standing by the Buffalo River in East London, South Africa. They were attending the Buffalo Regatta, one of the oldest rowing races in South Africa.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AARON VAN DYK

From left: Warrick Day, Corby Harrison and Aaron Van Dyk in Charlotte, North Carolina. They are holding the trophy after winning the Hornets Nest Bowl.