

By veering away from a traditional college experience, and mastering a brutal, unfamiliar sport like rugby, North Muskegon's Erick Bleakley proved he is really

'ALL ABOUT NEW THINGS'

By Dave Tomczak
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Erick Bleakley knew when he graduated from North Muskegon High School that he was going to continue to further his education, and hopefully continue his athletic career as well.

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As a five-sport star for the Norse, it was only a question of which college, and what sport.

As an All-State first baseman his senior year, Bleakley drew interest from Hope College to play baseball, but said he never seriously considered going there.

He really hoped to attend the University of Michigan or Grand Valley State University, two schools he had always thought of playing for. With high school experience in football, basketball, baseball, swimming and golf, he figured he could find a spot on a team at one of those schools.

Nowhere in his wildest dreams did the sport of rugby factor into the equation.

"All I ever knew about rugby was watching the 7-on-7 tournament on TV when I was in middle school and high school," said Bleakley, 21, a 2016 graduate of North Muskegon High School. "And I kept thinking, 'These guys are freaks.' Now here I am playing it and loving it."

Not only did Bleakley end up playing college rugby, but he's doing it somewhere he never guessed he might go – the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

"The opportunity presented itself, and I thought that it would be the best for me," Bleakley said about committing to Navy. "I thought I was immature at the time, and that this is what I needed to do."

Once accepted into Navy, however, Bleakley still had his mind set on playing one of the sports he was familiar with. When he reached Annapolis, he decided to try out for the Midshipmen's sprint football team.

But before long he realized that would not work out.

Sprint football follows traditional football rules, except it emphasizes speed and agility over size and strength, with a player having to maintain a maximum weight of 178 pounds. Bleakley was 6-foot-3 and 185 pounds when he reached college, and was not getting any smaller.

"I had to drop weight at the same time I was still growing," he said. "It wasn't a good time, and I finally decided I was over it."

While his initial foray into collegiate sports didn't go as planned, the friends he made during his first year at Annapolis offered him another solution for his sophomore year.

"They said I had good size and that rugby was a growing sport," Bleakley said. "They told me I could come out for a week or two and see how I liked it. And I'm all for new things, so I started playing that fall."

A brand new challenge

Bleakley attended a rugby informational meeting and liked what he heard. He soon joined other students vying to fill 150 spots on three of the Navy rugby teams – the "A" team, "B" team or developmental team.

Bleakley made the development team, but didn't stay there long. He was quickly promoted to the "B" team in the fall of 2017, where his size and speed, honed after years of playing multiple sports as a youngster, got him a shot as the team's outside center – basically the quarterback position in rugby.

His promotion to the B team sparked the interest of his parents, Fred and Ann Bleakley of North Muskegon. They were curious about their son's new sport, and wanted to see him in action.

"We flew out to Annapolis to watch when he got moved up," Fred Bleakley said.

"It was new to us, and we had to learn about it, but it was like 'Wow, this is a different sport.' We were hooked."

Bleakley continued his rapid development in the sport, and earned a promotion to the Naval Academy "A" team later in



that first season, getting the call just in time for the NCAA tournament in April.

The 16-team field pitted Navy against Big Ten Champion Indiana in the opening round. The Midshipmen sent the Hoosiers sailing, 47-0.

Advancing to the national quarterfinals, Navy faced No. 3 California, and Bleakley made his debut.

"He had a real nice run and took a lateral for a score and we were jumping around, high-fiving each other," Fred Bleakley said.