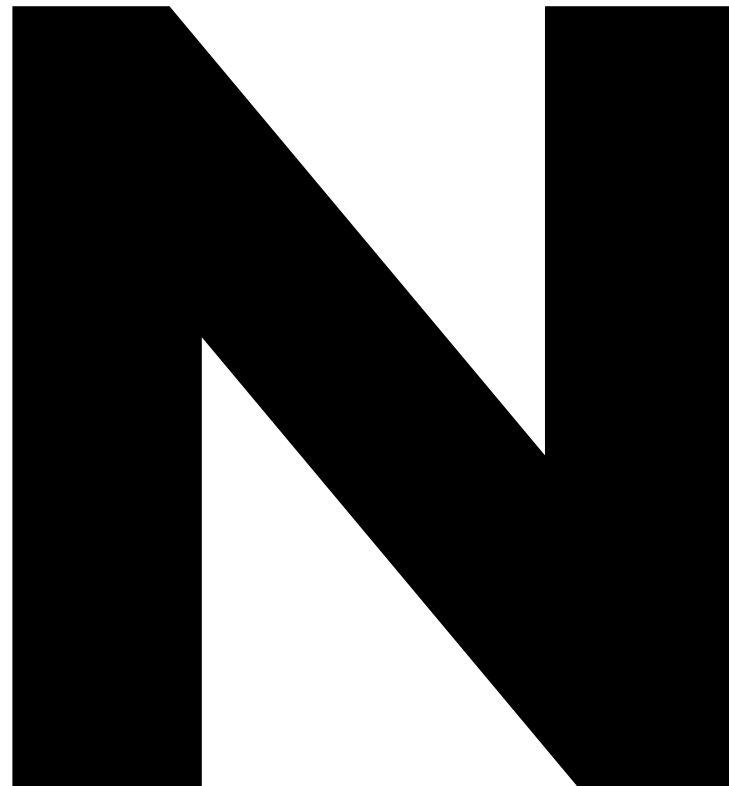
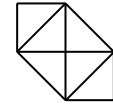


Situated along the east bank of the Mississippi River in south eastern Louisiana and nestled between the lowlands of the swamps, marshes and Lake Ponchatrain, lies the city known for bringing the wild and mystery of the night to life. New Orleans is many things to many people, but now it's got something new to be proud of: a professional rugby team.



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Pictures by Sophia Germer
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New Orleans finds a reason to throw a party for just about anything.

Celebrating food, music, people, the place itself, or just because it's a certain day of the week. Mardi Gras is the biggest, and when we visit, it's already got two weeks of partying under its belt.

Walking down the narrow, uneven streets of the Vieux Carre (Old Square), blaring saxophones and trumpets share the airwaves with strumming guitars, as assorted musicians play for tips to make ends meet. The fragrance of sweet beignets, savory gumbos, and fresh Gulf-caught seafood pours out of restaurant windows.

Hundreds of painters, craftspeople, merchants and vendors pack Jackson Square outside the 225 year-old St. Louis Cathedral at the heart of the French Quarter. Art markets, garages and galleries, antique stores, herb and spice shops, voodoo stores, cafés, novelty shops and bars of all varieties, line the rues.

The French founded this town in the 1700s and, in some ways, never left as its colonial past is still reflected in the 18th century homes whose balconies overlook cobbled corridors.

There's intrigue, in all its forms, everywhere. Even the cemeteries, where it's said even the dead don't like to rest. Voodoo practitioner Marie Laveau died in 1881, yet is still said to haunt the inhabitants of her former home.

The Big Easy and Louisiana boast one of the most distinct cultures in the United States with its fusion of French, Spanish, African and Caribbean lineage (Creole) paired with the French Acadian descendants who hailed from Canada (Cajuns), blending an eclectic mix of food, music and customs nowhere else can claim.

Aspiring musicians, chefs, and artists alike make the pilgrimage here to create a name for themselves, study or draw inspiration from the likes of Louis Armstrong, Emeril Lagasse and George Rodrigue, among a famed list that were shaped by the touch of the Crescent City.

When the partying stops, or at least slightly abates, what you find is a people are strong, resilient, hard-working and fiercely proud. The city and its people battled back and rebuilt from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the BP Oil Spill in 2010, yet the working class who call it home continue to overcome, smile and thrive.

Things often come and go in this Gulf Coast port, like the nearly 18 million tourists who visit the vibrant city yearly to indulge in its well of offerings.

While things move and change here, one thing remains constant in this

bustling hub, sports. And one in particular is adding a whole new level of intrigue for people: rugby.

In the Crescent City, American football reigns supreme. People of all ages bleed black and gold, the colors of their beloved Saints. The Mercedes-Benz Superdome is their kingdom and quarterback Drew Brees sits on the throne of this diehard fan base.

Although it's a [American] football city above all, across the Mississippi River, the New Orleans Gold is making their own mark as its first professional rugby team.

Rugby has been in the area since the 1970s, when New Orleans RFC were formed. Never a major force, they nonetheless worked their way into national contention, winning the second division of the national championship in 2011 and making the top four of the championship in both 2013 and 2014. The arrival of Major League Rugby in 2018, saw the club awarded a place in America's new professional super league as one of nine sides, including one from Canada. Playing as NOLA Gold, the side picked up three wins from eight, finishing XX.

A quarter of the way into only the second season ever of Major League Rugby, the Gold are preparing for their first road game against Utah, while the city gears up for Fat Tuesday [the Mardi Gras finale], just a week away.

Roughly 15-minutes drive over the river is the town of Gretna home to almost 18,000 residents, including Gold.

The clubhouse is a former bar turned rugby headquarters. Formerly the 'Rugby Pub', it's the spiritual home of New Orleans RFC, but is now the Gold's base after being purchased by their owner, Tim Falcon, a successful maritime and personal injury lawyer in the city.

Although still under renovation, it's still the Gold nerve centre, home to its ten or so backroom staff.

Heading through the under-construction kitchen to the back room, nine flags hang over this dining hall – each representing the backgrounds and homes of their players: New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, Samoa, Fiji, Uruguay, Chile, Canada and the USA – flying proudly over the men eating beneath them. The Gold squad numbers 35 players, 30 fully professional and five part-timers. There's a healthy chunk of local players and first-time pros, but to ensure there was enough professional experience, 16 seasoned rugby players were brought, many from overseas.

In team room where players gather to play cards, shoot darts and get treatment for their injuries, we meet players Eric Howard, Jean-Pierre Eloff and Taylor Howden, who've played for the Gold since their inception.

The three chow down on their post-practice meal of fried chicken and macaroni and cheese and after they're finished, we make our way into the coaches' office to chat about the team.

"It's like a melting pot," says Taylor, a 32-year-old Kiwi who was part of the Ohio Aviators in America's last attempt at professionalism, the now defunct Professional Rugby Organisation. "People are coming in from all over and adding to the history and adding to the culture and that's what everyone's doing here to us as well."

Among this global assortment is a sprinkling of internationally capped players, former foreign pros, college All-Americans, domestics who played at the amateur club level, locals and even an Olympian and Super Rugby champion.

Taylor sits across from Eric Howard, a 20-cap Canadian hooker and team captain this year fresh off a stint with the Canadian national team at the Americas Rugby Championship.

Eric hadn't planned on living in the Big Easy, but when the MLR emerged, he contacted current teammate and fellow Canadian national player, Hubert Buydens, who set him up with general manager Ryan Fitzgerald, who promptly signed him. "My first night here, a big supporter of the team had us over for food and we had gumbo and all this stuff," recalls Eric. "Then he took us downtown to Bourbon St. and to all those places and then he drove us home. I had only touched down a couple hours ago and I'm thinking, 'this is how everyone treats you in the South and how everything is'. The next few days, everyone is having us over for family dinners and it was absolutely amazing." >>



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» Sitting between the Canadian and Kiwi, is Jean-Pierre Eloff, the South African vice-captain whose won ten caps for the USA.

Before joining the Gold, the 27-year-old fullback was teammates with Taylor on the Ohio Aviators, Gold wasn't his only option, as San Diego Legion were also in for him, but he chose well. "I love that there's always something to do here, always something to keep you busy," he says. "It's a little dangerous to stay out too late here. It can get you in trouble really quick, so I haven't tried to do that too much."

Already, the Gold is a tight-knit group. "We have a motto that we use: 'we're a squad, not a team; we're mates, not teammates,' that [head coach] Nate (Osborne) has kind of used for us and it reigns pretty true," says Taylor. "We're off doing stuff together because we like to hang out. We're travelling together; guys have got fishing trips planned at the end of the season and all that kind of stuff. When you're with your mates, it's just so much fun. Seeing one of your mates break a line and running down like he's going to score a try, scoring and then seeing the smile on his face is pretty cool, you know what I mean?"

"I was actually just talking to Nate (Osborne) this morning when I came in, and I was saying how much enjoyment I get out of this," chips in Jean-Pierre. "This is probably one of the most fun times that I've had in rugby."

"Obviously there's higher places you can play, like nationals with your country and that's a great honour, but you aren't always together for that long. We enjoy it a bunch when we're there, but you're never there for that long."

Eric agrees. "I don't come in each morning thinking, 'Oh, I've got to go to the gym, or I've got to do this.' I'm thinking, I can't wait to be with the boys again," he says. "You're just always thinking about it. When I got back from tour, I'm thinking, 'I'm back,' and I get to hang out with the boys."

"I've played it for 20-fucking-seven years and only two of those years I've been a professional," adds Taylor. "The other 25 years that I've played it, I wasn't doing it because I was getting paid for it, but I'm doing it because I absolutely love it. I'm at the tail end of my career, but I'm still having so much fun. Once it becomes not fun for me, then I know I've got to step away. Fuck, I don't know when that's going to be because I'm always having fun."

It's no coincidence how they've gelled so quickly. Sixteen of the 33 Gold players live together in an apartment complex just a few blocks away from the clubhouse, allowing them to bond beyond the confines of the pitch.

"You get so emotional after wins and losses here because how much you've invested and how much the guys mean to you," continues Eric. "You look around and you're thinking, 'I'm playing with some of the best rugby players I've ever played with and will ever play with.' Just knowing they're around you all the time. They're your best friends, so you can hang out with them whenever."

This family-like environment trickles from the top down, and is rooted in the "mom and pop" business Falcon runs.

His family is involved in all aspects of the Gold's organisation. Daughter Jessica is a part of the front office staff and his son Cam carved out a spot on the roster as a reserve forward. "It's a great culture using the family as a basis," says Tim Falcon.

Before taking up ownership of the Gold, Tim was heavily involved in nearly all levels of rugby around New Orleans and Louisiana. He started playing more than 40 years ago for Louisiana State University, then played a key role in building the New Orleans RFC.

Tim even coached his three sons to state championships during their time at Archbishop Shaw High School – which now hosts the Gold's home games at their recently renovated football stadium. In addition, he co-founded Louisiana Rugby, which aids the development and exposure of youth and high school players across the state. "I think it translates to the players, and it shows that we care about them more than just being a product on the field," says Tim. "It spills over into what we're doing as an organisation too. We want people to work here who care and are passionate with what we're doing."

Tim and the players however, credit a key part of their chemistry to the roster and selfless culture that Ryan Fitzgerald and Nate Osborne built since the beginning. "They're bringing in really great rugby players, but they're also just great guys to be around, which just helps us bond so much better and I think that's why we have to much fun," says Eric. "I wouldn't say we have any egos. Guys are able to check them at the door when it's time to go or time to step on the field and that's why it's so much fun because we don't have to squash anybody's personalities, which obviously can put a dampening effect on the team and on a single individual."

Both the coach and general manager carefully selected each player based on their character over their skill set, taking a page out of the All Blacks' book. "I love the enthusiasm that the guys have and just the passion they have. I love that they all get along really well," says Nate. "You can't always just throw 33 guys into a room and say, 'Be friends. Respect each other. Understand each other.' The way they've done that has been amazing."

Prior to taking the coaching job in New Orleans, the Australian served as the backs and attack coach for the USA Eagles 15s through the 2015 World Cup.

However, after leaving the Eagles to pursue business ventures opening gyms in Minnesota, where he was living at the time, the head coaching job in New Orleans presented itself.

The opportunity of starting a team from scratch was too hard to resist, especially as it gave him a chance to test his own philosophies. "Whatever is going on in their lives, they can come in and sit with me and have a chat. At the same time, they understand that what I say, is what we have to do. That's the key to that. There's coaches that can just get walked over if they go that way and there's coaches that can keep that happy line and right now we've got a really good line of, 'this is what I want, so this is what we're going to do,' but you still feel comfortable coming in and having that relationship of 'hey, I need this' or 'have you thought about this? or whatever it is,'" he says.

His partner in building the Gold's personnel, Fitz, is not your run of the mill GM.

After being selected to play for USA Junior World Cup squad in France, he took a break from rugby and joined the United States Marine Corps, where he served for four years, including two tours in Iraq, before becoming a sergeant. "Some people struggle with that coming out of the military, going from a tight-knit brotherhood to working a regular job where you don't have that," says Ryan. "Rugby for me has always been that, easily the next best thing, or right there. The brotherhood of rugby has been the tightest brotherhood I've been a part of since the military."

For the Wisconsin native, who brought this leadership and philosophy to the squad, he sees similarities within the Gold and the military's culture and how they both operate as a unit.

"These guys have done a very good job of balancing that – knowing exactly what their role is, exactly what their fit is and that just kind of naturally ties into the military," he says.

While people are still stumbling out of bars onto the city's sleep-less streets, at 3:45 each morning, Bobby Johns, one of Gold's New Orleans locals wakes up for his daily routine.

He's headed to the gym to get a work out in, then directly into his full-time job as the Director of Financial Reporting for an oil distributing company down the street from the clubhouse.

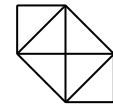
After working in the office for a few hours, he's out to film sessions, meetings and practice with the Gold, then right back into work until the end of the day.

Now he's coming in on the Gold's day off in between work to get treatment and sits down for a talk.

Is there a break in there between work and rugby? God no," he laughs. "It's definitely a balancing act, but it's awesome though. I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Bobby came up the rugby ranks through New Orleans' Jesuit High »

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» School, then travelled an hour north to Louisiana State University for college. As a Tiger, he captained the team four out of his five years, while working toward his undergraduate and Master of Business Administration degrees, while earning honorable mention All-American honors in the process.

After leaving university, he joined New Orleans RFC but set his sights on making the USA sevens team for the 2016 Rio Olympics. "I didn't get the invite to the camp. I was kind of bummed," he admits. "I was like, 'alright, well if I'm not going to make the Rio Olympics, I'm damn sure going to be a badass in my career'."

Bobby was then hired at his current job and had set new goals of working on becoming a Certified Public Accountant. He took a short hiatus from rugby to focus on the exams, but just as he finished his last exam, an opportunity to play for the Gold emerged, and he signed. "It's amazing," he admits. "All my friends are living vicariously through me. I haven't made a lot of rosters this year, but last season I was starting a good portion of games. Just the excitement of all the guys coming out to the games and constantly talking about it.

"Imagine if you did something with all your friends growing up and then everyone kind of stops doing it, but still is absolutely passionate about it and loves every second of it, and then you're still doing it. It's just a humbling experience. Everyone's constantly telling you, 'oh I wish I could do what you do...It's unbelievable. It's a dream come true. It really is like a dream. One time, someone asked, how is your day going? I said jokingly, 'living the dream'. Then I was like, wait a second. I absolutely am. It's pretty cool."

As a full-time worker and player, however, he wishes he had that additional down time beyond practice, film and games to bond with his mates. "It's something that I wish I could do more of. It's tough," he says. "Every time I come in, I'm like, shit. I'm counting the clock. I'm trying to make a meeting or something like that. The guys understand it and they don't hold it against me. I kind of hold it against myself a little bit," he adds.

But the pros far outweigh the cons. "It's the absolute best. Everyone is high calibre. Most of us have gone through years and years of playing where you're having to be the coach, where you're having to be the one that designs practice, you're the one that calls, texts, begs, borrows and steals to get people to attend fitness sessions and stuff like that. Now, it's just beyond an all-star team. It's professionals. It's awesome. It's amazing."

Before the season began, people expected Nola Gold to finish bottom, having won three and lost five in their maiden campaign. Ryan said many people counted them out. "I think these guys embrace it," he says. "The fight that New Orleans and the Westbank has as well. The resilient city that can fight through anything. Always climbing that uphill battle, always fighting and always being the underdog."

This past offseason, Ryan and Nate made it a point to bring back 22 players from the previous season to help with the chemistry, while bolstering their roster.

Enter USA Eagle and No.8 Cam Dolan; Australian sevens Olympian and centre, Con Foley; and 37-year-old lock/No. 8 Kane Thompson – a starter on the Chiefs' 2012 Super Rugby team, who also represented Samoa in the World Cup in 2007, 2011, and 2015.

Youth was also added in the signing of five College All-Americans, including 2018 Player of the Year, Nick Feakes. "It's amazing what we have," says Eric. "The knowledge that we have on this team is through the roof. Just guys from all over the world. Guys playing international. Guys playing Super Rugby. Just wherever they're from and bringing that experience. What it does for young guys on the team it brings them up so much faster and gives them so much more in such a short period of time.

For the first few weeks of the season, however, the Gold navigated without the constant presence of Cam Dolan (USA), Eric (Canada), Kyle Baillie (Canada), Hubert Buydens (Canada) and Ignacio "Nacho" Dotti (Uruguay), who were in and out representing their respective countries in the Americas Rugby Championship.

They also faced injuries to Australian fly half, Scott Gale, American winger, Tim Maupin, Chilean forward, Nikola Bursic and South African flanker, Vincent Jobo.

Instead they've relied on newcomers like 22-year-old South African back and Tristan Blewett, who scored in their first three games,

Matchday against the reigning MLR champion Seattle

Seawolves. It's a 65-degree overcast day at Gold Stadium – and with a light breeze, it's not overly humid and not too chilly – setting up a near perfect day on the pitch.

Fans pour in and the grandstand fills quickly, in what becomes their largest crowd to date, around the 1,4000 mark.

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Even the Seawolves faithful, who travelled over 2,500 miles, are getting rowdy, filling a corner with blue and green among the sea of gold and white.

From kick off, the Seawolves come out firing, quickly getting inside the Gold's 22-metre, eventually scoring the first points of the match on a penalty goal.

The Gold are in trouble as Foley receives a yellow card in the 18th minute for not wrapping on a tackle, forcing them to play a man down.

With Foley in the sin bin, Seattle whip it wide from their lineout to fullback Mat Turner who finishes a well-executed team try in the 25th minute, giving Seattle a 10-3 lead.

The Seawolves dominate the first 30 minutes of the first half, but a switch flips for the Gold.

From their own kick-off, the Gold retain possession from a Seattle clearance attempt and several phases later they're over the Seattle whitewash. Eloff converts to bring the game level at 10-10.

Now on the front foot, Gold sense there's more to come in this half. In possession for the last play of the half, just outside Seattle's 10-metre line, Gold forms a maul from their lineout.

The pack bears down and running all the way from fullback, Eloff binds onto the formation.

Seconds later, the crowd erupts as Seattle collapses the maul, just before the Gold can cross the line, resulting in a costly penalty try, giving Gold a 17-10 lead to take into the locker room.

After the break, a penalty having taken Gold to 20-10, the Gold are back inside the Seawolves' five-metre, knocking on the door.

A flurry of forward and back punches can't penetrate the Seattle wall. The savvy vet, Taylor, is now screaming for the ball at first receiver.

Scrumhalf, Holden Yungert, answers his call, feeding Taylor, who dummies a defender, diving in for a score, putting them up 27-10 in the 47th minute.

The defending champs, however, won't go quietly.

A costly Gold penalty gives the visitors a scrum on the Gold's five-metre line and three punches later, Apisai Naikatini makes them pay with a try, cutting the lead to 27-17 in the 59th minute.

Just under five minutes go by and Seattle's forwards are testing the Gold's defence.

After almost a dozen pick and gos and punches, Naikatini quickly pops it to hooker Kellen Gordon, whose score narrows the margin to 27-24, with fifteen minutes remaining.

But with all the momentum seemingly leaning toward Seattle, the Gold take control of possession inside Seattle's 22-metre.

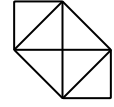
A quick ball goes to Taylor and he skips it to Blewett who's alone on the wing and he gallops in for an easy score, extending their lead to

34-24 with less than ten minutes on the clock

Two minutes later, a fluffed lineout by Seattle results in another turnover.

This time, vice captain, Eloff, breaks a 35-metre gain and offloads to Foley in support, who finds JoJo Tikoisuva for the score, delivering the final blow in their 41-31 win. »





» “We had fuck-loads of people here,” Taylor says after game. “You could actually feel that energy on the field, whereas last year you didn’t have that.”

“I think the crowd’s been really loud and crazy and it’s really helping us,” agrees Nate. “We understand that we want to make it a fun thing and we talk about it all the time if we want to have people turn up and watch our games, we want to perform and make sure those games are worth the money they’re paying out of their pockets.”

Players guzzle down Michelob Ultras and Coors Lights, and soon make their way to the VIP tent, where a few sign autographs for young star-struck fans.

Once the sun’s down, players make their way to the local watering hole.

The Doghouse is a dive bar conveniently located across the street from the apartment complex where the batch of players live, so they can either easily stumble home, or continue onward through the night after properly ‘re-hydrating’ after their 80-plus minute bout. It’s going to be a big night.

Word has been spreading fast about Gold. Only two years old, but the ownership, management, players and staff agree that things are happening – something helped by their position at the top of the table. “I think last year was that whole first year, ‘What is this? Is this going to last? Are these guys really professionals?’” ponders Nate. “Whereas this year, I think the guys downstairs have done a good job getting sponsors and getting people in the stands.

“Everywhere I go, people say, ‘oh I’ve heard about the rugby team’. Last year it was non-existent.”

Ryan believes this family-dynamic resonates within the community. “We have old boys and wives and girlfriends that are running the concession booth, running the tickets, cutting the grass, lining the field,” he explains. “You don’t have that at every other facility and that’s unique. I think these players fell in love with that and I think the fans fell in love with that – that it’s a tight-knit family atmosphere too.”

But while they’ve noticed growth, Tim [Falcon] identified some current challenges facing the organisation.

The Gold’s average attendance of 1,500 isn’t where Tim wants it to be given the city has a population of around 390,000, and the state 4.6m – he’s set goals of selling out their home games and having standing-room only options.

A venue larger than their current stadium at Archbishop Shaw High School could also be on the cards, possibly across the river.

Keeping ties strong with the amateur game, growing it at grassroots, is also pivotal to Tim’s plan

“What’s important for the MLR and us at the Gold, is to maintain the tradition, and continuing to be invested in the amateur club and high school levels,” says Tim.

Nate echoes this notion and wants to expand the existing Gold academy into a fully-fledged program me that can give kids at the high school level the training and coaching to excel at rugby, even providing them a potential path to play professionally. “I think that’s something that we need to get set up here in the next five years where we can really get a lot of kids playing. The more kids that are playing young and understand the game, the better the league’s going to become,” he says. “Even though I’m Australian, and I’m a proud Australian, I consider myself an American rugby coach, because I’ve only ever coached here. So, I want the best for this country and I’m going to live here forever with my family.

“I obviously want this league to succeed and I want there to be a place where my daughters can even go play rugby and all that sort of

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stuff. I think the youth and the academies are going to be big over the next five years.”

Right now, with Gold are fast living up to their name on the field, expectations have been raised considerably. “The sky’s the limit,” says Taylor. “We can only go up.”

“We’ve got the depth, experience and just the brotherhood to pull through that and just continue grinding,” adds Eloff.

“I think,” chips in Eric, “as the season goes on, in my personal opinion, we have to have high expectations of ourselves, because we have such unreal talent and such amazing rugby knowledge, and the kind of guys you want to be around.

“I think you can only set a high bar for yourself because of what we think we can do and how much fun we’re going to have doing it.”

A week later, the Gold is back in town after capturing a snowy 21-19 road win against a tough Utah Warriors team.

Fat Tuesday’s also here, and the culmination of the month-long Carnival celebration spills onto the streets for a day of excess and over-indulgence. Thousands of people sport masks and costumes – some of which they’ve worked all year on – just to wear on this day free of judgement.

It’s 8am and although the sun is shining brightly, it’s a crisp, 40-degrees. However, this doesn’t deter the hundreds of thousands of people gathering for the historic Zulu parade, who await the floats and marching bands that are just lining up.

A few miles away in the Marigny, members of the Gold are also gathering for a walking parade that’s starting soon. They’re marching in the annual “Krewe of Ruckus” along with other New Orleans rugby teams and fans.

After filling up on early-morning beverages, the Gold march through the countless colorful blocks, tossing custom NOLA Gold beads to spirited parade-goers along its corners.

Now, having traversed the streets for a few hours, the Gold make their way into the French Quarter and onto Bourbon St.

From a distance, a PVC-pipe goal post towers above the crowd. Indistinguishable people are thrown high into the air for line outs, and at a closer glance, scrums and rucks form in this wild scene in the middle of the street.

The Gold, however, packs into the confines of the dim, hazy rooms and low hanging ceilings of Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop, which dates back to the 1700s and said to be the oldest bar in the country.

As they embrace with arms wrapped around their fellow mates, the squad’s cheers, chuckles, clinks and clanks of their pint glasses craft a distinct New Orleans sound in the heart of the city on its most celebrated event.

Luckily, they have an off day to recover from the thrills of this mystical Mardi Gras day.

The following day, however, this squad will be back to work, but the Gold will surely continue to let the good times roll. ☺

Story by Brian Wollitz



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