

IGR Tries to Turn a Page

I take no joy or satisfaction from writing this; it saddens me because IGR is a great organization that has improved the lives of many ruggers around the world. I only write this because all of my efforts to address this situation informally through mediation have not compelled IGR to acknowledge the truth.

I was staring down at a message with disbelief and annoyance; a fellow trustee and the Secretary who has a sketchy history of racial insensitivity had declared the only majority-black club within International Gay Rugby (IGR) defunct. The club was formed after some players of color experienced race-related issues with the original IGR club in Baltimore (*something similar had already happened in Columbus*). Unfortunately, it was not the first time this club was targeted for unnecessary and unjustifiable scrutiny. There had been six previous requests to review their membership status in their two-year existence; something that had not been required of any other club. The club, with good reason, felt it was being singled out. As a result of this, members of IGR's Diversity and Inclusion Working Group (DIWG) would look into the accusation. The review exposed a concerted effort to ignore and sideline accusations of racism within IGR, starting at the top with its Chairman.

As a consequence of these revelations, the work of the IGR's DIWG was maligned, and the name of its members slandered. These are members who are respected leaders of equality movements worldwide with expertise in academia, human resources, and legal aid --- dedicated globally recognized activists. Fortunately, most of the culprits involved were not re-elected to any leadership role within IGR, and some outstanding folks have taken their place. However, the new

leadership wants to forget the misconduct and ignore the harm done by the prior administration. By trying to turn the page prematurely, they ignore a festering wound and send the horrible message that if you choose to question someone in power within IGR, you will be relentlessly persecuted.

As many don't know me, let me take a minute to introduce myself. My name is Gustavo Ventura, Ph.D.; I go by Gus. I was the first openly gay rugby coach in the United States and helped found the Washington Renegades Rugby Football Club (RFC) in Washington, DC, the first LGBTQ inclusive rugby club in the USA. Since the very beginning, I've been involved with gay rugby helping to found IGR's early version IGRAB (International Gay Rugby Association and Board), and have been intimately engaged over its 20-year history. I was elected as the first Regional Representative for IGR North America – EAST and was then elected as IGR's first-ever geographic North America Trustee in 2018. I was the only North American of IGR's seven trustees.

The discussion between the Secretary and me regarding CCK on a Facebook messenger group for IGR trustees turned ugly. The Secretary submitted his resignation via email. The Chairman stopped the debate and chastised us both for the exchange. Privately, he asked to talk to me where he tried to explain that there was nothing racist amiss. Confused by what I had seen as an obvious problem, I reached out to a teammate who was a part of IGR's DIWG and the executive leadership team serving as the regional representative for the World Barbarians RFC (*I am the coach for this club*). He also happened to be the only person of color on IGR's leadership team. I showed him screenshots of the discussion and asked if I was off base. He said my concerns were valid, and he

offered to talk to the Chairman to explain. When I approached the Chairman to set up the call, he was livid to hear that I had mentioned the situation to someone else. Confused, I stated that since we seven trustees were lily-white, it would be prudent to get input from a person of color. He relented, and I set up a time for a zoom call.* We spent an hour on the call, me on my cell phone in the car while driving up to Orlando, my teammate on his cell, and the Chairman on video. The call went in circles, frustrating my teammate and me. My mother, who had to endure the call on my car speaker, mentioned afterward that the Chairman didn't want to understand the situation; I had come to the same conclusion.

The next several days were stressful as the Chairman and the other trustees discussed disciplinary action for the Secretary and me. I was surprised and dazed by the unexpected defense by my fellow trustees of the Secretary who had resigned. I waited as they held a meeting that following Wednesday to discuss how to proceed. Although I was not in attendance, I was able to review a copy of the zoom proceeding.* The conversation was jaw-dropping; the Chairman made a snide remark that my teammate thought they were all racists, and then they proceeded to conspire to undermine my teammate and me. They had no intention of letting the Secretary resign even though our by-laws provided no avenue for them to ignore it or reverse it.

The next day they announced that they would hold a disciplinary meeting for me that Friday and one for the Secretary (who had already resigned) on the following Monday. I insisted that the trustees allow my teammate a chance to explain why the Secretary's conduct was inappropriate, they grudgingly agreed.* The meeting became a farcical attempt at demanding protocol when they had already proven

that they had no intentions of adhering to the same during their private meeting. Even when we both reported that a private Facebook group was formed by over 100 players of color within IGR because of the prevalent racism within the organization, they scoffed. They alleged that they were not aware of racism within IGR; racism that had been brought to IGR's attention time and again. Instead, they began a campaign to discredit me and the teammate of color who agreed with my assessment of IGR's treatment of people of color. Over the next few months, the trustees would distort the events, publish intentionally deceptive documents, conceal any evidence that undermined their position, launch a sham inquiry led by one of their colleagues, coordinated a social media assault on any individual that came to our defense, and shut down any dissent on IGR controlled forums. My attorney captured this surreal experience in a letter sent to IGR in December 2020.*

Even in the face of this hostile conduct, the Co-Chair for IGR's DIWG developed and conducted a survey on racism within IGR. The results were stunning, and the comments were heartbreaking and deplorable. Players shared horrible stories of discrimination and harassment. In contrast, others submitted hateful comments that claimed exposing racism was some political ploy and that racism was not an issue within IGR. It vindicated what I, my teammate, people of color, and the DIWG members had experienced, said or heard – racism was prevalent within IGR.

In the interim, IGR initiated an "inquiry" to allegedly review my teammate's complaint against the Chairman. Instead the "inquiry" manipulated by the Chairman disparaged DIWG's work and produced a thin report and an

unsubstantiated letter of no confidence filled with false statements and unfounded accusations. The whole process violated every tenet of what a charity organized under the UK Charity Commission should be and ignored IGR's own by-laws. The lack of a real inquiry and the behavior of IGR's leadership began to impact IGR's brand as organizations like The You Can Play Project, USA Rugby, Rugby Canada, and several sponsors pulled back not to get caught in the fray. I and those targeted were pained. Our roles and efforts diminished, our reputations smeared, and our very contributions disparaged by an organization we dearly loved.

A good friend asked if I would be willing to let this go now that the people whose conduct was so deplorable were no longer in power. If it had just been me, I would have considered it, but so many were scarred, shunned, and harassed by all of this and chose to walk away hurt and disgusted. Racism in IGR has cost us the participation of some amazing individuals, some fantastic athletes, and some respectable leaders. Though I'm glad to see the new trustees initiate a plan to address racism*, we cannot forget what brought us to this point nor those who were willing to bring the problem to light. And even though this experience has been horrific, my teammate and I have consistently only asked for two things, that the truth be told and an apology. I truly hope the new trustees will acknowledge the misdeeds of the past, issue an apologize to myself and my teammate, and provide the balm to heal us all. This is the only way to turn the page.

With you,

Gus

*All relevant documentation and evidence can be viewed at www.IGRIquiry.org.
These resources are made available so that everyone can review the information
and draw their own conclusion.