

Between Cultures & Careers



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Randika Alwis shares his experiences as a professional rugby player turned public accountant.

The island country of Sri Lanka is home to vibrant, golden beaches, tropical rainforests, and flatlands dotted with subtropical jungles and soaring mountains. It's also home to Randika Alwis, a tax associate in BKD's Salt Lake City office. Before making his way to the U.S. and BKD, Randika poured himself into his passion for rugby and earned his spot on the Sri Lanka national rugby team.

"I started playing at age 10, and the more I got involved the more I wanted to pursue it professionally. I loved playing rugby, and I love what I'm doing now at BKD," says Randika.

The second most popular sport on the island

Randika grew up in Kalutara, a suburb about 45 minutes from Columbo, Sri Lanka's commercial capital, and attended high school at Trinity College Kandy, one of the country's biggest and most competitive rugby schools. Sri Lanka's rich rugby history also started in Kandy, when the first match was held between Trinity College and Kingswood school in 1879. Although Sri Lanka is most recognized for its success in cricket since winning the 1996 Cricket World Cup, rugby in Sri Lanka continues to gain mass appeal.

Randika competed at school level throughout high school, and in 2015, he was selected first to Sri Lanka's national U18 team and then its U20 team, for players under 18 and 20 years old, respectively. He made captain of the national team the following year.

"It's a really competitive process," says Randika. "The high school and club teams start with around 120 players, then they reduce it to 60 players, then 30, until they choose the final 15 to represent the main team."



Randika (center) competing at school level for Trinity College Kandy.



Randika (far right) representing the Sri Lanka national rugby team.

During Randika's time playing professionally, the team toured all over to places like Thailand, Hong Kong, Dubai, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines, and played at many well-known arenas like the Hong Kong Football Club Stadium. They typically arrived a week early at each location to start training, as well as enjoy the local bars and restaurants. The trips to Dubai and the United Kingdom were some of Randika's favorites, as the cultures seemed especially different and exciting. "I enjoy the culture anywhere I go. Every single country is different in its own way," he says.

Facing tough decisions and adapting to the outcomes

Rugby is widely considered one of the most physically intense sports, and each 80-minute game takes athletes multiple days to recover. In his younger teens, Randika stayed several days in the hospital recovering from surgery to repair a broken nose. Not even a full month passed when it broke for the second time. Some of his other injuries include torn hamstrings and a fractured finger bone that resulted in a permanent metal plate in his right hand. Early in his college career in Sri Lanka, Randika felt the weight and impossibility of sustaining his studies and commitment to rugby. With such a rigorous schedule, there was little time and energy left for also achieving academic success.

"I would train in the mornings, study for an hour, train again, study for two or three more hours, sleep because I'm drained, study again, and do it all over the next day," says Randika. "Half of the time, the team was away training, so I wasn't even in the country."

Faced with two conflicting paths, he knew something needed to change. This realization brought him to Wheeling University in West Virginia—his first time in the U.S.—on a full rugby scholarship, but he was caught in a similar situation. "I thought I could get my degree and come back to Sri Lanka to play rugby, but then I realized that it just wouldn't happen. I decided to shift gears and move to New York," he says.

New experiences in the United States

In New York, Randika worked full time, often over time, until he saved enough money to start college at the University of New York. It was here that he realized the opportunities he had and how exciting a career could be as a CPA. And in Staten Island, which has one of the largest Sri Lanka and Italian populations in the country, he met his wife Traci, who happens to be Italian. With three CPAs and five accountants between families, Randika learned a lot about the accounting world before beginning his studies. Between Randika's father, father-in-law, and sister-in-law, the family offered a window into Big Four, private, and public accounting.

"They also emphasized how different the experience can be from one firm to another. The main reason I was attracted to BKD was the culture. You see how employees talk about their firms, and nothing compared to the way BKD employees talked. They just loved being here," says Randika.

Salt Lake City Partner Dave DeMille is grateful to welcome Randika to the team. "Randika is an extremely hard worker and a great fit at BKD," he says.

While in some ways the two career paths couldn't be more different, there's still an incredible crossover of abilities and experiences.

Playing rugby gave Randika confidence, time management, and organizational skills to tackle the challenges he'd face as an accountant. "In rugby, you have to make decisions under pressure within milliseconds. You always have a strategy, but often things don't go according to plan, so you need to know how to adapt," he says. "Since it's a team sport, you have to make sure you voice your opinion and listen to everyone else's opinions as well to get the best results."

Mallory Mills, a senior associate in the Salt Lake City office, views Randika as an eternal optimist and a colleague who is always a joy to be around. "Whether he's working long hours, completing difficult assignments, or navigating the complexity around the extended tax deadline, he always holds a positive attitude," she says.

Although he's hung up his rugby gear, Randika still finds time to exercise and be outdoors. Traci and Randika and their 15-month-old Newfoundland, Giacomo, love spending the day at their favorite dog park, going on hikes, hanging out at the lake, and soaking up life in the United States.

"The diversity of New York was really similar to Sri Lanka," he says. "But it's amazing how different it gets from place to place in this country. From West Virginia to New York and Salt Lake City, your surroundings, people, and culture are entirely different. It's something I've never experienced before. I love it here."



Randika and Traci at Disney World, Florida.



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