

Former Spartans rugby duo come out on top

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Jesse Lofthouse has played rugby for a number of years.

But if you asked the 21-year-old Stouffville resident which season stands out the most during the time he's taken to the pitch, it won't take long for a response.

In fact, Lofthouse doesn't have to look that far back in his memoirs.

The recent 2013 campaign was by far his most rewarding.

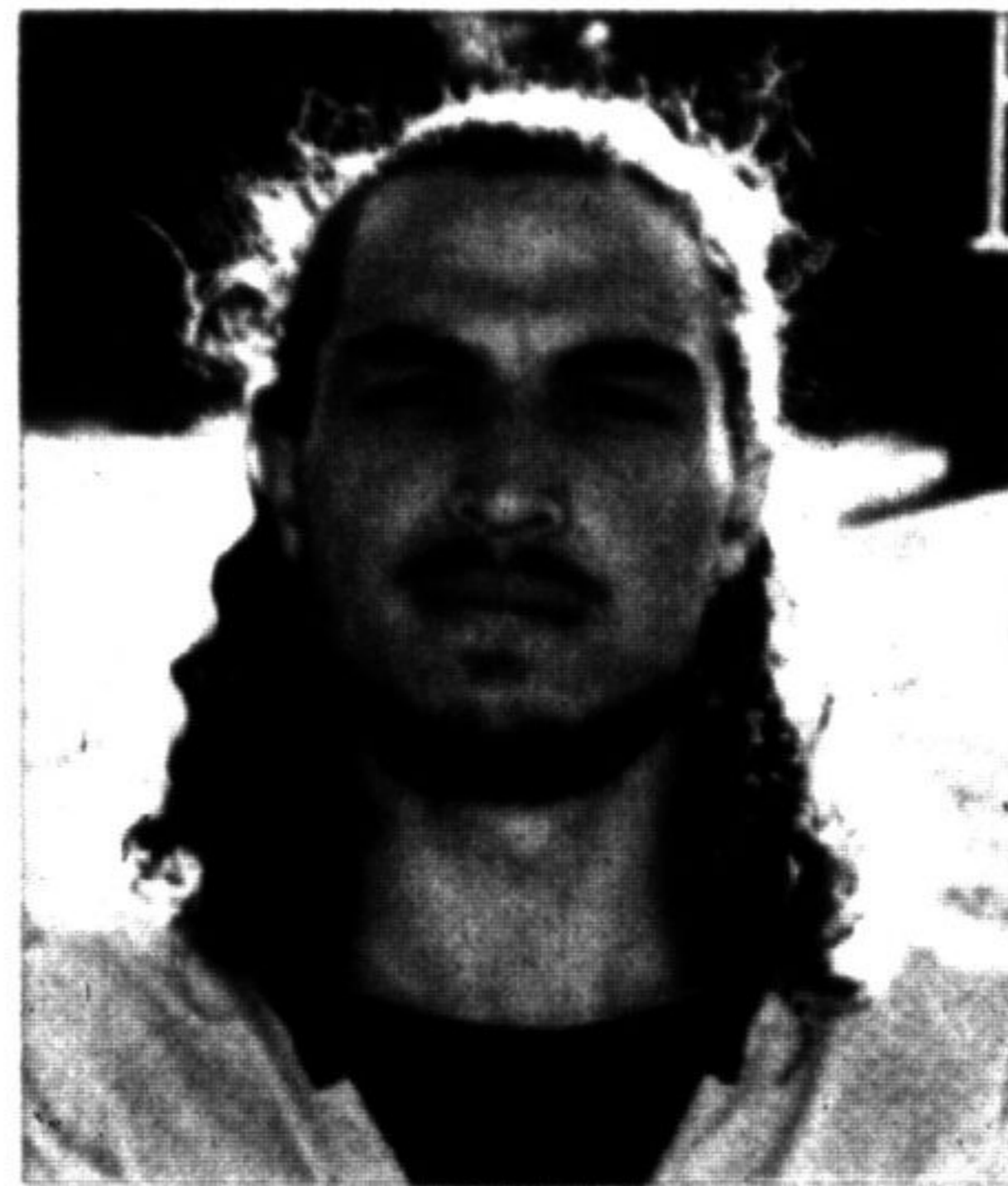
Especially after he was a part of two championship clubs.

One was the Ontario Blues, who won the Canadian Rugby Championship senior men's title this past summer.

More recently, though, Lofthouse was a member of the Markham Irish Canadian Rugby Football Club men's firsts that tackled the coveted McCormick Cup provincial title with a hard-fought 8-3 win over the Aurora Barbarians on a cold and windy day, played on a muddy Fletcher's Field in Markham last Saturday.

For the Markham Irish Canadians, the McCormick Cup title was their first since 2008 and the club's provincial leading 17th Ontario Cup (1950-81) and McCormick Cup (1982 to present).

"It's definitely been a good year and a lot of



JESSE LOFTHOUSE

fun," Lofthouse said of what he's accomplished this season.

While winning the provincial senior men's title with the Ontario Blues in just his first season with them was rewarding, Lofthouse was quick to note his latest feat with the Markham Irish Canadian team was a little more satisfying.

Especially since he's played with the core of the team the last three years.

Among that group are several Stouffville residents and fellow Stouffville District Secondary School graduates, including his older

brother and outside centre, Jordan, prop Pat Laffan, scrum half Chris Boake, outside and inside centre Joe Beare, second row Connor MacDonald, second row Gavin Howe and his older brother and back row member, Adam.

"I grew up playing with these guys and to finally put it all together, it feels amazing. All of the development and hard work we put in has finally paid off," Lofthouse, a winger for the Markham Irish Canadians, said. "To win the cup (McCormick) is awesome. I can't even describe it. It's unbelievable."

Reflecting on the match, Lofthouse felt several factors were critical in their success.

For starters, he said their gameplan worked to near perfection.

"We had to try and keep the ball for as long as we could and when they (Aurora) had the ball we couldn't afford to give them any ground," he explained.

It also didn't hurt that Mother Nature appeared to smile on them by creating adverse playing conditions, which worked in their favour.

"We really have a good forward attack and a team-like Aurora likes to run and spin the ball out wide and the wet and muddy conditions did not help them."

Along with those factors, Lofthouse was quick to credit the resolve of his teammates.

"We had a lot of heart," he said. "The

night before the game, we had a team dinner and had a long talk and said whatever it takes to win, we've got to do it and we got the job done."

In savoring the moment of winning the McCormick Cup, Lofthouse revealed it also broke a personal long-standing curse he experienced, along with Laffan, extending back to their days as teammates on the Stouffville District High School Spartans senior boys' rugby team.

During their time with the Spartan seniors, Lofthouse recalled they fell short of winning the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations AAAA gold medal on two occasions.

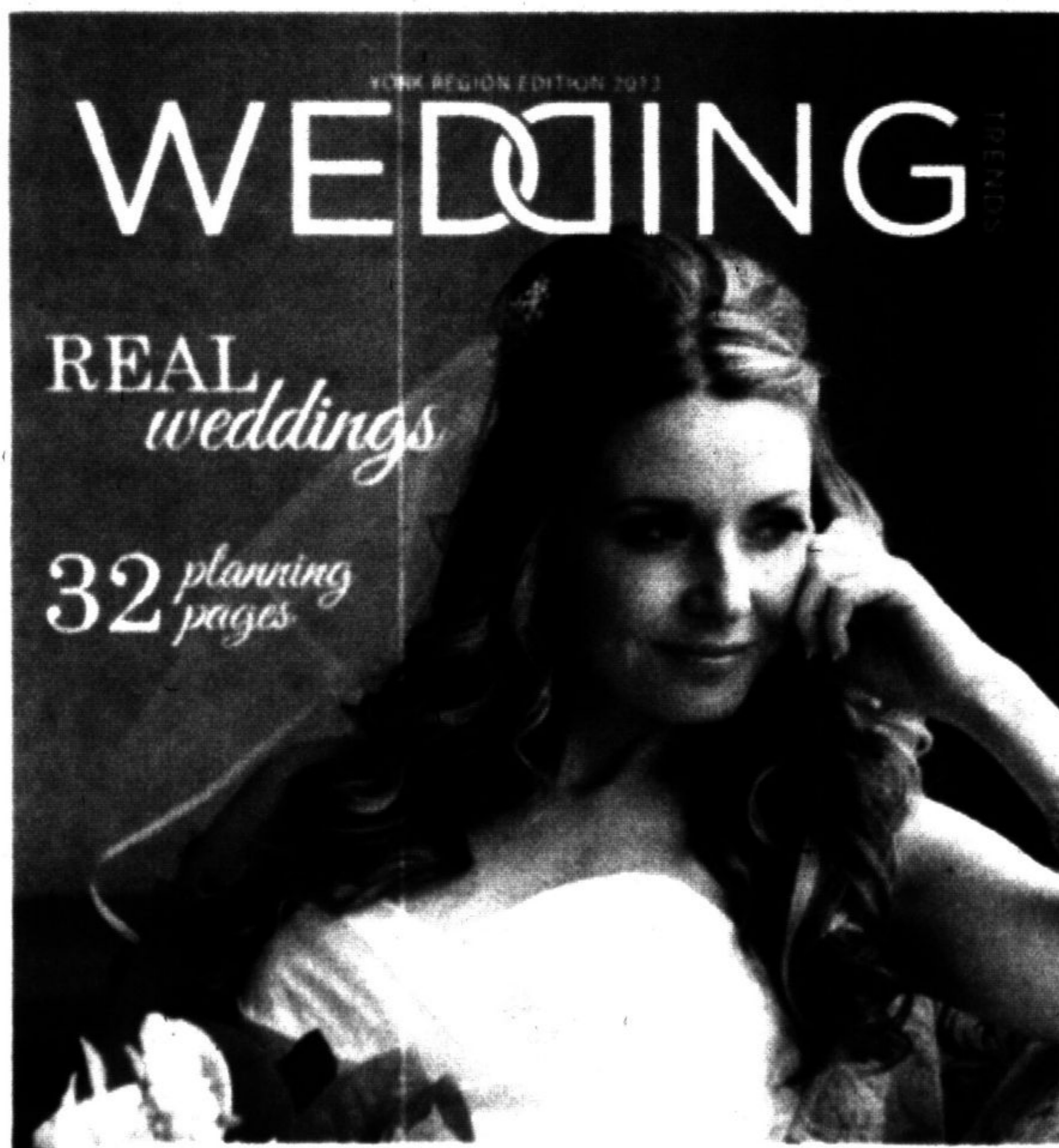
Since that time, the pair had not played together on a championship team.

That was until regulation time expired in Saturday's finale, when they immediately embraced each other with a congratulatory hug.

"Last week, when we played in the semifinals (which resulted in a 17-12 win over previously unbeaten Brantford Harlequins) we said to each other that we've got to get out of this slump," recalled Lofthouse. "We played together and lost in the (OFSAA) finals when we were at Stouffville District High School and to reach the final gave us some hope."

"It's nice to know that we finally came out on top."

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