

Rugby: Founded in the turbulent '60s, the Buffalo club is alive and well

Still feisty after 50 years



Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

Buffalo Rugby Club player Sean Menz carries the ball during a recent practice on the Meadow at Delaware Park.

Rugby clubs are multiplying in WNY and across the U.S.

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The 1960s and unrest went hand and hand. The Vietnam War infuriated people across the country, leading to high-profile campus protests. When students weren't causing havoc on campus quads they were experimenting with drugs, discussing how little their parents understood them. Woodstock was a telltale sign that people were reacting to nuclear paranoia in a whole new way.

The "radicalism" of the era transcended politics and coincidentally led to the birth of a sport in Buffalo with roots going all the way back to the ancient Romans. When looking for an outlet, a handful of young rebels turned to the Buffalo Rugby Club, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this summer.

"It was counter way to what people perceived as institutionalized sports," said former Buffalo Rugby Club head coach Ron Astridge. "We're talking about the '60s and '70s, so everyone felt that way about everything. Rugby was a perfect fit for a lot of people."

It would be an understatement to say the sport has come a long way. Rugby has become institutionalized, moving into the realm of regulated athletics. There are high school programs,

including ones at Canisius, City Honors, Grand Island, Hamburg, Kenmore, Orchard Park and West Seneca.

"When I was a freshman, there were, including myself, three guys on the team with high school experience," said St. Bonaventure coach Clarence Picard, who played the sport while a student at the university. "Now I'd say probably over two-thirds of our current roster played in high school."

Players start younger, train harder and treat it like any other sport. They come to clubs at a younger age with much more experience.

"We do two or three practices a week, but also you have to do stuff on your own," said Collin

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SPORTS



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

Buffalo Women's Rugby Club players practice on the Meadow at Delaware Park earlier this month. Players are attracted to a sport that offers contact without the same health risks as football.

Women's rugby is in Olympics

RUGBY • from D3

deGuerhery, who plays on the Buffalo Rugby Club team. He started playing as a freshman at Kenmore East, then continued at Buffalo State.

"It being a club, it's more on you," he said.

There once was just the Buffalo Rugby Club in the area, with its teams playing as the Buffalo Old Boys. Now others have popped up in South Buffalo and Ken-Ton. Although the Buffalo Rugby Club's numbers remain around 50 players, the numbers in all of Western New York have grown.

Multiple local colleges play the sport at the club level. In July, St. Bonaventure named Picard and Andrew Tui Osborne as full-time coaches for the men's and women's teams, respectively, to take advantage of the sport's growing popularity.

That growth is reflected in the rest of the country. The number of rugby players in the U.S. surpassed one million last year, with the sport growing by 14 percent each year from 2010 to 2015. A game featuring the world-power New Zealand All Blacks sold out the 61,000 seat Soldier Field in 2014.

A professional rugby league, PRO Rugby, was started in the U.S. this year with teams in Denver, Columbus, Sacramento, San Diego and San Francisco. The league is hoping to expand for its second season.

Rugby can be found on national television. It's a different world than Astridge is used to, when enthusiasts of the sport used to subscribe to

overseas streaming services to catch even a glimpse of rugby.

And the sport's greatest boost might come with men's rugby having returned to the Olympics after a 92-year hiatus and women's rugby joining for the first time.

Awareness is at an all-time high, but it begs the question – Why is this sport growing so much?

For one, it offers players a contact sport that doesn't have the same health risks as football. Unlike in football, no one leads with their heads when tackling. A hit too high will draw a penalty, and one too low will result in a knee to the face. Some football coaches like Seattle's Pete Carroll are trying to bring this technique to football as well.

Another allure is that players get to toil on both sides of the ball, so there isn't much downtime. deGuerhery said that's an exciting development for many of the football players who try the sport out.

Also, unlike football, rugby is played by both men and women. As of 2015, 1.77 million women play rugby worldwide according to the sport's governing body, World Rugby.

Rugby's popularity among spectators can partially be chalked up to a new style of rugby, called sevens. Historically, each rugby team has 15 players on the field, but that can make the sport hard to follow and slow it down. Sevens cuts the number of players, allowing for more space on the field. It's the style of rugby they're playing in the Olympics, and the style at which the U.S. is the most successful.

Despite all the increased interest,

many at the Buffalo Rugby Club still like to hold on to its roots, the renegade nature that made them fall in love with the sport. Some players of yesteryear say the young additions don't know how to have fun like they used to.

Those former players will get to wax nostalgic to the younger generation during the anniversary celebration from Thursday to Sunday. Some 200-300 alumni will return for a long weekend of festivities, some coming from as far as Australia, England and Wales. Former players will get to see a game played by the current squad and participate in an alumni scrimmage on their normal home turf in Delaware Park.

"It's a little weird, because I watched that team growing up," deGuerhery said. "A lot of those guys I grew up watching are retiring now, so it's weird jumping into their shoes."

The sport may be as competitive as ever, but at the heart, it's not much different. The players may be bigger, they may train harder, but they are still travelling the country out of pocket to take part in the sport they love.

"A lot of my friends during the summer haven't been doing anything, and I'm as busy as ever," deGuerhery said.

"They ask, 'Is it worth it?' I say, 'Yes, it's definitely worth it.' I've travelled so much with rugby that I wouldn't have done otherwise. I've gained friends and just done so much cool stuff that if I never played rugby I would have never done."

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