

Old Boys Enjoy Rugby Pastime

Come close. I have a secret for you.

The game called rugby is a mistake . . . an accident.

Had it not been for William Ellis, a 19th Century Wrong Way Corrigan, it's quite possible that very few "scrums" would have been formed over the last 135 years.

Ellis was a soccer player when he enrolled at Rugby College in England in 1823. . . . a not-too-good soccer player.

Frustrated in his inability to kick the bouncing ball with any skill, Ellis picked it up during a game and carried it down the field under an arm.

ELLIS was subjected to a great deal of criticism for breaching the etiquette of England's royal game, but as news of his innovation spread, several teams decided to try "that game at Rugby."

Many years passed and many "milestones" were noted before the game reached Buffalo.

The spirit, character, exhilaration, enjoyment, unpretentiousness, pure amateurism, and proper attitude of the game of rugby is being carried out in Western New York by the Buffalo Old Boys Rugby Football Club.

WHEN the University of Buffalo decided to fund every student activity except those where a ball was used and scores were kept, the rugby team ceased operating as a school function.

"We took our sport from the campus to Delaware Park and represented the City of Buffalo rather than UB," said Bruce Marzahn.

Since most of the team members were in graduate school or on the faculty, they were older than the players on the college teams they played . . . hence the name "Old Boys."

The hotbed for rugby is England, where it is called football. But trying to compare rugby to Monday night football in the United States is like comparing Hubert Ginn to O. J. Simpson.

THE RULES are as complex as they are simple, and no cram course will make "set scrum," "loose scrum," "ruck and maul" and "line-out" household words.

In amateur circles, roughly 99 per cent of the world's rugby players, it is called a gentleman's game, or a social game, and for good reason . . . a game consists of 30 players and just one referee. Players are bound by the spirit of the game to play by the rules.

It's a game that sates a crowd's appetite for action and, to an extent, violence. But it's

also a game played by puritans, not hedonists.

An old rugby saying explains it: "Football is a game for gentlemen played by ruffians; rugby is a game for ruffians played by gentlemen."

THERE ARE 15 players to a team, eight forwards and seven backs, and no substitutes are allowed. If a player receives a crippling injury, his team plays a man short.

It is the forward's duty to form a scrum after every dead ball and pass it back to a back who can either run with the ball until tackled or kick it.

After a player is tackled, he is duty-bound to turn the ball loose and allow play to continue.

The field is called a pitch, a score is called a "try" and worth three points, and a kick across the goal line is worth two points.

THE FOOT is a big part of the game and drop-kick field goals of up to 55 yards are not uncommon.

Amateur rugby is less violent than the professional league in England that is dramatized in the current hit Broadway play "The Changing Room."

Players do not wear pads and the amateur attitude of "win, but not at any cost" keeps down the number of serious injuries.

Most of the amateur injuries fall into the sprained ankle, bruised rib and fat-lip category. "We wear the injuries as kind of a badge," said Neil Smith of the Old Boys.

The game is played in the spirit of camaraderie. It's mainly a game of backslapping and beer.

"We meet the opposing players before the game and always drink with them afterward," said Old Boys forward Ron Astridge. "You treat opposing players as human beings."

THE SPORT has no ethnic nor social barriers, and the only rewards are emotional.

"We have doctors, lawyers, students and teachers on our team," said Marzahn. "We don't look for sponsors, as they are looked down upon, and even the referees are not paid. Everybody pays dues to keep the club going."

It is with this spirit that the Old Boys will begin play April 13 as members of the Niagara Rugby Union.

The Old Boys will take on Syracuse University at 1 o'clock at Delaware Park, and an excerpt from the Rugby Code best describes what the outcome will be:

"The amity and good will, which are bigger than the result of any particular match, endure long after the match has been forgotten."



LOOSE BALL: A member of the Buffalo Old Boys rugby team (center, white pants) battles with members of the Syracuse Rugby Club for possession of the ball Saturday afternoon during their game at Delaware Park. Buffalo won the New York State Rugby League opener, 14-6.

Photo by Ric Delaney