

COMMENTARY

Rugby Club scrums together to chase dream



Jerry Sullivan
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One Sunday last May, the players from the Buffalo Rugby Club filed onto a bus in Newport, R.I., and began the long ride home to Western New York. For the fifth straight year, they had advanced to the Sweet 16 of USA Rugby's national tournament and fallen short of a berth in the Final Four.

Five years in a row, five crushing defeats. What do you say on the way home? A lot of the players were in their mid- to late-30s. They'd given 10 years of their lives to the club. They were lawyers and doctors and engineers, family men with responsibilities. How long could the older guys keep chasing the dream?

One more year, at least. As Paul Vallone recalls it, a "bunch of thirtysomethings" got together on that bus ride and talked through their despair. They hadn't come this far to quit now. But they realized that if they ever were going to reach a Final Four, they would need to renew their commitment to the team, and

each other.

"It didn't take much convincing," said Vallone, 37, the team's captain and one of several lawyers on the roster. "That loss left a bad taste in our mouths. We had worked so hard."

If people only knew how hard rugby players worked, how much training was involved to play the sport at a high level. They laugh at the old notion that rugby players are hooligans who use the sport as an excuse to get drunk.

"Everyone has stereotypes about the sport," Vallone said. "They saw someone run naked in a bar once in college, so they think it's still like that. Guys work out six days a week to compete at this level."

The Buffalo players were determined to be in top physical condition this year. Last fall, they went 6-0, assuring themselves of home-field advantage in the first round of the 2004 nationals. In February, they began training for the spring season.

"We worked out inside in El-



JOHN HICKEY/Buffalo News

A Buffalo Rugby Club player doesn't get much running room after breaking free of the scrum against the Chicago South Side Irish.

ma, and it was hard," said Bob Chester, the coach. "We put in a lot of extra work."

The players say they might have cursed Chester once or twice during the winter workouts.

But it paid off. This past weekend, the Buffalo Rugby Club hosted the first round of the national tournament. On Saturday,

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they ripped Kalamazoo, 65-0. On Sunday, they held off Chicago Southside, 18-10, on a slick, muddy field at Delaware Park.

The Chicago players were bigger, more vociferous, eager to move on to the Midwest final in two weeks in their own city. But Buffalo was faster, deeper and better conditioned. They have a 28-man roster and held out some players from Saturday's game to have the strongest team possible on Sunday.

They took an early 7-0 lead on a try (worth five points) by Nick Gelling, who came from Australia this year to play for Buffalo. Chicago pulled within two, 7-5, but Buffalo took control midway through the second half.

Buffalo was leading, 12-5, when flanker Alex Nadiak was fouled midway through the second 40-minute half. Nadiak, caked in mud from an afternoon in the scrums (the part of the game where the teams lock arms

and slam headlong into each other), made a left-footed penalty kick with inches to spare, giving Buffalo a commanding 15-5 lead.

Along the home team's sideline, a community of rugby lovers rooted the team on. Many of them played for the team when it was known as the Old Boys. Jack Schweigel, who is 60, played on the original Old Boys squad in 1966. He'll be hooking up with some of his old teammates at a senior tournament in Canada.

"Athletically, the sport is at a whole new level," Schweigel said. He gestured toward Chris Kowalski, Buffalo's speedy fullback, who was a record-setting punt returner at Canisius College. Most of the players were top athletes in other sports at one time.

A few of them have suffered serious injuries and been told to give up the sport. Ted Graney, 38, has a reconstructed knee. His doctor told him to quit three years ago. But he can't stop, not until he gets to a Final Four.

"I've been team president,

captain and treasurer," said Graney, who is also a lawyer. "A core group of us has been there the last five years. No one wants to give it up until we get there."

When it was over, Chester gathered his team together and told them how proud he was of them. All those workouts in February had paid off in the final 10 minutes, when they dominated a bigger Chicago team.

Afterward, three of the older guys — Vallone, Graney and Nadiak — stood together, exhausted and happy. In two weeks, they will fly to Chicago for the Midwest final. If they finish in the top three, they return to Rhode Island for a sixth straight Sweet 16.

You wonder why they keep coming back at their age, why they keep chasing this shared obsession. Vallone asked that question on the bus a year ago. The answer was simple: "We do it," he said, "for each other."

e-mail: jsullivan@buffnews.com