

You Don't Have to Be Crazy, but

By VIC CARUCCI

It goes well beyond the satisfaction of competitive hunger. If it were that simple, they'd be playing softball or basketball or a racquet sport. If it were that simple, you'd find them on a golf course or in a bowling alley or perhaps even flaunting their intellect around a Trivial Pursuit board.

Any number of safer, if not saner, alternatives exist for the men who call themselves the Buffalo Old Boys.

Only rugby can satisfy their voracious appetites for competition, contact and camaraderie.

"To me, it's a tremendous release for a week's worth of anxiety," says 29-year-old Dr. Tom Little, chief resident at Veterans Administration Hospital. "It's really therapeutic, being able to go out and go nuts for 80 minutes."

Like most rugby clubs, the Old Boys have a great deal of variety among their 50 members. They are physicians, attorneys, biologists, teachers, salesmen, electricians, carpenters, construction workers and college students. One guy even makes his living as a chimney sweep.

Professional types can be found on almost every roster, because they get hooked on the sport in college and can't shake it from their systems after they graduate. In fact, it was the University of Buffalo club team that became the Old Boys in 1971, after rugby was slashed from the student activity fund. And Old Boys is a term used in England, where the game originated in 1823, to describe college alumni.

The youngest Buffalo Old Boy is 21; the oldest, 42. Home games are played at Delaware Park, usually on Saturday afternoons and rarely before anything large enough to qualify as a crowd, between March and October (with August designated as a rest period between spring and fall schedules). A first-time spectator is told simply to look for the field across from the Buffalo Zoo.



Buffalo Old Boys' Jim Hess comes up with the ball during a lineout.

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BILL WIPPERT/Buffalo News

Rugby

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Once there, however, he can't quite be certain if he has found the right place . . . or merely an area where the animals are allowed to roam free.

Rugby purists like to offer the textbook explanation of how the sport uniquely combines the skills of football and soccer (it was a frustrated soccer player in Rugby, England, who gave birth to the game when he suddenly picked up the ball and bolted for the net before being mugged by the opposition). They insist there really is some rhyme and reason to what is taking place on the 75 by 160-yard playing surface.

But from the sidelines, it appears to be nothing more than a human demolition derby. Thirty overgrown kids — 15 to a side — mixing it up in the mud with little, if any, regard for their physical well being or dignity.

And all for the sake of advancing — i.e. carrying, kicking or laterally passing — what looks like a football, but more closely resembles a watermelon. A try, when player and ball cross the goal line, is worth four points; a conversion kick over the goal post, attempted after each try, is worth two; a successful penalty kick is worth three.

THE RULES, mercilessly ignoring the fact that pads aren't worn by the players, leave plenty of room for kamikaze behavior. Sometimes, however, rattling someone's teeth with a flying tackle just isn't enough to vent the many frustrations that accumulate during the week. When the ball, as will frequently happen, vanishes underneath a pile of bodies, the rule book tends to do the same. There is raking — which is when one's cleats are literally raked over one's prone body — kicking, punching, clawing and, for fans of former Buffalo Bill Conrad Dobler, even biting.

Much to their credit, rugby's founding fathers made no attempt to gloss over the sport's darker side when establishing terminology. Intense struggles for possession are known as rucks and mauls, and are every bit as savage as they sound.

"With 30 players and one referee, intimidation is part of the game," says 37-year-old Ron Astridge, a chemistry teacher at Buffalo Traditional High School. "Certainly, you can get a cheap shot in anywhere. The thing that keeps things in control is the thought that you can get one back at any time."

"You'll maybe get one fight a game," says 33-year-old Gene Adams, an attorney and the Old Boys' vice president. "I've never seen an all-out brawl, but that's

not to say they don't occur between toots of the referee's whistle."

AN OLD Boy usually greets Sunday morning with a wince. Even if he somehow managed to avoid being tackled, raked, kicked, punched, clawed or bitten, he still must overcome the ill effects of 80 minutes of almost continuous action. You see, substitutions are not permitted in rugby — except when a player is badly injured — and there only is a five-minute break between 40-minute halves.

"I live on aspirin," Adams says, only half in jest.

It is not uncommon for an Old Boy to come hobbling into his place of business Monday morning with a black eye and a fat lip. A scrape here. A gash there. Bruises everywhere.

But worse than the discomfort these Saturday afternoon souvenirs produce are the questions and comments they regularly attract. Astridge dreads days like that.

"I'll walk in the classroom with a black eye, and kids will ask, 'What did your wife do to you?'" he says. "But, actually, I get it more from the other teachers than the kids."

"Four years ago, as a medical student in Augusta, Ga., I broke my nose in a game and then I went to work at the hospital that same day, wearing a cast on it," recalls Little. "Some of the patients joked around, saying things like, 'You look like you need the doctor more than I do.'"

INVARIABLY, someone will ask, "Why?"

Why does a grown man take such serious risks with no multi-million-dollar contract or any other form of remuneration (in fact, the Old Boys have to pay to play)?

Why does he put himself through so much hell on Saturday afternoon and even more on Sunday and Monday mornings?

"I feel these lumps and bruises are part of my life and I've gotten them in a good, healthy way," says 42-year-old Paul Frauenhofer, a salesman and the oldest of the Old Boys who turned to rugby two years ago after the Buffalo Geminis semi-pro football team folded. "It's enjoyment to me. Besides, in our family, we lose it mentally at about the age of 15."

"It really stimulates you," 27-year-old Steve Kuznik, a construction supervisor and the Old Boys' president, explains. "It's the type of sport that makes you realize that you can always be in better shape. It's an 80-minute battle, and when you get done with it, you feel like you've been through a battle. But you get the

satisfaction that you gave it your all — win or lose.”

“I think the longer you play the game, the more you know how not to get hurt badly,” says Little. “You get wiser. You learn how to take a tackle and how to tackle somebody else.”

Astridge tried to quit once. Tried to act his age, just as most of his co-workers kept suggesting he do.

Then, it quickly dawned on him that he had nothing better to occupy his spare time. Nothing that could replace the non-stop, spontaneous action that had been filling his Saturday afternoons seven months a year since 1971.

“It’s kind of boring otherwise,” Astridge says. “I still like the game and I’m still able to get in pretty good shape and play competitively. You don’t like to give up something that you do well.”

RUGBY’S SOCIAL side is an equally powerful magnet. There is a fraternal relationship between teammates and opponents that can’t be found in most team sports. The Old Boys stay in touch with each other year round, and have friends on every club in the Upstate Rugby Union, not to mention the friendships they’ve made during periodic tours of England, Wales and Ireland. In fact, earlier this week, they hosted a team from the London, England, police force.

“After a game, no matter how physical it gets, it’s over,” says Kuznik. “One time, we were playing a club from Pittsburgh in Delaware Park. There was a big pileup and this guy was keeping his hand on the ball, which is flagrantly against the rules. The referee can’t see everything, so sometimes you’ve got to take the law into your own hands. I started raking his hand, which is also against the rules, but he wouldn’t take it off the ball. So I kept raking. Finally, he came after me, but they separated us right away.

“After the match, he and I happened to be the first ones at the bar. So we sat around and had a couple of drinks together. Hey, it was part of the game. I had to do it, he had to do it. And then it was over.”

Post-game parties, where the home team usually treats the visitors to a couple of kegs of beer and some snacks, are as much a part of rugby’s tradition as the funny-looking ball and bone-crunching action. And you’d be hard-pressed to find a rugby player who didn’t like to party.

“A recluse just doesn’t stick around, no matter how physically talented he is,” Little points out.

THE OLD Boys’ party spot is the Park Meadow on Russell Avenue. Win or lose, the hosts and guests rarely fail to enjoy themselves, singing the off-color lyrics

Buffalo Old Boys Schedule

The following is the balance of the Buffalo Old Boys’ spring schedule and their complete fall schedule:

Spring

May 19 at Lilac Festival Tournament in Rochester, 10 a.m.

May 26 at Rochester, 1 p.m.

June 2 Pittsburgh, 1 p.m.

June 9 at Batavia Dead Ants Tournament, 9 a.m.

July 21 vs. Niagara at Port Colborne, Ont., 1 p.m.

Fall

Sept. 8-9 Battle in Buffalo II Tournament at Delaware Park, 10 a.m.

Sept. 15 Rochester, 1 p.m.

Sept. 22 at Binghamton, 1 p.m.

Sept. 29 at Syracuse, 1 p.m.

Oct. 6 Rochester, 1 p.m.

Oct. 13 at Albany, 1 p.m.

Oct. 27 Brockport, 1 p.m.

NOTE: All home games played at Delaware Park, across from the Buffalo Zoo.

of traditional rugby songs as loudly as possible until the kegs run dry.

Most Old Boys will tell you they’ve outgrown the days when such gatherings resembled the toga-party scene from the movie “Animal House.” They say that sort of thing is pretty much confined to the college level, where rugby’s biggest appeal always has been the fact it doesn’t require coaches (particularly, in the 1960s, when supervision was something to avoid).

But there still is the occasional party where an Old Boy will consume enough beer to do, as Astridge puts it, “some pretty entertaining things.” That is, if your idea of entertainment is a guy shedding his clothes and singing and dancing on top of a piano.

Such was the routine of one recently retired member who shall remain nameless.

“This guy used to have his clothes off at every other party,” Astridge recalls. “We went to Tullamore, Ireland, in 1978, and the first night we were there, they had a party for us. And before you know it, there he was, singing and dancing on top of a piano . . . stark naked.

“The reaction? Well, all I know is that all the women in the place started throwing coins at him.”

Sure, there are any number of safer, if not saner, ways in which the Buffalo Old Boys can satisfy their competitive hunger.

But it’s not that simple.