

Mike Healy

Buffalo Old Boys Expect Rugby Hosts to Give Them Hard Time



WHILE THOUSANDS of people are lying on southern beaches lethargically trying to tan the insides of their elbows, a group of people from this area will be heading for the mist-bound British Isles to tackle and be tackled on rugby playing fields.

Though it's not most people's idea of a spring vacation, the Buffalo Old Boys Rugby Club will be touring Wales and England beginning Thursday. Thirty-five players and 10 wives and girl friends will spend 11 days in the United Kingdom.

Patrick Giles, one of the organizers of the trip, said that the U.S. Eastern Rugby Union tells him that the Old Boys tour will be one of the bigger amateur international tours this year. The Old Boys will play six games against such teams as Abercarn and Llandovery in Wales and the Old Saltleas, Old Centrals and COBRAS (College of Birmingham Rugby Athletic Society) in Birmingham, England.

RUGBY IS AN ANCESTOR of American football. Giles said the English game started in the 18th century "when a frustrated soccer player picked up the ball and ran with it." The running and tackling game is played without padding or any special equipment, and yet Giles said he feels rugby is less violent and produces fewer major injuries than football.

"No blocking is allowed, and the physical contact between players is mostly pushing and pulling. That's a lot different than standing back 20 yards and running headlong at somebody like in football," he said.

Giles said he played semipro football in Lockport and saw three men go under the knife for knee injuries in one year. He's been playing rugby for the last three years, and there's been only one serious injury in all the Old Boys games.

IT'S AN INCREDIBLY strenuous game, with two 40 minute periods, no substitutions and no time-outs except for penalties. When a player is tackled he must release the ball immediately, so there are long stretches of continuous running without a break.

Perhaps the inevitable exhaustion that follows

a rugby game spawned the "social aspect" of the sport. Giles said the postgame parties, thrown by the hometeam are "part and parcel of the game."

"At the party you mingle with the other team, drink and sing traditional songs—most of them dirty. But the drinking and singing are expected of you. They're part of the game."

"THE PARTY ASPECT was a little hard for some of us to accept at the beginning, because in American sports you build up so much animosity for somebody on the other team, and never see him again until you play the team again. But when a rugby game ends, all animosity is left on the field, and everybody gets together," said Giles.

Another aspect of the formal fellowship of the sport is the accommodations the Old Boys and their companions will have on the tour. It's traditional that the hometeam players put the visiting players up for the night, so the Old Boys will be staying with families rather than in motels. Not a bad introduction to countries most of the Americans have never visited before.

THE OLD BOYS ARE a cross section of men from the ages of 21 to 34 who are students, teachers, business executives—actually the only thing they have in common is that they're all in decent shape and enjoy rugby parties, according to Giles.

The Buffalo Old Boys Rugby Club began as a UB team, in 1966, but became a city club in 1972. Though the tour is booked up, membership in the club is open to "anybody of just about any size" who can get in good enough shape to take "this sporting life."

Giles said there's one hitch in the tour. The Birmingham Old Saltleas have recently become enamoured of American basketball, and have challenged the Buffalo Old Boys to a game.

"I'm afraid they think all Americans are super basketball players," said Giles, shaking his head. "I think they'll be sadly surprised when they see us on a basketball court."