By James Brennan

WHY does a reasonably sane, 29-year-old Buffalo executive risk life, limb and ear to play rugby football — for no pay, no glory, relatively little fan adulation and two or three paragraphs of recognition in the newspaper?

Why would he and his teammates even have gone so far as to have paid their own way last spring for a rugby-playing pilgrimage to Great Britain, the home of the sport?

Neil Smith, an administrator for Ryder Truck and a member of the Buffalo Old Boys Rugby Club, plays because he enjoys the rough body contact and unique camaraderie of the sport.

"That's why I joined the Old Boys," Smith explains. "I played professional football with the Toronto Argonauts in the Canadian Football League for two seasons and wanted to stay in condition."

And how does his wife, Karen, feel about being a sports widow to rugby?

"Being a former pro, Neil likes to keep physically active," she says. "So unless he plays a contact sport of some kind, he drives me crazy around the house."

But what about a recent newspaper report that tells grimly of a professional British rugger having his ear bitten off during a game? Or another gruesome account of a rugby player being taken to the hospital to have a tooth removed from his thigh? Doesn't the threat of serious injury worry a rugby player's wife?

"Neil can be hurt picking up a trash can," she responds. "He works out twice a week with the team, staying in the right condition. The only time he's been hurt is when somebody from the other team wasn't playing by the rules."

Brad Hovey, 20, the Old Boys' youngest member, agrees. "I think football is a more dangerous sport than rugby," says the UB student. "In rugby, your two most common injuries are separated or sprained shoulders and head cuts. But in football, you're likely to see ripped knees, broken ankles, spinal compressions and concussions."

Even so, rugby is hardly for the faint of heart. Rough body contact is the nature of the beast, and from the sight, sound and smell of a rugby game, you might often wonder if it's beasts — not men — playing this violent sport.

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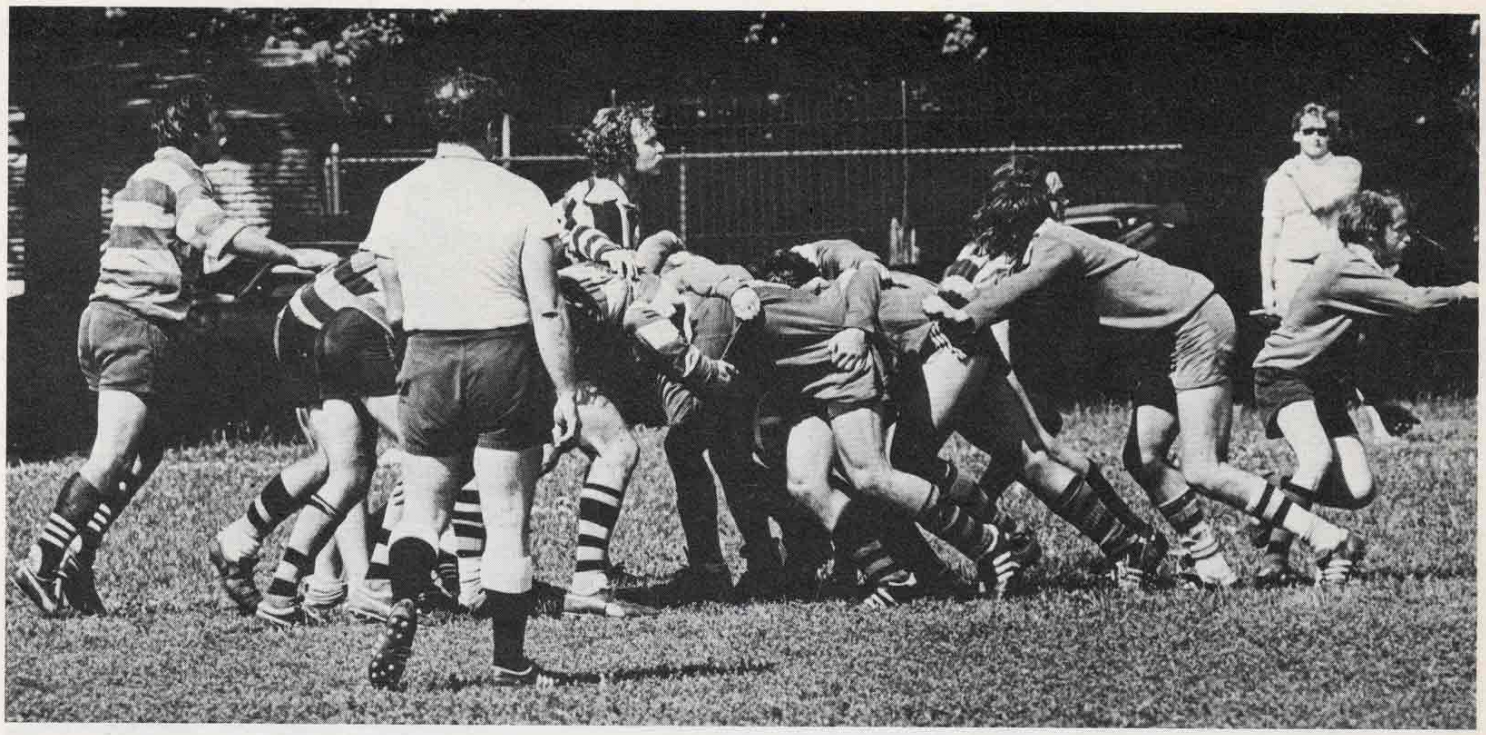


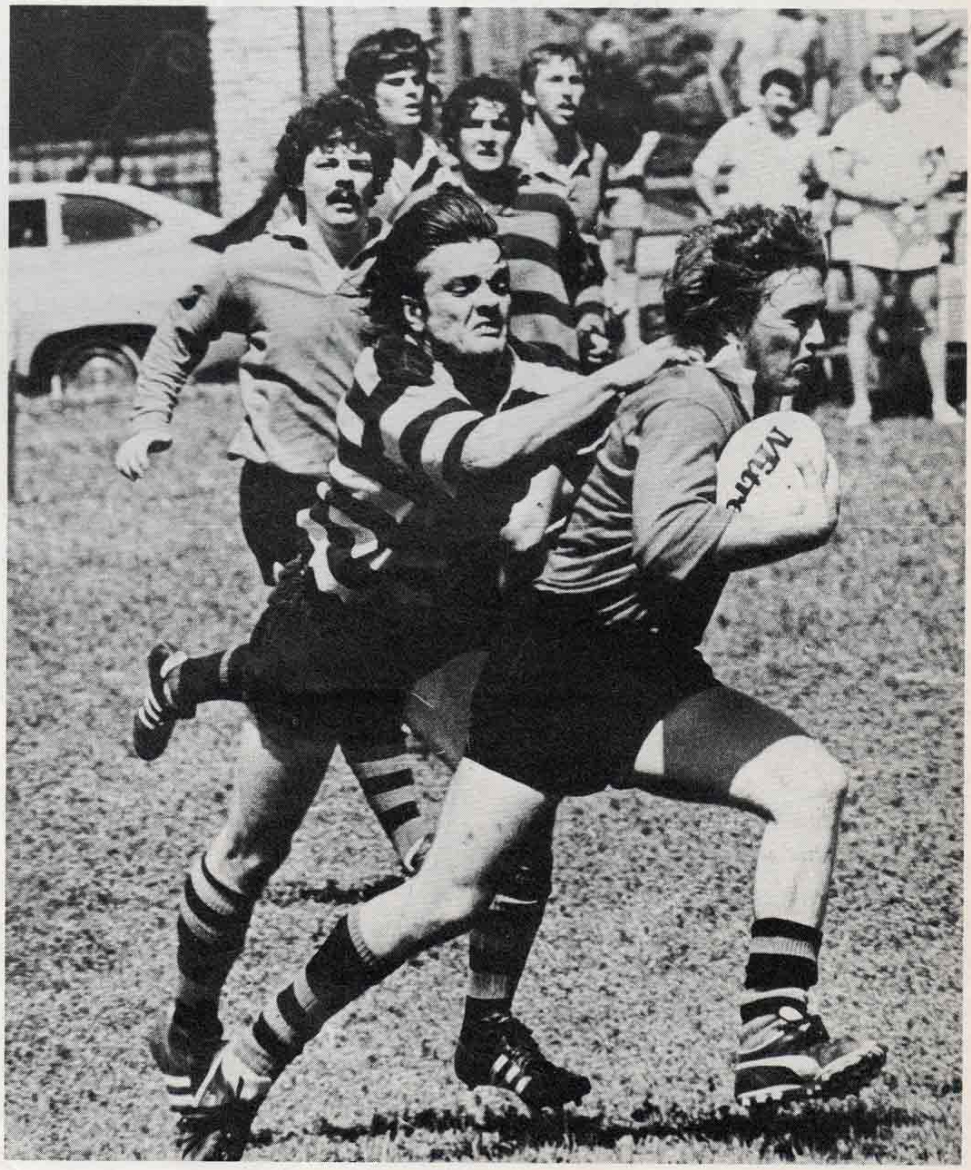
"The game is in fact a precursor of American football," explains Dave Clark, 27, a UB law student. "Except that it's played with 15 men on a side, no timeouts, no substitutions, and 40-minute halves."

Rugby developed from British football (not to be confused with the American brand) 150 years ago. At that time, the ball was kicked toward the goal, not carried as it is today. But one November afternoon in 1823, during a football game at the famous Rugby School, the rules changed.

The score was tied. Dusk was settling. Suddenly a player named William Webb Ellis, with à fine disregard for tradition, took the ball in his arms and ran across the goal line. The score was disallowed, but rugby football was born.

Today, play starts with the formation of a "scrum," which looks like two massive turtles locked in combat. Actually, players from both teams lock arms in an opposing wedge, head-to-head. The ball is thrown between the two teams, who try to work it back with their feet to a player called the half, who throws it out to his linemen.

Theoretically, the mud-covered linemen carry the ball down the field in a wing formation, passing off to the next man as they are tackled to the ground. That's why more than one player is given credit for scoring a "try," much like an assist in hockey. Against Brantford, Ontario, last season, the Old Boys



scored on a dramatic 80-yard run.

There are a number of ways to score in rugby — a try (similar to a touchdown in American football) for four points, a kick or conversion after try for two points, or a penalty kick or drop goal kick for three points.

There are no downs and no forward passes. The ball is literally up for grabs to anyone who can get it, which is where the rough and tumble body contact begins.

If a player is injured, he is given two minutes to get up. If he is unable to rise to play, he is carried off to a round of polite applause by both sides, and the game continues. A penalty can be called for anything from punching, to moving your foot up before the ball is thrown into play, to using your hands in a scrum.

All that the players wear are shorts, cleats and jerseys in their team colors, the Old Boys' being light and dark blue stripes. They use no other equipment, except for some front linemen who wear shin guards or leather caps to protect their ears.

"You protect yourself in the way you play," says Hovey. "One of our first rules is, 'Use your head and don't use your head'. In other words, don't try spear-tackling with your head because it's an easy way to get a serious injury."

The Old Boys play their home games in any kind of miserable weather at Delaware Park, near the zoo. They usually attract a crowd of about 150 friends and curious onlookers.

Their schedule is broken into two seasons, from March to June and from September to December. Players are divided by ability into A, B, and C teams, or "sides," which are paired against their counterparts from the opposing club.

There are about 50 Old Boys members in all, with such a wide variety of occupations that a stereotype is impossible. Ron Astridge, a former club president and this year's match secretary—in charge of selecting opponents and scheduling games — is a teacher at the Fillmore Middle School. Another club secretary, Don Lynch, is a systems analyst for Hooker Chemical. Team treasurer Tom (Scoop) Henrich is studying for his master's degree in engineering.

Stan Swisher, 31, is an environmental technologist working for the Buffalo

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harbormaster. Joe Delprince is a UB student, and Dick Bacile is studying medicine. Mike Brock works at Bethlehem Steel, and Dan Kaplan is an administrator at Buffalo General Hospital.

Ed Woods sells real estate, Paul Dudek is a mason, Tim Dittmar a civil engineer. Carl Hamm is an unemployed Vietnam veteran and his brother John is a child care worker at West Seneca State School.

"Some of the Old Boys, like 35-year-old engineer John Rolfe and David Lamb, a D'Youville College drama professor, have lived and played rugby in England, so their experience is a valuable asset," observes club president Pat Giles, a math teacher at the West Hertel Middle School.

"But most of our team members are Americans, many with no previous experience, who joined us after seeing our posters in bars and college bulletin boards.

"Our coaching comes from Bruce Marzahn, a former art professor from Buffalo State College, and from a 45-year-old physicist from Wales named Derek Harris, who can teach you more rugby in five minutes than some guys learn all year."

With a won-14, lost-2 record last season, the Old Boys were good enough to win the Niagara Rugby Union championship. They went on to capture the Ontario provincial crown by defeating the Eastern Rugby Union champs, York University, 15-7.

"Our club is maturing. We're looking for lightning fast, wide open games against teams that keep the ball moving all the time," Hovey says. "That's why we joined the Canadian Rugby Union, where the caliber of play is far superior to most of the college teams we play."

The Old Boys originally were known as the UB Queens, a campus sports club begun in 1967 and funded by the university as a student activity. They became a community-based club and adopted the current name after losing this funding in 1971.

The 'Old Boys' phrase stems from British tradition, to which the team paid tribute on their British excursion last March. Some expense money was raised by selling bumper stickers ("Give Blood, Play Rugby" . . . "It Takes Leather Balls to Play Rugby" . . . "Hug a Rugger"), but most of the travelling money came out of the players' own pockets.

"Players on both the Birmingham teams we played were alumni of Saltly and Central Grammar (High) Schools, which is where they got their old school names — Old Saltleans and Old Centrals," explains Tom Cratsley, 25, a community mental health worker. He once broke his jaw playing rugby in Delaware Park.

The Old Boys played a grueling five games in seven days, facing teams in Abercarn and Llandaff, Wales, and in Birmingham, England.

"Our trip to Britain was the first time many of us had set foot on a rugby field since our fall season ended. But the English were in peak condition, having almost completed their playing season.

"That's why our 32-16 victory over Llandaff, one of oldest rugby teams in Great Britain, was so gratifying," Cratsley beams. "And their coach said we were the best and hardest-hitting American side he's ever seen."

What's more, Cratsley adds, "the teams we played put us up in their homes and provided us with fine stout and bawdy locker room ballads in the clubhouse bars after the games."

Eight players' wives and girlfriends accompanied the Old Boys on their tour. Known as the Rugger Hugger's Auxiliary, they serve as cheerleaders, nurses and bumper sticker sellers at the Old Boys' games.

"The trip to Great Britain was the best vacation we ever had," recalls Mrs. Smith, who displayed an old Sheffield silver teapot given her by one of the English couples she and her husband stayed with. "They were so giving. We admired it and they said, 'Here, take it. It was given to us as an anniversary present.'"

"Rugby in Wales is a way of life," she adds. "It's in a class way up there with religion. Their teams just took to our Buffalo players, opening their homes and hearts to them."

In Birmingham, the Old Boys were invited to an open bar by the Lord Mayor, who presided over the fes-

tivities in his ceremonial robes and chain of office. The British newspapers ran accounts of the Buffalo team's game exploits, and the post-game parties ran until 4 a.m. with chorus after chorus of bawdy limericks.

"Songs and beer-drinking are very much a part of international rugby tradition," Cratsley explains. "I've partied with ruggers traveling by train across Canada and sung the same bawdy ballads in Australia and New Zealand. I imagine you'll find the same camaraderie and spirit in South Africa or anywhere else rugby players gather to play and party."

Locally, the Old Boys usually gather at the Gaslight West, near Buffalo State College. They keep their tournament trophies on display there, along with their Niagara Union and Ontario Rugby Union championship cups.

At the end of a rugby game, both teams line up and form a tunnel, cheering and clapping each other off the field. They shake hands and all injuries to ego and body are soon drowned in tall glasses of beer.

In addition to their $14 annual dues, Old Boys members are assessed $2 per home game, which goes toward providing a beer party for the visiting team after the game.

"The esprit de corps is something truly amazing to behold," Hovey says. "Rugby's more than just a bunch of knuckle-dragging goons bashing in each other's heads. It's a social sport, with lots of great parties and travel.

"I've played soccer and football and find them to be shallow experiences compared to rugby. In those sports, there is nothing really but the game. But in rugby, the personal meaning of the game goes beyond the playing field.

"To me, it's a way of life, a close circle of friends, and a feeling that if I fell over dead drunk with a group of ruggers, they'd take care of me .... no matter where I was .... even in far-off England."

And after a few more seconds of thought, Hovey adds with a smile: "But of course, there is still something wonderfully primitive about a group of rugby players getting together on a chilly afternoon to do something absurdly violent."

And all for no pay, no glory, relatively little fan adulation and a few paragraphs of recognition in the newspaper.