

Rugby: 'You don't go out to break people's necks'

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The snow white of the oval field was soon patched with muddy brown as the two teams battled to reach their opponent's goals. Some of the fancy footwork lost itself in the slush, but the outcome was obvious. The ball slithered ahead until two opposing players almost reached it at the same time. (It could be soccer, you say?) They stopped at the ball and bent over, as if to pick it up. (Football, maybe?) Some other players arrived and looked on, and each group tried to kick the ball out behind them to their waiting teammates. (So what is it, you ask?)

One of the men finally succeeded and the ball left the mud scramble. It was quickly scooped up and carried over the goal line. The player thrust the ball downwards as he crossed the bar—three points scored!

The game, an apparent combination of soccer, football, a street fight (according to some observers) and a lot of fun, is called rugby. The similarity to other sports is due to the fact that rugby "happened" in 1823 during a "football" (soccer) game in Rugby, England. A schoolboy player named William Webb Ellis picked up the ball during a game and ran over the goal line with it. The score was not allowed, but the idea of running the ball caught on.

Rugby became so popular in the decades following that in 1863 the Football Association was formed in London to make and maintain a distinction between soccer and rugby football.

In the United States, Harvard, Rutgers, Princeton, Columbia, Yale and McGill University (Canada) were playing rugby by 1876. American intercollegiate football as played today developed from this first "game."

Rugby football continued to gain international popularity. It was to every continent and was included for a time in the Olympic Game program. The

1924 Olympics marked a peak for rugby in the United States as the team brought home the championship.

Club rugby

Today in the United States, rugby operates on a club level. Teams are usually associated with a university, a city or an organization.

The Buffalo rugby club is not connected with the Athletic Department, but operates out of Norton Hall. Surprisingly, it doesn't wish to go varsity. Its membership includes undergraduates and graduate students and even three faculty members — Jim Crista, John Howell and Jerry Needham. Varsity status would make many of the players ineligible.

There is no formal coach, so different club members act as informal coaches in their specialties.

The enthusiastic club participated in that cold, snowy rugby match against the University of Rochester rugby club, a hard fought contest on the intramural fields at the Amherst campus, the Rochester team won, 14-8. The Buffalo club also played clubs from Cornell University and Toronto this spring.

How to score

Each team is allowed 13 players on the field. They may score on the basis of tries, conversions, field goals and penalty kicks. A try is similar to a touchdown in that the player carries the ball across the goal line, but it is different because as the player makes the try, he must thrust the ball downwards. A try is worth three points and is followed by a conversion attempt, which is a placement kick similar to the point-after-touchdown in a football game.

The conversion kick is taken at a point on a line perpendicular to the goal line. If the kick is good (through the uprights) two more points are scored. If the kick is good (through the uprights) two more points are scored.

A field goal, worth three points, is a drop kick made during the action of the game, also

through the uprights.

The penalty kick, which is a placement kick worth three points, is awarded to the injured team for any gross infraction of the rules, such as forward passing or blocking. It is interesting to note that blocking is allowed while blocking is not.

The only necessary equipment for rugby is the ball — which looks like a fat football. Players wear shorts, boldly colored "rugby" jerseys, spikes and sometimes shin guards.

The ball may be advanced by carrying (as in football), kicking (as in soccer), or lateral passing. Forward passing, even if unintentional, receives a penalty, which can be taken either as a penalty kick or as a scrum.

The scrum

No hands are allowed in the scrum, which is the most frequent means of putting the ball in play. Players hook arms together, forming two opposing blocks and each team tries to get possession of the ball by kicking it out of the scrum to teammates waiting behind to move the ball downfield. "Scrum" refers to this setup in which the teams fight for possession of the ball.

Rugby players must have endurance — the game is played in two 35-minute halves with a five-minute halftime and no timeouts.

Injuries are few. As Jeff Giers of the Buffalo rugby club put it: "You don't go out to break people's necks. You try to get everyone into the game and have fun."

Rugby is a spontaneous game and very informal. It's a tradition for the host team to throw a party after the game for the visiting team, where the discussion usually centers on the game. Personal social contact with the opposing players is one of the advantages of this informality.

Buffalo's rugby club has attracted about 30 members, who probably "discovered" rugby in much the same way as Jeff: "I went out to see what it was like and fell in love with it!" He said that there is still room on the team for anyone who is interested. All you need is enthusiasm for a really fun sport.