

August Alumnus of the Month: Rory O'Connor

By George Janke in Alumnus of the Month ☉ August 4, 2020



Rory O'Connor is second from the left in the second row, wearing a solid tee.

Note: Larry Luccarelli, third row, also played for BRC.

Our August Alumnus of the Month is Rory O'Connor.

How did you get into rugby?

I started playing rugby in 1969. I was attending the Berkshire College of Education (now part of Reading University) in Reading England. I was selected as an exchange student from Eastern Michigan University, where I had played football and wrestled. (I also got to play basketball for Berkshire, as they were that bad.)

Luckily, I arrived in early August and had a month-long introduction to rugby by the coach, John Tasker, a former capped player for England. It took a while to shake off the football side of my life, but I took to rugby pretty quickly.

Naturally, they placed me ("The Yank") on the wing. I gradually earned my way into the centers, where I was more of an impact, as they did not like tackling me or being tackled by me.

I learned a more proper way to tackle over time; the Dick Butkus method was not good for my longevity. I also found that it took me a while to get game fit. The good thing was that I got to travel a lot with the club and we played some really great sides, including London Welsh, London Irish, Bath Bs, and Loughborough. I got selected to the Berkshire County side and played a lot.

I was lucky enough to be one of the selectors for the exchange students that were to attend Eastern Michigan the following season. One of the guys I selected was Dai (David) Thomas, who was a Welsh school boy first side select and was later an alternate for the Barbarians/NZ 1973 match.

When did you play for UMRFC?

When I returned to EMU, I read that UMRFC existed and I headed straight there! That was in 1970. Dr. John Robson was our coach and Terry Larrimer was our captain. I could not have had better skills and fitness coaching.

What positions did you play?

I played most of the positions in the game: prop (in 7s), flyhalf, scrumhalf, centers, wings, fullback, flanker, number 8, and second row. It all depended on where I was needed.

Any inspirational teammates?

I was quite fortunate to be a member of that time and team. Terry was an Eagle Select from Princeton. Quinton Lawson was a Yale all star. Walt Holloway, Ron Smith, Jacques Passino, Vern Plato, Al and Mike Markman, Peter Magloci, Harry McGee, David Weber, Herb Hopkins, Jay Gore, Billy Chung, Billy Conway, Steve Chapman, Cleland Childs, and so many more greats were part of those times and teams. And especially Bruce Kingsbury and Keith Stone, Jack Goodman and the famous Tony Menyhardt, Peter Schreiner, Peter Hooper, and the infamous mountain climbing and fishing gurus Bill Haldane and Greg Rose. And I can't forget Doug Defors and Ed Carney, and Angelo Tocco. And, last but not least, Tom Raboine.

What were your biggest highlights with UMRFC?

Among the many highlights were winning the Big Ten several times, being a member of the first Michigan Select side and playing against Northampton (the English National Champions) and later Michigan Select sides. Also: playing against other Midwest Select sides, playing against Gloucester, Sale, London Metropolitan Police, Marseilles, Saracens, British Air Command, Waterloo, Cald, Tullamore, and winning the Canadian 7s, and the Cherry Pit Tournament, and the Rites of Spring Tournament, and especially beating the Chicago Lions, Notre Dame, and Ohio State.

What have you been doing since leaving Michigan Rugby?

I moved to sunny Buffalo in 1978 and joined the Buffalo Old Boys RFC (now Buffalo Rugby Club) and found it to be a lot like Michigan RFC: great players, great competition, and great people. I would return for Olde Blue Events as often as I could and would also travel on road trips to play NYC and others as often as I could.

On one NYC event, I got to meet Jerry Cooney, and won a bet from Tony Menyhardt. ("O'Connor your ass is huge and I bet you weigh a lot more than me!") So, we jumped on the heavy duty scale in the locker room and Tony and I each weighed in at 225 pounds. HA!

Buffalo went to the Can-Am tournament in Lake Placid every August and we played very well and I would see many of my Michigan mates from time to time. I finally hung up my boots when I turned 60, but am still very involved. About 15 years ago I was inducted into the Buffalo Rugby Wall of Fame, which was a very humbling experience. I was known to be "highly protective" of my teammates and was nicknamed the "Peace Maker."

I was transferred to Buffalo by American Hospital Supply, and have worked in sales and marketing all of my career and have a couple of small businesses. In 2002, I was selected to represent Buffalo and western New York on a business mission to Ireland by Senator Clinton. Quite the experience to say the least.

Buffalo is a very Irish city, having some street signs in Gaelic and English, and I have been very involved in the local scene here and belong to the Amherst Gaelic League, a charitable organization here.

Anything else?

One last thing is that many Olde Blue were from EMU—Paul Sauer, Hank Lukaski, Mike Sweeney, Gary Anderson, Ron Michaud, Gary Woodhouse, Cleland Child, Dai Thomas, Dai Robb, and Jeff Smith to name a few.

Don Canham was a great supporter of UMRFC, permitting us to practice under the lights on State Street and providing us with travel vans and gas cards. What a great man! While I was with the club, I created a series of awards called The Golden Gonad Award, and I was advised by the wise men in the club not to give one to Mr. Canham. Although, I think that he would really have loved it.

M Go Blue!

Rory Brennan O'Connor

1970-78 and beyond.