

THE ACTION IS FURIOUS BUT RUGBY REMAINS A GENTLEMEN'S GAME

Wasn't it Robert Browning who wrote, "Oh, to be in England, now that April's there?" Whoever wrote it must have been a rugby player.

This is the time of year when itinerant rugby teams travel to the land of the sport's birth. There is a marker at Rugby School commemorating the day in 1835 when one William Welb Ellis carried a soccer ball in his hands "with a fine disregard for the game."

Carrying the ball and playing without a net were the major adjustments from soccer. The modern rugby players are fond of a saying, "rugby is a hooligan's game played by gentlemen and soccer is a gentlemen's game played by hooligans."

Rugby resembles a cross between a pack of hyenas fighting over a lamb chop and fraternity boys scrambling for the last Bud Light. Whatever the description, rugby now ranks with rowing as the last outpost of the purist athlete.

The gentlemen of the Buffalo Rugby Club recently returned from a 10-day trip to England and Ireland where they played six matches, four by their A-Side team and two by their B-Side. A and B are roughly the equivalent of varsity and junior varsity

"Our A team won two and tied the other two games," said Ted Graney, a 33-year-old lawyer who serves as the club's captain and treasurer.

"One of the games we played in Central England, in Eccleshall, we won, 82-0. Each team provides someone to serve as sideline judges in the game. Our man heard their players at the beginning of the game saying "We're a lot better than they are! Get after them." After a while it was "Get going! We're just as good as they are!" Finally they were yelling, "C'mon! They're not that good!"

Win, lose or tie, rugby players are like brothers under the bruised skin, walloping one another in scrums that resemble gang rumbles more than sports events and then retiring to the nearest pub or tavern for refreshments and socialization. The scrums are called "on the pitch" and the parties "off the pitch."

In Ireland, the Buffalo players stayed in a hostel. When they played in Gnosall, near London, they stayed in a high-end hotel, but in Eccleshall they stayed in the homes of their opponents. In small British towns, the rugby games of the locals are often the main source of entertainment.

"In the U.S.," says Graney, "sometimes the crowd is made up strictly of family and friends. In England there may be 200, 250 people who turn out." In rugby it isn't the size of the crowds nor their cheering, it's the bonding of players, foes as well as teammates.

Two weeks ago in New York I ran into a friend of mine, Burt Sugar, former publisher of Ring Magazine. He had a welt over his right eye.

"I played a few minutes for the Alumni in our game against the University of Michigan rugby team last week," he told me. "It was our 40th anniversary. I founded the team while I was in law school. At the time I was in a drunken stupor."

Sugar is 62. He couldn't resist entering the game for a few minutes, wearing his trademark fedora. He emerged with a cut nose, the welt and a soiled, bent hat. He also wore a happy expression on his face.

The Buffalo club is a lot younger, having been formed as "the Buffalo Old Boys," a group of Buffalo State alumni, in 1971. Nowadays the members are composed of tradesmen, teachers, businessmen, doctors, lawyers and researchers.

Two weeks ago, the Buffalo Rugby Club played Michigan in the first round of their playoffs and beat the Wolverines, 33-22. After winning a second game, Buffalo heads for Chicago this weekend for the Midwest Rugby Association's version of the final four.

"We play the West Side Condors of Chicago," says Graney. "If we finish in the top three, we'll play in the national tournament in Dallas and Chicago."

On the pitch and off, it could go on indefinitely.