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Lamorinda rugby a sport for all

By Jon Kingdon



Photos provided

The preseason practices started in October and the season began in December with the high school season running through the end of April. Over spring break, the team will make a major trip overseas to tour and compete. In the past, they have traveled to Ireland, Italy, England, Scotland, Argentina and Hawaii. This year the team will be making a return trip to Hawaii.

USA Rugby was founded in 1975. It has been reported that from 2006 to 2016, the number of rugby participants has increased by more than a million. In 2016, USA Rugby reported having 125,000 members playing in 2,673 clubs with over 900 college teams governed by USA Rugby, not the NCAA.

Doug Pearson, who played rugby at Cal and is president of the boys high school team, is witness to the growth of the sport: "We have one of the larger clubs in the country and we have seen a lot of positive growth. Our players begin as young as six, playing a flag type of rugby. One of the cool parts of rugby is that there is a position for every sized player. Anyone will be able to find a spot on a rugby roster."

Still, as in most sports, athleticism, speed and toughness are important for the athlete. Pearson adds a fourth factor: "A key element for the players is fitness. The amount of running is like soccer. Unlike football, there are no long stoppages and you have to be in top shape."

Rugby's growth

The growth of the sport in the Lamorinda area can be attributed to the proximity and the success of the rugby teams at the University of California and Saint Mary's College, says Pearson: "A lot of former players have settled back in the area. Many of our coaches are parents that bring great experience with them. They get their kids to get their friends to play, which is another reason why we have so many players. At the high school level, many of our players also play football. It's a natural attraction for both sports."

Alex Cortessis, a senior at Acalanes, is hoping to continue playing rugby next year at Cal or UCLA. Cortessis learned from the ground up: "The game was tricky at first, but it's not hard once you get it. The best part of the game is that, big or small, once you learn the technique, you can tackle anyone. The techniques and leverage that I learned in rugby worked well for me on the football team at Acalanes."

Soccer has been called a gentleman's game played by hooligans while rugby has been called a hooligan's game played by gentlemen. Cortessis would agree with that assessment: "The main thing that I love about rugby is that we're one big family. I know all about my teammates. There is great camaraderie. Our team is comprised of players from 12 different high schools. Everyone on the team is equal."

King Matu, a senior at Deer Valley High School, makes the trip to Orinda twice a week for practice and echoes Cortessis' attitude about the team and the game: "Though we come from all different areas, we're all equal on the team. My father played rugby and introduced me to the game. Unlike football, you learn how to see the whole field and everybody gets to run."

Gary Hein, the team's assistant coach, played rugby at Cal and for the U.S. National Team and became the second American to play for Oxford, twice winning the Varsity Blues against Cambridge. All this was accomplished while going to law school. With all of his accomplishments on the field, it's the love of the sport and team unity that Hein feels most strongly about:

"Rugby is unlike any other sport. In other sports, you have teammates; in rugby you have brothers. You run, tackle and never leave the field, which generates a lot of camaraderie. You have an ownership to the team. We preach family as we're working for a common goal. We have a number of football, lacrosse and soccer players. All the players help each other. If there is a player having trouble finishing a run in practice, you'll see his teammates run alongside him, encouraging him to finish."

Female participation

As the sport has grown, so has the participation of females in the sport. The girls high school team, the Lady Longhorns, comprises 25 players ranging in age from 14 to 18 years old. Bob Stephens, the administrator and assistant coach for the girls high school team, is in his sixth-year of coaching. He was exposed to the game when his daughter began playing for a club team in Danville: "It's the most unique cultural and spiritual sport I have ever seen. We constantly talk about family and having each other's backs

on and off the field. It's not like basketball or football where size is defined. It's a sport where there is a wide range of sizes among the girls. It is a preparation for life and adulthood."

Vainga Manoa, the girls head coach, sees the club as more than just coaching players in the sport: "Our culture is not only to play a good game on the pitch (field) but also for the players to keep up their grades and getting them into college. We've had a number of the girls get scholarships for college. I have had a number of coaches contacting me about my players."

With the under 10 and under 8 teams, there have been some girls as young as 5 who have started play with the junior teams. Manoa has witnessed the maturity of the girls as they have progressed through the program: "The players appreciate the family atmosphere and confidence that they acquire. As they develop the skills, they begin to realize that they are contributing to a team and earning the respect that comes from that. It's easy to get individuals to learn how to play rugby and contribute to the game. There is a wide range of girls that join our team: introverts and extroverts, talkative and quiet girls, models and weightlifters - it runs the gamut."

Still, as gentlemanly a game as it is, contact is a real factor, says Manoa: "The common theme for the girls is the enjoyment of contact. Most play other sports. They can be physical and aggressive and enjoy the competition of hitting and tackling."

Grace Gitchell from San Ramon Valley also plays soccer and runs track and will be playing rugby at Quinnipiac College in Connecticut next year: "I really enjoy the physical aspect of the game. We have great coaches that have really helped us to learn the game quickly. I love working as a team. Knowing spacing in soccer has really helped me in that aspect of rugby. I learn something new every practice."

Leila Ofeti, a four-year player from Hayward, enjoys both the game and her teammates: "I grew up with the sport. I really like the contact and the pace of the game. Learning the game took time but you soon get into the pace of the sport. The best part is how you learn to work together as a team. It's been great meeting so many people and making new friends."

With all of the contact in the game, one would imagine there would be a number of injuries. Fortunately and by design, the majority of the injuries are restricted to bruises and sprains though more serious injuries are not unheard of.

All of the coaches stress the importance of tackling properly in not only getting the opponent down but in avoiding injuries to the tackler and the runner. Says Hein: "Tackling is all done with the shoulders and arms. We teach them to get their head out of the way of contact. One of the reasons that keeps rugby safe is that we don't wear pads for extra protection. Our players are aware that they don't have pads where you can go full force and run into someone."

Most ironically, it was reported in the New York Times that this past December, the state of Texas, where football is king, is starting a program to familiarize all of their high school coaches with rugby-style tackling, emphasizing the use of the shoulder and not the head in bringing down a player with the ball so as to reduce the number of concussions along with head and neck injuries. Pete Carroll, the head coach of the Seattle Seahawks, has promoted "hawk tackling," which borrows heavily from rugby.

Pearson succinctly explains what rugby is about: "It is a safe but competitive game. The teams play aggressively and the tradition is that the home team provides the meals after the game for both teams. It creates a rugby community with our competitors and with the national teams."



Alex Cortessis tackles a Danville Oaks player at a game last year.



This year's girls high school rugby team. Photos provided



Boys high school rugby team from last year.

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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