

Lamorinda rugby a sport for all



This year's girls high school rugby team.

Photos provided



Boys high school rugby team from last year.

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.”

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“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

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