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## From World Cups to Whistles Star rugby player transitions to coaching

By Clare Varellas



Gary Hein, pictured in center Photo provided

Thirty years ago this month, UC Berkeley freshman football player Gary Hein stood outside Memorial Stadium about to enter the locker room to begin his usual off-season workout. But before he could even begin dressing, friend and teammate Don James approached him with a proposition that would change his life.

"He came in and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and said, 'Come on, you're coming with me. Why don't you just come sit down and watch this sport called rugby?'" Hein recalled. "So I did, and after about ten minutes I said, 'Alright, I'll try it out.'"

Little did Hein know, that rugby practice in January of 1984 would be the first in a long and successful career that led him to play for Cal, for the U.S. national rugby team, and for a variety of top rugby teams around the world.

Hein, who is now a lawyer and the head coach of his twin sons' U12 Lamorinda Rugby Club team, comes from a line of renowned athletes, including his grandfather, an NFL Hall of Famer, and his father, a past world-record pole vaulter.

Hein was recruited to Cal on a football scholarship and played football all four seasons. However, he says that in comparison to football, he prefers both the "continuity and the camaraderie" of rugby.

"I really enjoyed the fact that in rugby when someone was tackled with the ball, it wasn't a dead ball," said Hein. "In rugby, you play a match, and afterward you have dinner and drinks with the other team."

Hein was a four-time All-American, a two-time National Player of the Year, and a member of the Cal rugby team that won three national championships. He was offered a chance to try out for the national rugby team during his junior year.

"My football eligibility had ended at Cal, and I was toying with the idea of trying out in the NFL, but it was right at the same time that I got this selection onto the U.S. rugby team," said Hein. "Given the choice of trying out for the NFL and representing my country in the first rugby World Cup, I chose the latter and loved it."

Hein played for the United States in the inaugural Rugby World Cup in 1987. He stayed on and played in two more World Cups in 1991 and 1993.

In the meantime he lived in Dublin, Ireland, playing for the world-famous club team Old Belvedere. Hein attended Oxford University to earn his law degree from 1989 to 1991 and played on the university's varsity team and for the London-based club, Richmond.

After returning to the United States, Hein continued playing for the national team and for Old Blues, the Cal alumni rugby team. He retired from playing in 1994 but worked as an assistant coach for the Cal team in 2001-02.

In 2009, Hein started coaching for Lamorinda Rugby Club, trying to instill the same love he has for the sport into his young players.

"The most important thing is that they love the sport, and that they come back," said Hein. "If you try to pressure them too much to be committed to the sport year-round, you're more likely to lose them to other sports, whereas we make it fun for them."

Hein said that coaching is also about preparing athletes for life. "We try to teach them life lessons about how to work together as a team, how to set a common goal and work toward achieving it together," he explained.

In an era of mounting concern regarding concussions, it would seem that the lack of padding, particularly the lack of helmets, in rugby uniforms would increase players' danger of getting hurt. However, Hein believes that rugby is actually safer than football because players are more careful without all the preventative padding.

"The helmet can be a sword as well as a shield," said Hein. "It can protect you, but I think when people are wearing a helmet they feel like they're bulletproof or immune to injury ... whereas when you're playing rugby you're probably intending to protect yourself as well as other people."

As rugby grows increasingly popular worldwide (it will be an Olympic sport in 2016), Hein treasures the memories he has of being a part of the world's first rugby World Cup, and continues to promote the sport's values via his coaching.

"To have done that on the highest level, on the highest stage in the world with some of the best players as your teammates was really exhilarating," Hein said. "I miss it, but I have a lot of great memories and will always look back on it fondly."

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