

For love of the game

Frederick rugby players do what they can to grow sport in area

Thursday, April 6, 2006

by Ian Quillen
Staff Writer

Their new jerseys are still in the mail. Their home games are few and far between. And their first-ever win is still looming somewhere in the future.

But to hear players, coaches and parents of the Frederick Youth Rugby club tell it, their inaugural season is the stuff of dreams.

What was the brainchild of a few rugby-playing fathers just a year ago is now a living, breathing organization. Not only that, but it's a club stocked with players who genuinely love and understand a sport that many of their friends have never even seen.

Despite a winless start to this first year, the Frederick U17s are turning the heads of their competition—primarily Baltimore-Washington area private schools with a rich rugby tradition.

“Most people don't believe us when I tell them this is a brand new team,” said assistant coach Mike Saintcross, whose son Michael is on the squad. “We've recruited some really good athletes, and I think that's a credit to the players.”

It's also a credit to the sport itself, which has skyrocketed in popularity in the United States over the last two decades, especially on the East Coast and around Washington, D.C.

Take the Frederick Rugby Football Club, the organization behind the formation of Frederick Youth Rugby. When founded in 1990, the FRFC boasted just one men's side. Now it fields two men's sides, a men's 35-and-over squad and two women's teams, along with its new youth branch.

On the youth squad, some players have spent childhood watching parents and relatives play, so they come to the pitch with a natural feel for the game. But as a team that recruits players through friends and colleagues instead of a captive student body, the biggest problem for the U17s is numbers.

Rugby teams field 15 players at a time. That's how many Frederick has.

“Everyone says your first year, you're going to have 15 to 20 kids,” Saintcross said. “That's pretty much what we have. Hopefully we'll see what the other clubs have had in their second and third years.”



Sage Winn of Frederick battles through Calvert Hall defenders Saturday in a rugby match at Baker Park. The Frederick U17 team plays squads from all over the region.

But the growth of Frederick Youth Rugby won't be hindered by low morale. The sport's culture, players, coaches and parents say, is one where the camaraderie after the final whistle outweighs the pain inflicted before it.

'A gentlemen's (and ladies') game'

Terri Winn played rugby for a year while an undergrad at Frostburg University in western Maryland. Some time later, her sons Sage and Zach grew up on a rugby touchline, watching dad play for various open mens' teams.

Now, unlike a lot of moms who fear the sport's full-contact nature, Terri is glad to see her kids on the pitch.

"My kids know so many people that we met through rugby," she said. "It's very much a social event. After every game, the hosting team feeds the visiting team. And during the summer, during the touch league, they would bring out the grills and have a banquet."



Frederick's Adam Maxey is tackled by a host of Calvert Hall players Saturday.

It was in that touch league where Frederick Youth Rugby began, firstly as a U15 squad intent on learning the basics of passing and positioning. The team disassembled in the fall because American football season pulled too many players away to field a full team.

The two sports share roots, especially in Frederick, where the FRFC evolved out of the Frederick Falcons amateur football team that dates to 1963. But for young athletes, the sports and their cultures sometimes clash.

"Football, once you play somebody you hate them," Sage Winn said. "I guess it's the nature of the game. In rugby you have fun with them afterward."

While the two pastimes are lumped together into the "full-contact" sports, parents, coaches and players alike say there are fundamental physical and mental differences. For one, every rugby player touches the ball at some point during a game. Your typical rugger has to be more versatile than gridiron specialists, whether they be receivers, linemen or kickers. And they must be in better aerobic shape to engage in a game that stops only at halftime and the end of the game.

Mentally, players must improvise, unable to turn to a playbook for guidance. That's part of what makes rugby a more intellectual sport, say its supporters.

And, they add, the sport's high-pressure mental demand keeps many players and coaches coming back to what remains a relative obscure sport stateside. "I think most people get addicted to it because it's really an adrenaline sport," coach Mike Saintcross said. "You just don't sit there and watch the play happen and stand around."

Those who try it, love it.

Saturday, the Frederick U17s hosted Calvert Hall College's 'C' side—the rough equivalent of the Baltimore high school's freshman team—at Baker Park in Frederick.

Instead of playing two typical 35 -minute halves, the two sides played three 22-minute periods so Calvert Hall could find playing time for 30-plus players.

Against what seemed like a small army, the Frederick U17s yielded early deficits of 10-0 and 15-5, before eventually losing 18-10 on a pleasant, breezy day. In some ways, the respectable result was a moral victory.

But it was also the end of a rare opportunity to recruit on what is literally Frederick's home turf.

"It's [about] getting them to watch a game," Sage Winn said about recruiting players. "Some said they were going to come today, since it's in Baker Park. But I don't think anybody did."

Instead, Winn reasoned, prospective players were at a nearby high school baseball double - header.

Such conflicts between rugby and high school athletics are common. Some of the U17s have chosen to nix high school athletics in the spring, while others double dip. But convincing friends to embrace either alternative has proven difficult.

"A lot of people say it would be sweet to do," said Michael Patschak, a freshman for Brunswick High's lacrosse and football programs. "But they're doing a lot of sports, like me, and they don't think they can do it."

Until new recruits try it, players say, they can't fall in love with it. They can't develop the drive of the Winn brothers—who, according to their mother, Terri, would have endured traveling to Carroll County if Frederick Youth Rugby had not been formed—and they can't develop the joy of doing something Patschak says is better than anything he experiences in lacrosse in the spring, or football in the fall.

As the U17s ended their contest Saturday, one of the FRFC's men's sides assembled along the sideline, waiting to play a team from Pittsburgh. Brawny and thick-limbed, they were clad in green and black club colors, tossing and kicking a ball around like fourth-graders at summer camp.

For most of them, rugby goes beyond mere recreation. It's hardly any different with the U17s.

"It's like somebody took a shot of it and shot it into their veins," says Terri of her two sons and their affection for the sport. "They both absolutely adore it."

Copyright © 2006 The Gazette - ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Privacy Statement
<http://www.gazette.net/frederickcty/>