

The Patriot-News

Passion fuels Harrisburg Rugby Club

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Rugby players are considered to be a different breed. Playing in pain and adapting to adverse conditions are just a part of their normal demeanor.

Recently the wire services ran a story about a rugby player in Australia who was complaining of headaches and eye irritations while still playing the sport several months after being involved in a heated battle with a neighboring team.

After being examined by a doctor, it was determined that the player had an opposing player's tooth embedded in his head.

In most sports that might be considered highly unusual. In rugby, it's a little closer to the norm.

Harrisburg Rugby Club even has a neurosurgeon as one of its players, J.R. Hill, who's available to stitch up teammates on the sidelines if the need arises. And, in several situations, that has been the case.

But, like other tight-knit organizations, rugby players also do a very good job of taking care of and honoring their own.

An example of that came when former Harrisburg Rugby Club coach Dennis Shade was memorialized by teammates following his unexpected death from a massive heart attack late last fall.

The eulogies and tributes from players, teammates, former players and even former opponents read like something you might see at the coronation of a king.

But, as viewed by many of his former rugby counterparts, Shade was sort of a king who presided over a table of jousting knights for more than 13 seasons as their head coach.

The entourage that traveled 300 miles to attend the 54-year-old Shade's funeral near his home in Erie totaled about 40. Most had been involved with Shade in rugby through one situation or another.

"We honored him by dedicating the remainder of the season to him last year," said new Harrisburg coach Larry Sweger. "We won our first Mid-Atlantic Rugby Football championship, then went on to finish third in the country. I think everyone felt we owed him that."

Sweger also attested to the unity of the team despite the diversity of its players.

"Although you'll find our rugby players come from any number of different occupations," said Sweger, "you'll find the same kind of passion for the sport from all those involved no matter where they came from."

Sweger, 38, works for Highmark Blue Shield.

Leading scorer Grant Walter, 28, who plays fly half and fullback, is a state worker.

Bob Rhubright, 42, who's been with the team since 1989, is the team captain and works in construction when he isn't part of the rugby scrum during fall and spring weekends.

There are doctors, lawyers and possibly even Indian chiefs who regularly participate in rugby.

Rugby is a sport which boasts bigger numbers on the field at one time -- 15 for each team -- as well as a larger playing surface. Like football, rugby is a sport that doesn't have a goalie.

Football fields are approximately 50 yards wide and 120 yards from the end of one end zone to the other.

For rugby you can add at least 20 yards to each of those measurements to approach the 70-meter by 144-meter dimensions.

In fact, it is because of those very dimensions that rugby fields are so hard to come by.

Harrisburg Rugby Club practices on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the fall and spring and plays most of its games on weekends.

During the summer there are 7-man teams playing on fields of the same dimensions as are used for the 15-man teams.

Its home field for practice and play is Cibort Park in Bressler. But the team is forced to share the field with just about every of sport that requires extra size -- especially those from high schools.

"Our dream is to build our own field," said Sweger. "But we're a long way off from having the kind of money to do something like that. We try to have some fundraising activities to generate money to work with."

The team's latest fundraiser occurred July 20-22, when it held The Harrisburg Bash. It was a get-together to help raise money for the Harrisburg Rugby Club, which in turn contributed to developing youth programs in the area and also to The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

In addition to the Harrisburg team, there's a team from around Carlisle known as the Old Gaelics. The two teams have developed a great rivalry and will meet this fall the weekend before Thanksgiving on the Old Gaelic field.

There are even women's rugby teams, which play under most of the same rules and regulations as the men.

In addition there are a few junior programs in existence.

The most successful of these has been the West Shore United Rugby Team coached by Sean Robinson, which has been undefeated in regular-season play the last three years.

The team is made up of high school players from Trinity, Red Land, Cedar Cliff, Hershey and Mechanicsburg.

Some of those players have been invited to the USA National team camps.

With his own team's new fall season less than two months away, Harrisburg's Sweger would like to see youth rugby experience the kind of growth spurt that has helped lacrosse become a PIAA-sanctioned sport for boys and girls.

"Right now there are more older guys interested in playing rugby than there are younger players," Sweger said.

"But the interest is growing. We have a young guy on our team from Shippensburg University [24-year-old Zach Khuri] who is developing into one of our better players.

"There are more and more college-aged kids who are becoming attracted to this sport. The more of that we can get the more it will help the sport of rugby."

Finding athletes looking for some diversity in their normal sports lives might make rugby look appealing.

But, finding athletes willing to undergo the pain and dedication of old-time players like Sweger, Rhubright and even the late Dennis Shade, might not be quite that easy.

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