

How Rugby Makes Better Football Players

By Alex Goff

freelance writer in Olympia, Washington

Your High School season is over. Your players are already making plans to play other sports during the winter and spring. What should they play? In the spring, especially, football coaches find themselves at odds with their players' choices. But what if your players could play a sport that not only keeps them in shape for football, but actually makes them become better football players? The sport is out there, its called rugby, and strangely enough some football coaches won't let their athletes play the game.

High-school age rugby is played throughout the USA, culminating in a national championship in late May. The game itself is an ancestor of football, and is similar to a no-huddle, wishbone gridiron game with all two-way players. Forward passing is not allowed, so the ball must be advanced by hard running and intricate lateral passing. After a tackle, play continues as teams form essentially a compacted line of scrimmage and try to drive each other off the ball. Players and football coaches who have been involved in both sports agree that playing rugby can make for better football players, and more dedicated athletes.

"The improvement in fitness, hand-eye coordination, and tackling technique after a season of rugby is phenomenal," said Mark Bullock, who served as head football coach and head rugby coach for Kentwood High School in Kent, Washington before becoming the USA Under-19 rugby coach. "I always recommended that my football players play rugby if they weren't playing a spring sport."

Everyone Plays the Ball

"In rugby, every type of player handles the ball at least a few times. Every player is expected to be able to pass and catch, tackle and break tackles. You'll have players tackling and trying to break tackles which is great for contact skills in the off-season," said Dave Hodges, former pro football player and currently the captain of the U.S. national rugby team. "They will be working on fitness and should continue with their strength and explosive exercises. They will be handling the ball, which will benefit hand-eye coordination. If they want a sport that complements football, rugby is much closer than the other sports played in high school."

"The ball handling skills are almost unmatched in American sport," explained Tom Billups, who was starting offensive linemen for Augusta college during the school's 49-0-1 stretch in the 1990s. Billups later took up rugby and played professionally in Europe, and for the USA, a record 44 times. A physical trainer by profession, he is currently the USA Rugby strength and conditioning coach. The development of the sense of space, timing and teamwork are even greater than those in basketball. The total number of sets of hands that are involved in a well worked try [touchdown] is much greater than any in basketball."

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Everyone Runs

There are stoppages in rugby, but not after every tackle. A well-played game of rugby requires backs (the runners) and forwards (like linemen) to run great distances as they work to retrieve the ball and launch another attack. Playing that way for 80 minutes requires fitness that can only help an athlete when he plays football. "The aerobic requirements are dramatically different between rugby and gridiron," said Billups. "I can still remember my first senior side rugby match for the Quad City Irish in the Midwest. I must have asked how much time was left a dozen times. The continuity was the most drastic difference from one sport to the other. The concept of continued play asks the American football player to continue to react, scan, and process information rapidly. The assignments I remember from National Championship college football were more like, you block the guy in front of you at the line of scrimmage."

No Pads

Actually rugby players can use pads. The scrum cap, designed to protect the ears is much like the 1920s football helmet, only little softer, and players can also opt to wear foam padding over their torsos. However, rugby certainly doesn't have the padding football has, and that makes coaches worry about injuries. But those who have played both sports say that playing a tackle sport without pads forces you to use good tackling and driving techniques. Football pads can be used as weapons, while rugby players have no such luxury.

"The neuromuscular recruitment that is required to control your body in a tackle in rugby is much greater than that of a tackle in gridiron football," said Billups. "American football is much more of a collision sport now than it has ever been, where a rugby tackle still requires a wrapping of the arms to be fair and legal."

Culture

Athletes follow their role models, and its an unfortunate state of football that coaches are constantly trying to get their football players to emulate what they see their heroes do in a game, but not what they do on the sidelines. Rugby is a little different. Complaining to the referee, excessive celebration after scoring, and playing to the crowd may be discouraged in both sports, but in rugby it's simply not part of the game at any level.

"From a cultural standpoint, rugby can improve American high school football in more ways than a coach can count," said Billups. "The mere fact that, in rugby, you address the referee as 'sir' - can you imagine that in American football? That there isn't towel whipping, look-at-me behavior we see kids emulating. Score a try, and leg it back to the halfway to get ready to go again is the way it still is in our game. No touchdown dances or athletes taking off their helmets to show their mugs for the cameras."

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Rugby Helps Football

Can rugby make a good football player? Consider the story of Richard Tardits. He grew up playing rugby, then, one day, as a student at the University of Georgia, he walked on to preseason football practice. "He didn't even know how to put his pads on," said then head coach and now Georgia Athletic Director Vince Dooley. "We put him in tight end and asked him to fire out and block, and he fired out and tackled the guy. So we figured that we better put him on defense pretty quick."

As a linebacker who had never played gridiron before, Tardits learned quickly, and in one scrimmage sacked the quarterback five times. "I gave him a battlefield promotion right there," said Dooley. "I gave him a scholarship. He had such explosiveness." Upon graduation, Tardits made all-conference as a linebacker, and had set a record for sacks at Georgia that still stands. He went on to play for the NFL for New England and Arizona. After his NFL career was over, Tardits returned to rugby, playing for the United States 24 times. "All those things he learned in rugby, mobility, running, reaction, and tackling, can help develop a young athlete," said Dooley. "Richard went on to have quite a career in both sports."

Football can also create great rugby players. Second-team All-ACC tight end Dan Lyle of VMI took up rugby while waiting for an NFL tryout. The tryout came, but by then he had shown a great talent for rugby and was hooked. Lyle is now one of the best at his position in the world in rugby, and plays professionally for Bath in England.

Great Opportunities

Rugby offers athletes opportunities that the gridiron cannot. Rugby has a national championship, for one, an Under-19 and senior national team, and a chance to travel all over the world. "The culture of rugby is worldwide," said Billups. "You can go to any country on Earth, find a rugby team, and an immediate friend. Having heard I played for the USA, an acquaintance asked, how much money do they pay? It's never about money. A sport where the highest honor you can receive, to play for your country is still coveted in the professional era should be admired by high school football coaches. The issue of character is white-hot in the NFL right now. Why would a football coach not want a kid who values the efforts of his teammates, plays with extreme passion, and after taking a knock picks himself up and gets on with it? My experiences in college football I wouldn't trade for anything. I was lucky to have a great coach and tremendous teammates who have played to their potential every weekend in the Autumn. But I would have loved the opportunity to learn about all that rugby represents at an earlier age."

The consensus among those who know both football and rugby is fairly clear: If you have a player on your football team who you wish would get a little stronger, a little fitter, and a little more aggressive, then have him play rugby. Rugby is fun, its different, but still enough like football that he'll be able to play, and it will make him a better football player.