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Lamorinda rugby a sport for all



Photos provided



Alex Cortessis tackles a Danville Oaks player at a game last year.

By Jon Kingdon

With globalization in so many areas today, sports have certainly not been left behind. As we have exported baseball, basketball and even football to other countries, we have imported a number of sports from around the world. Rugby - which began in England in 1823 appropriately at the Rugby School in Rugby, Warwickshire, England - has grown in the United States from a niche sport to one played by all ages and genders.

The Lamorinda Rugby Club began in 1980. Until 2001, it was strictly for high school players. In 2002, a plan was instituted to begin a youth program to stimulate a greater interest in the sport and increase the flow of players into the high school programs. Under 12, under 10 and under 8 year

old teams were created. This eventually led to the Lamorinda Rugby Team winning the first California Cup in 2012, defeating Long Beach and being ranked No. 1 in California and No. 2 nationally.

The preseason practices started in October and the season began in December with the high school season running through the end of April. Over spring break, the team will make a major trip overseas to tour and compete. In the past, they have traveled to Ireland, Italy, England, Scotland, Argentina and Hawaii. This year the team will be making a return trip to Hawaii.

USA Rugby was founded in 1975. It has been reported that from 2006 to 2016, the number of rugby participants has increased by more than a million. In 2016, USA Rugby reported having

125,000 members playing in 2,673 clubs with over 900 college teams governed by USA Rugby, not the NCAA.

Doug Pearson, who played rugby at Cal and is president of the boys high school team, is witness to the growth of the sport: "We have one of the larger clubs in the country and we have seen a lot of positive growth. Our players begin as young as six, playing a flag type of rugby. One of the cool parts of rugby is that there is a position for every sized player. Anyone will be able to find a spot on a rugby roster."

Still, as in most sports, athleticism, speed and toughness are important for the athlete. Pearson adds a fourth factor: "A key element for the players is fitness. The amount of running is like soccer. Unlike football, there are no long stoppages and you have to be in top shape."

Rugby's growth

The growth of the sport in the Lamorinda area can be attributed to the proximity and the success of the rugby teams at the University of California and Saint Mary's College, says Pearson: "A lot of former players have settled back in the area. Many of our coaches are parents that bring great experience with them. They get their kids to get their friends to play, which is another reason why we have so many players. At the high school level, many of our players also play football. It's a natural attraction for both sports."

Alex Cortessis, a senior at Acalanes, is hoping to continue playing rugby next year at Cal or UCLA. Cortessis learned from the ground up: "The game was tricky at first, but it's not hard once you get it. The best part of the game is that, big or small, once you learn the technique, you can tackle anyone. The techniques and leverage that I learned in rugby worked well for me on the football team at Acalanes."

Soccer has been called a gentleman's game played by hooligans while rugby has been called a hooligan's game played by gentlemen. Cortessis would agree with that assessment: "The main thing that I love about rugby is that we're one big family. I know all about my teammates. There is great camaraderie. Our team is comprised of players from 12 different high schools. Everyone on the team is equal."

King Matu, a senior at Deer Valley High School, makes the trip to Orinda twice a week for practice and echoes Cortessis' attitude about the team and the game: "Though we come from all different areas, we're all equal on the team. My father played rugby and introduced me to the game. Unlike football, you learn how to see the whole field and everybody gets to run."

Gary Hein, the team's assistant coach, played rugby at Cal and for the U.S. National Team and became the second American to play for Oxford, twice winning the Varsity Blues against Cambridge. All this was accomplished while going to law school. With all of his accomplishments on the field, it's the love of the sport and team unity that Hein feels most strongly about:

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