

RUGBY GIRLS DON'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK

This is Riot country · Home of the Brandywine Womens Rugby Club

You pick up Route 926 just below West Chester and head west. Thirteen miles of winding road, through post-card pastoral landscape the developers haven't gotten around to wrecking yet, brings you to a country lane with cars nosed up to a wire fence. Someone's thoughtfully built a wooden stepladder to help you across into a meadow filled with women in bright, striped jerseys and socks, busily colliding with each other. There are cow-chips behind the sets of padded steel goal posts at either end, and under the white chalk lines which mark the field of play. Across a series of electric fences, several black cows regard the activity briefly between mouthfuls. They've seen it all before: this is Riot country, home "pitch" (field) of the Brandywine Women's Rugby Club.

I'd known Rugby players in college- they reveled in their toughness, exotic injuries ("right cheek-bone broken in three places"), capacity for revelry and convivial beer consumption. And I was curious to see how the distaff version came off - were they really butch and burly?

"I get that all the time," says Ann, a cheerful seventeen year-old Rugger who is running the line

today. "They question my sexuality. Even at my church they're horrified that I do Rugby. But I love guys! My boyfriend's on the football team."

Like Ann, there's no gender-warp on these women. In ages ranging from 17 to 38, they are indistinguishable from any collegiate women's field hockey, soccer, lacrosse or softball team.

Rugby's rules and terminology are vast and Byzantine to the outsider... even some of the players here are still learning them. In brief, both teams try to advance an oversized "football" for a "try" (think "touchdown") over the opponent's "try-line." But there are no forward passes. No blocking. Anyone can carry, kick and lateral pass to her heart's content, so the action is non-stop. Anyone can tackle or be tackled, so the mayhem is continuous - somewhere between a game of "keep-away" and a street-brawl. Amazingly, except for a "scrum-cap" or two and a few mouth guards, I saw no protective gear. More amazingly, during an hour and a half of this roughhousing, I witnessed fewer injuries than in my nieces' soccer games; no one was carried or hobbled off the field.

"Good to have a lot of subs," Ann had told me at the

Rugby is big
at Henderson
High



the outset. Because of injuries, I wondered? “Nope, doing all that hitting gets you tired.”

There are two particularly distinctive features of a Rugby match, both of which equate roughly to a “jump-ball” in basketball or “drop-puck” in ice hockey. In the Scrum, the referee yells “Engage,” and the players of both teams, clustered in a carefully-arranged huddle over the ball, engage in a shoving match, this whole knot often rotating, while designated players in



Line Out

the center of this mass of bodies try to foot-sweep the ball back to a teammate. From a distance it resembles a monstrous spider in spasms. A Maul, which looks similar, is sort of a spontaneous Scrum, occurring as a result of teams dead-locking over a ball in play. The “Line-Out” is a throw-in from out of bounds, but each team hoists a player in the air to snag the ball –now you know why you always see someone in Rugby photos who seems to be able to jump twice as high as anyone else!



West Chester East holds on

else, what distinguishes Rugby from other sports is the camaraderie between opposing teams, possibly owing to the relative “smallness” of the sport here. Despite the continuous hitting, there are no disputes or confrontations. At the conclusion of the match, rather than just the usual grim “guh-game, guh-game” hand-slap gauntlet, both teams join in a post-game huddle. And then, since Brandywine and the opponent Lehigh are unusually chummy, they play a third half - some of the players even switch jerseys and sides, to allow some of their novice players to get some additional hands-on experience.



Brandywine and Lehigh in a “scrum”... or is it a “maul?”

And yes, those who are of age do gather at the Pub afterwards to down the brews, replay

the matches and compare scars. One of the Lehigh girls explains Maul-mechanics to me, lining up packets of sugar and Equal on the table to show how players must approach a Maul from behind. She pauses to show off a bruise on the side of her face. “Check this out,” she says happily.

Is female rugby an oddity here, confined to a handful of random clubs? Hardly. A few weeks later a high school tournament features dozens of teams, including those of West Chester East and Henderson (both teams coached by Brandywine players). The play is equally rough and aggressive. And Henderson’s team is huge!

There’s something special going on here, so far unspoiled by the top-heavy officialdom, over-regulation, commercialization and seriousness of the league sports. Women’s Rugby enjoys a unique charm in its smallness; no exclusion, no do-or-die quest for titles or scholarships -these girls are in it for the fun of it. Imagine!

Ladies! Want to join in the fun? These clubs are always looking for recruits. But be warned, once you take up Rugby, it gets into your blood!

Brandywine Women’s Rugby Club www.brandywinerugby.org
Lehigh Valley Rugby Club www.lvrugby.com



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