

# rugby warriors

BY FRITZ ESKER

FEATURE

Most Americans have at least a passing familiarity with rugby. They may not know the rules or the nuances of the game, but they'd recognize it by sight. It's the game where guys with little to no padding play what appears to be an organized team version of tackle-the-man-with-the-ball. But there's more to rugby than meets the eye and it's rapidly gaining popularity in the New Orleans area.

So what is rugby? The opinions of local experts vary slightly when asked to boil down the sport to its essence. Trip McCormick, director of recruiting for the New Orleans Rugby Club ([www.neworleansrugbyclub.com](http://www.neworleansrugbyclub.com)), describes it as "an even mix between American football and soccer...It has the pace of soccer in that play doesn't stop unless there's an infraction, but the contact is closer to American football."

Haj Langford, Tulane's men's rugby coach, describes it a little differently. "It's American football with no pads, no stopping and starting, you can't pass the ball forward, and when you score a touchdown, you actually touch the ball down."

Rugby matches typically last 80 minutes, with only a short interval halfway through. A team advances the ball down the field until a player is

tackled with the ball or until a penalty is committed. Points are awarded by scoring a try or kicking a goal. A try (worth 5 points) is scored when a player grounds the ball in the opposing team's in-goal area. This is similar to scoring a touchdown in football. A goal is scored by kicking the ball over the opposing team's crossbar and in between the two goal posts (similar to a field goal). Three different goals can be scored: a dropped goal (kicked from the ground during the run of play), a penalty goal (taken stationary after one team commits a penalty), and a conversion (a stationary kick after a try is scored - similar to an extra point in football). Dropped goals and penalty goals are worth three points, a conversion is worth two.

While rugby may appear to be a very violent sport to an outside observer, it's not as rough as it looks. "The injuries in rugby are mainly scrapes and bruises," said Langford. Rugby players often get tackled, but it's not with the level of violence that often occurs in a football game.

"You can't just throw your bodies around in an uncontrolled manner," said Pat McNamara, a Loyola University law student and member of the Loyola rugby team. Players cannot launch themselves like



a missile at another player in an effort to make a tackle. Rugby players wrap their arms around an opposing player, then use their bodies to bring that player down. Spearing or reckless tackles result in penalties. In addition to this, players are not allowed to block downfield like in a football game (blocking being another activity where people often get seriously injured in football).

But, like any sport with contact, serious injuries can occur. McCormick broke his jaw in a game four years ago. However, this has not stopped him from getting back in action. "It probably helps that I don't remember it happening," said McCormick. For him,

overcoming the injury just meant getting back on the field, making a tackle, and getting back in the swing of things.



A major draw for rugby is the fact that people of all body types can play the sport, provided that they have some level of stamina and fitness. "There's not any kind of body type that's ruled out of it," said McCormick. The bigger guys tend to play forward, while the smaller, faster guys play in the back.

"If you're willing to get out there and lace up, there's probably a spot for you," said McNamara.

Mental focus is an important part of the game as well. Langford said that teams are aligned like military units in terms of their cooperation and

dependence on each other. Succeeding at rugby means commitment on the part of each player.

"You're immediately exposed if you're faint of heart or faint of mind," said Langford.

Rugby is still most popular in Europe and Australia/New Zealand, but its popularity is rapidly growing in America and the New Orleans area. The New Orleans Rugby Club was formed in 1973, but McCormick said that the organization has grown more in the last five years than it did in the previous 30. McCormick attributes this to people starting rugby at younger ages. "The sport is really exploding at the high school level all over the country," said McCormick, who added that many New Orleans high schools started teams around 2001-2002.

Getting people involved at a young age is crucial. McCormick started as a senior in high school because his history teacher in Tulsa recruited him to play for a local men's league (not a high school league). Langford began his career because he spent childhood years in England where on certain days the kids had to play rugby at recess. While McNamara did not play the sport until his college years, he was still, in a way, exposed to the sport at a young age because his uncle played collegiate rugby and left his old rugby jacket at the family home. The high school leagues insure that more people will be exposed at earlier ages.

For its participants, the benefits of rugby come in the camaraderie formed with teammates, as well as the increased discipline the sport teaches. "It's made me more disciplined mentally and physically," said McNamara. "You have to be prepared for the fact that there may be a 300 pound guy in another uniform who doesn't like you."



But the camaraderie is important as well, especially with a sport like rugby, where the players in the New Orleans area are not paid for the efforts, like top athletes in other sports. "We've worked really hard at creating a team culture that people want to share in," said McCormick. **HFM**