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Chapter **1**

Rugby's Beginnings, Allure, and a Basic Overview

Why do millions of fans around the globe watch 30 players chase an oval ball on a field of grass as if the world would end if they missed one pass, kick, or tackle? Because they're hooked on rugby — a game of passion that's full of action, excitement, and beauty, as well as unpredictable moments and dramatic resolutions on the field, plus unique camaraderie off of it. When played by the best competitors in the sport, rugby satisfies the soul like nothing else.

Rugby's Roots: The Birth of the Game

The game gets its name from Rugby, a town in England's Midlands, where it was first played at Rugby School. The legend goes that in 1823 a schoolboy by the name of William Webb Ellis first picked up the ball in the middle of a soccer game and ran with it, thereby breaking the old rules and setting the stage for an entirely new game (see the following section for the creation of this myth).

What is true is that the game was popularized and the rules codified at Rugby School. The school's alumni spread the game throughout Britain to other schools and universities, like Oxford and Cambridge, and eventually to the far reaches of the British Empire.

The mythical pick-up of William Webb Ellis

William Webb Ellis was indeed a student at Rugby School from 1816 to 1825, and then he went on to study at Oxford before joining the clergy. He died in 1872 and is buried in Menton, in the South of France. But his being a student at Rugby School in 1823 is about as much historical fact as can be determined about him regarding his invention of the game of rugby. In reality, four years after his death the myth was created for a specific purpose — so that the upper classes in England could justify their control of the game. Around the time the story was concocted, rugby was in the throes of a great battle between amateurism and professionalism that would eventually split the sport into two different codes.

Ellis's posthumous anointment as father of the game was a significant event in that battle, and his name lives on today as the embodiment of the sport's crowning achievement, the William Webb Ellis Cup, which is awarded to the winner of the quadrennial World Cup (see Chapter 12 for more about the World Cup).

A century of amateurism

From its beginnings at English public schools, rugby was definitely an elitist pursuit that actively discouraged and prohibited the payment of players. In 1895, after the Rugby Football Union (RFU) refused to allow clubs to compensate players for missing work to play the game, 22 clubs broke away from the union to form the Northern Football Union. This forerunner of professional rugby league (a similar game but with only 13 players) eventually adopted its own set of rules and began paying players — something rugby union wouldn't do for another century.

Up until the 1990s, rugby union was a strictly amateur sport. While there were obviously numerous cases of cushy jobs, special treatment, and under-the-table payments, rugby administrators in both hemispheres diligently ferreted out cases of direct pay-for-play offers and banned those who were caught. Making the jump to rugby league meant no further involvement in rugby union at any level.

The fact that this prohibition against remuneration outlasted even the Olympic movement's similar rule is a testament to the amount of control the game's conservative governors exerted over a worldwide sport. By 1995, the pressures of money and television had become too great and, under threat of losing the best players to league or upstart union competitions, the powers that be capitulated and the sport entered a new era of professionalism.

REASONS WHY RUGBY IS SO AWESOME

We've been collectively around the game from club to international level for almost 70 years, and have observed the following truths about the game. Here are the reasons we think rugby is the best sport in the world:

- **Anyone can play rugby.** The game does not discriminate — rich or poor, male or female, young or old, every person can enjoy this fantastic game.
- **There's a position for everyone.** Whether you are 7 feet tall or 5 feet tall, 100 pounds or 300 pounds, fleet as a cheetah or slow as an ox, an appropriate position exists for every body type.
- **Everyone participates fully.** Although there are 15 different positions, each player uses a skill set that includes running with the ball, passing, tackling, rucking, mauling, and kicking.
- **Rugby tests athleticism and courage.** Fast running, towering kicking, and fearless tackling are all elements of the game that challenge players to reach their athletic potential in the face of danger.
- **Rugby players share a global bond.** The game is played in more than 100 countries, but its devotees nevertheless belong to a select group. No rugby player is ever without a friend as long as another rugby player is nearby.
- **Rugby has a unique ethos on the field.** Rugby is a hard, aggressive game that attracts fierce competitors. Regardless of the intensity, however, honorable conduct is expected of all participants, and you won't find the sort of trash-talking that pollutes most other professional sports in North America.
- **Rugby has a unique ethos off the field.** The same players who do their best to legally smash each other for 80 minutes during a match will always shake hands and share a beverage and a chat afterward. Whether at a club game or the highest international level, socializing with the opposition is mandatory.
- **Rugby is easy to follow.** Although it looks chaotic at first, rugby is easy to understand and appreciate when you become familiar with a few simple principles of play.
- **Rugby people are cool.** Rugby brings together a gregarious, intelligent, diverse group of characters who are fun to be around.
- **Rugby has a proud history.** While it is new to many North Americans, rugby has a long and storied tradition of competitive excellence, fair play, and sporting spirit that transcends the game itself.



REMEMBER

Rugby Union, or simply “rugby,” has a passionate, worldwide following and is played in more than half the countries on the planet. Rugby League, or just “league,” is a more regionally popular game with adherents mostly located in Northern England, Southern France, and in scattered parts of Australasia. The sole subject of this book is Rugby Union.

How the Game Is Played

At first glance, rugby can look very complicated. The rugby field is covered in a myriad of lines and populated by 30 players running around and performing seemingly disjointed actions while wearing a variety of accoutrements. Don’t fear, though — a little bit of explanation will clear up exactly where they are, what they’re doing, and what they’re wearing.

The field



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Rugby is played on a grass field measuring 100 meters long by no more than 70 meters wide (109.4 yards long by 76.5 yards wide). At each end of the field there are goalposts on the goal line and an in-goal area that varies by venue but is usually between 10 and 22 meters long (10.9 yards to 24.1 yards). (All measurements in this book and in rugby are given in meters.)

Lots of lines are marked on a rugby field. The most important ones are the following:

- » **Goal lines:** Players have to reach these lines in order to score.
- » **22-meter lines:** These lines are vital because they influence where play restarts after the ball is kicked out from behind them.
- » **Halfway line:** This is where play starts after every score.

We talk more about the field — and all its other lines — in Chapter 2.

The scoring

The aim of rugby is to score more points than the opposition. This is done in four different ways:

- » **Try:** The most valuable play is to score a *try*, which means touching the ball down in the opponent’s in-goal area or on their goal line. Doing so is worth five points and earns that team the right to attempt a conversion kick.

- » **Conversion kick:** This kick is worth an additional two points. The conversion kick is taken from a spot in line with where the ball was originally grounded, so scoring as close to the posts as possible is best.
- » **Penalty kick:** Penalties for various infractions can be used to take a kick at goal, which is worth three points.
- » **Dropped goal:** A *dropped goal*, which occurs when the player drops the ball on the ground and then kicks it just as it bounces, is worth three points if it goes through the uprights.

We cover scoring in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The gear

In the old days, rugby players wore boots, socks, jerseys, and maybe a bit of tape. The laws have changed over the years to allow much more safety gear to be worn. In the modern era, seeing players wearing padded headgear, compression shorts, light padding under their jerseys to protect shoulders and ribs, and, of course, mouth guards is common. Chapter 3 lets you know what's legal to wear and what's not.

Understanding the Essentials of the Game

Like most sports that didn't originate in North America, rugby can be difficult to comprehend at first glance because of the large number of players involved, the seemingly random calls of the referee, and the wide variety of strategies employed by different teams to score points and get wins. To help you begin your journey toward a complete understanding of the game, in the following sections we outline who all the players are, explain what the referee is generally looking for during the match, and spell out the basic skills required to be successful on the pitch.

Puzzling out the positions

A rugby team has 15 positions. Each player wears a specific number and each number corresponds to individual responsibilities:

- » 1 and 3 are the props
- » 2 is the hooker
- » 4 and 5 are the locks

- »» 6 and 7 are the flankers
- »» 8 is, conveniently enough, the eightman



TIP

This group is collectively referred to as the pack or the forwards.

A rugby team has another group as well — the backs or back line:

- »» 9 is the scrumhalf
- »» 10 is the flyhalf
- »» 11 and 14 are the wings
- »» 12 and 13 are the inside and outside centers
- »» 15 is the fullback

To get a feel for what each player is charged with doing on the rugby pitch, see Chapter 4.

Grasping the laws of the game

Rugby is governed by laws, not rules. The laws of the game are designed to produce an entertaining and free-flowing contest for possession in an attempt to score the most points. Twenty-one laws cover all aspects of the field, the players, and the match officials. The referee, helped by two assistant referees, is the sole judge of fact and law during a match.

The laws are constantly evolving and are the same all over the world, wherever the game is played. Chapter 5 details where the laws come from and also shows pictures of all the different referee signals to help you figure out what's going on the very first time you watch a match.

In general the laws governing play are straightforward about what's allowed, but three crucial parts can be somewhat confusing: the tackle situation, advantage, and offsides:

- »» In a nutshell, when a tackle is made in rugby, the requirements are that the tackler releases the tackled player, who then releases the ball so that players who are on their feet can use it.
- »» Advantage simply means that when one team makes an error the other team can try to capitalize on it, instead of the referee immediately stopping the action. If the non-offending team can't capitalize on the error, play restarts where the original mistake took place.

- » Specific offside laws exist for different phases of play, but essentially players can't be involved if they're in front of a teammate who last played the ball or are behind the ball when the opposition has it.

Chapter 6 explicates all the intricacies of the game and will have you understanding like an expert in no time.

Scoping out skills and tactics

The four basic skills necessary for any rugby player to excel at the game are running, passing, kicking, and tackling. In Chapter 10, we explain how to execute each skill, including doing the goose step with ball in hand, throwing the cut-out pass, making a grubber kick, and pulling off a ball-and-all tackle. (And while these names may seem slightly humorous to you now, when they're explained within the context of play they'll make perfect sense.)

Plenty of rugby teams are filled with great athletes who never get to hoist trophies in triumph, either because they don't have the right game plan or they aren't employing the correct tactics in accordance with their abilities. Rugby coaches have lots of options open to them as far as strategy is concerned, but the most important thing for them to do if they want to win is to select an overall structure that fits their players' strengths. Either that or go out and get players who can play the type of game the coach envisions! Chapter 11 looks at the various ways to attack and defend in order to create a winning team.

Rugby Is a Worldwide Game



REMEMBER

Rugby is played all over the planet by everyone from little kids to millionaire athletes. What binds them together in one collective embrace is passion for the game. More than any other sport, rugby is about tradition, lifestyle, and a noble ethos. Whether you're interested in watching the professional game abroad or playing for your local third-division club, rugby offers an entertaining spectacle or years of athletic enjoyment that can't be matched.

The overall governing body for the sport is World Rugby, based in Dublin, Ireland. To learn more about what they do and how they're structured, check out Chapter 5.

An international affair

The Rugby World Cup is a relatively new tournament, having made its debut in 1987. Now, the tournament is by far the most important event in the minds of fans — and of national unions, who go all out to win it every four years. So far, only New Zealand (3), Australia (2), South Africa (3), and England (1) have managed to lift the William Webb Ellis trophy. Chapter 12 delves deeply into the origins and history of the World Cup (including sections on the United States' and Canada's participation), plus gives loads of information on all the other World Rugby World Cup competitions from Women's to Sevens.

The World Cup may be a newcomer on the global sporting scene, but rugby's international tradition goes back to 1871, when England and Scotland squared off in the first test match (which is when the national teams of two countries play an official game). The professional international calendar is chock-full of exciting action from both hemispheres, with the Six Nations Championship and The Rugby Championship supplemented by the top countries taking annual tours to play on each other's home turf. The interprovincial scene is every bit as entertaining, with Super Rugby Pacific & Americas, European Champions Cup, United Rugby Championship, England's Premiership, and France's Top 14 providing nearly year-round action. Chapter 13 gives an overview of all these professional tournaments.

North America gets into the action

North Americans are relative newcomers to the sport of rugby, but both Canada and the United States are passionate about the game. In Chapter 14, we provide the lowdown on their respective histories and detail how the national governing bodies are organized on both sides of the border.

Before you can earn your international call-up, you need to play some club rugby. In Chapter 15, we survey the professional and amateur club game across North America. Over the past ten years, the most encouraging development in North American rugby has been the rapid growth of the sport at the youth, high school, and collegiate levels, a trend we examine in Chapter 16.

Coaching and Refereeing

Other than the players themselves, the two next most important jobs in rugby are the referee and the coach. Neither is an easy assignment, nor one to be taken lightly. In our experience, coaching can be one of the most satisfying (and sometimes frustrating) things you can do.



TIP

Nothing compares to the feeling of watching your charges artfully deploy your brilliant game plan with devastating effect, complete with the knowledge that you were the one who devised and implemented the whole plan of attack! When that happens, the unavoidable pains of being a coach seem a distant memory — at least until the next training session.

Chapter 17 talks about what it takes to be a good coach and outlines the various other support roles available to those who want to be involved in the sport. Chapter 18 details the different procedures to become a coach in the United States and Canada, and provides some background about what doing so at various levels of the game entails.

The most important person at any rugby match is the referee — without their presence, the game would evolve into a giant wrestling match and tempers would certainly flare out of control. Although the referee is always respected by the players on the field (and if not, the ref's got the power to effect change), the job is still a tough one. The laws of the game don't protect the referee from criticism by spectators or, at higher levels, from media scrutiny. In other words, refereeing isn't for everyone, but it is for a select knowledgeable and confident few who dearly love the game as much as, if not more than, the players they adjudicate. Chapter 19 provides the pathway to taking up the whistle in Canada and the United States.

Keeping Informed about the Game

Rugby used to be a purely local affair, but in today's globally interconnected, media-driven world watching the sport wherever you are — whether you live in a rugby-mad country or not — is possible. Chapter 20 takes all the guesswork out of the process for you with a handy guide to watching rugby on TV and streaming online. Chapter 21 delves into the Internet and provides a plethora of websites, podcasts, and social media to keep you up to date on your favorite country, competition, team, or player. Plus, we list our favorite books that will give you the real flavor of the sport. We also give you advice about how to actually go see a rugby match in person, where you'll be able to soak up the positive atmosphere that makes rugby such a unique endeavor.

