Chapter 1

Rudimentary Rugby

In This Chapter

- Discovering the origins of rugby: The legend lives on
- Making sense of what's happening on the field
- Understanding the basics of the game
- Enjoying the view from the sidelines
- Going global: Rugby from coast to coast and pole to pole

Why do hundreds of thousands of fans around the world follow 15 players and an oval ball on a field of grass as if the world would end if they missed one pass or kick? Because they are hooked on rugby union, a game of passion which is full of action, excitement, beauty, unpredictable movements and drama. When played by the best exponents of the game on earth, rugby union satisfies the soul like nothing else.

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The Game They Play in Heaven

Rugby union buffs are a pretty serious bunch. They treat their game as if it is played only on the most sacred of turf. That's why rugby enthusiasts are among the most passionate, most one-eyed, most vehement (and sometimes most single-minded) of people when they start talking about their favourite subject, especially if they are in a tired and emotional state. Rugby fans firmly believe that rugby is 'the game they play in heaven', a tag that first appeared in the 1980s and which perhaps gives the game more respectability than it deserves.

Rugby is sports heaven to fans because it has so many elements that make it exciting for players and spectators alike: fast running, towering kicking and fearless tackling. And always the sense of danger, especially when huge bodies start crashing into each other – a classic example of irresistible forces meeting immoveable objects. This chapter gives you a taste of what rugby is all about.

What's in a Name?

Some people use the word *football* to describe any game that involves kicking a ball around. Although sometimes called *rugby football* by the purists (the Victorians used this term to differentiate it from its cousin, *association football*), rugby union allows players to actually carry and pass the ball by hand, as well as kick it (unlike modern soccer, which really is limited to kicking and heading the ball). So the word 'football' is a bit misleading for this sport.

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 the ball up in the middle of a football game and ran with it, thereby breaking the old rules and setting a precedent for the entirely distinct game of rugby (see the nearby sidebar 'Rugby union, legendary stuff' on how this romantic myth grew). What is certain is that the game was developed at Rugby School, where they even have a plaque set in the school wall admitting to it – thousands of fans have had their photograph taken standing next to this plaque.

The game developed when students from Rugby took the sport to other schools, and from there it was taken up by university undergraduates at Cambridge and Oxford. Gradually, after many rough and tumble years, it was refined into a game suitable for the plucky sort of chaps who played a significant role in the development of the British Empire.

Rugby quickly spread throughout the English-speaking world. The first national union was established in England when the Rugby Football Union was formed in 1871, although clubs had existed as early as 1839 at the University of Cambridge. The first club established in the southern hemisphere was in Australia, at the University of Sydney in the 1860s. Rugby union is now played all over the world, from large countries such as France and Japan, to minnows like Barbados, Guam and Kazakhstan.

Breaking up: Amateur rugby union and professional rugby league

Many people still believe that rugby union and rugby league is the same game. Not so. Rugby union is vastly different to rugby league, even though league derives from the union game.

Rugby union, legendary stuff

William Webb Ellis, a schoolboy at Rugby School in England in 1823, is regarded by many as the father of rugby, having supposedly been the first person to pick up a ball in a football game and run with it, rugby style. His role as the game's originator has, however, been questioned by eminent historians, who believe the game actually got into its stride well before William Webb Ellis got bored with booting the ball about, soccer-style.

The Webb Ellis legend was created 50 years after the alleged event took place – and by someone who wasn't even at the school at the time when young William made his alleged historic run. To complicate matters, Webb Ellis was dead by the time the story gathered pace so he couldn't confirm or deny it.

The legend has been described as an elaborate hoax concocted by the school's old boys in order to make Rugby School rules the undisputed, official laws of the game of rugby.

Myth or reality, the World Cup revolves around the presentation of the William Webb Ellis Trophy, a fine example of the goldsmith's art, which is awarded to the winners (We discuss the trophy further in the chapter on the World Cup, Chapter 12). If you take a close look at the trophy, you see that perched on top of it is a miniature ball – a round football, much like the one Webb Ellis is reputed to have picked up – supported by garlands.

Rugby league came about when players and officials became disillusioned with the attitude of the Rugby Football Union (RFU), the English national union that, in the nineteenth century, effectively ruled the sport, and decided to break away and form their own code. RFU officials were determined to keep their game strictly for amateurs (see sidebar 'League splits from union').

And, up until the 1990s, so it was – rugby union was a strictly amateur game. The rugby union authorities in both hemispheres were very strict in ensuring that the game was a totally amateur sport, due to their belief that staying amateur was the only way to guarantee that the game remained strictly a leisure pursuit rather than a means of making a living. Any player who was discovered to have been paid was barred from the code.

Rugby league has always been a professional game where players are openly paid. Over the years, rugby union players have signed for rugby league clubs, lured by big contracts, actions which at the time meant they were barred from their former sport. Since the mid-1990s, however, rugby union is also professional and players are allowed to play openly for both codes. The result is a role-reversal in the transfer market, with many more rugby league players crossing over to sign more lucrative rugby union contracts than *vice versa*.

League splits from union

On August 29, 1895, 22 clubs in northern England decided to break away from the RFU, exasperated by repeated refusals by the ruling body to allow them to compensate players for money lost by taking time off work to play rugby football. The clubs met and conspired at the Mitre Hotel in Leeds, where they organised themselves into what they called the Northern Football Union, which eventually became the Rugby League in 1922.

The newly formed breakaway body set about looking at ways of attracting spectators to the game. Within three years, the game was professional, and with this new professionalism came a new set of laws and a reduction in players from 15 to 13.

The 'Great Schism', as it became known, also occurred in Australia. The NSW Rugby League was founded on August 8, 1907 at Bateman's Hotel in George Street, Sydney. This meeting was held under great secrecy because Dally Messenger, Australia's best rugby union player, was intimately involved. Players in the new league competition were paid, with Messenger being paid what was then the vast sum of £180 to turn professional.

Until relatively recently, relations between the two codes have not been exactly warm. For the next century, rugby union regarded itself as the clean and pure amateur code, and rugby league the low-brow professional alternative.

Noting the differences between the two codes



Even though the league game is derived from rugby union, the two rugby codes have different laws. Some of the main differences between the two codes are as follows:

- Rugby union has 15 players in a team and rugby league has 13.
- Rugby union has lineouts; rugby league doesn't.
- Rugby union has unlimited tackles, whereas rugby league has six tackles, after which the ball is handed to the opposition.
- In rugby union, a tackled player must let go of the ball, whereas in league, a tackled player can retain possession.

Getting It Together on the Field

Rugby is played with an oval ball on a field, usually grass, about 100 metres long and 70 metres wide (the dimensions of the field are explained in Chapter 2). You don't need an enormous amount of equipment to play rugby – a

jersey, shorts, socks, boots and a ball which you can obtain from any good sports store are enough to get you started, as we explain in Chapter 3.

Each team has 15 players divided into forwards and backs. These players have specific roles on the rugby pitch – roles which we explore in more detail in Chapter 4. Essentially, the forwards win the ball while the backs score the points required for victory. The aim of each team is to score the most number of points, either through tries or goals.

A team must therefore win possession of the ball and attack with the ball in the hope of beating the opposition's defence players. The tussle between a team's attacking players and their opponent's defending players provides the drama that makes rugby special.

Aiming to score

The basic aim of rugby is to score a *try,* which is worth five points. A try is scored when the attacking team crosses the opposition's *goal line* (sometimes called the *tryline*) and puts the ball on the ground. The attacking team then has the chance to kick a *conversion*, by kicking the ball between the H-shaped *goalposts*, thereby adding another two points. We go into detail in Chapter 2 about the scoring and points system.



A game of rugby is supposed to last for 80 minutes, split into two halves of 40 minutes each. But the referee can, and often does, add extra time if play has been stopped while a player receives treatment for an injury. The winning team is the one with the most points at the end of the match.

The laws for getting the ball to the point of scoring are pretty straightforward; the most important laws can be narrowed down to just five. They're mostly common sense rules governing such things as where players need to stand to be in the game, how they pass the ball, foul play and tackling. One of the most important people on the pitch is the referee, who is assisted by two touch judges, and between them they ensure the game is played fairly and properly. We tell you all about the laws and the officials who regulate the game on the pitch in Chapter 5, where you can also find a handy checklist of the referee's signals.



Rugby union certainly cannot be accused of stagnating. The game is one of the few that is ever changing, thanks to its laws being regularly updated.

Shaping up to play

Because rugby caters for all shapes and sizes, everyone can find a spot in the team. But that doesn't mean you can simply amble onto a rugby field and

success automatically follows. A rugby player needs certain basic skills, most importantly coordination and the ability to run in a straight line at a reasonable speed.

A rugby player must also be able to catch a ball with relative ease, hold onto it without dropping it for several seconds, and not be scared witless if someone built like the Incredible Hulk looms in front of them (turn to Chapter 6 for more information on the skills you need in order to play a mean game of rugby).

While learning how to tackle may be intimidating at first, with practice it comes easily. The breakdown is another aspect of the game that may at first intimidate the newcomer, but once you understand the basics, you can take your place in a scrum, ruck or maul with confidence. Chapter 7 has all the details about the breakdown.

The sight of rugby players soaring to catch the ball is unforgettable and we devote an entire chapter, Chapter 8, to the lineout, a form of play unique to rugby union that calls for split-second timing and strength.

Rugby teams spend many hours on the training field improving their skills and strategies. We are fortunate in Britain and Ireland in that there are plenty of open spaces in which to practise. As most rugby matches are played on grass, all you need to do is visit your local playing fields and you're ready to go. The more time you spend with a rugby ball in your hands, the better your skills are when you actually start playing this wonderful game. We tell you all about the best training exercises, warm-up routines and fitness food in Chapter 10.



If you can drag a friend along to practise with you, so much the better – passing the ball to yourself isn't much fun.

Coaching and those tantalising tactics

In addition to being a physically demanding sport, rugby also requires considerable brain power. A team's players spend hours with their coach improving their training techniques and developing the skills and strategies they need to improve their chances of winning. The combination of skills and clever strategy make rugby the exciting game it is. We discuss the tactics that teams bring into play to crush their opponents in Chapter 9.

One of the great pleasures of being a spectator at a superb game of rugby is to watch the way one team can psych out another on the pitch. Whether a team is on the attack or forced back on the defensive, many of the moves they make have been rehearsed many times before.

The team's director is the coach, whose sole aim is to ensure that on the Big Day, his team's performance is as good as it gets. The coach's role is pivotal to the success of a team: He improves the performance of each individual player as well as that of the team as a unit.

The coach decides what tactics a team uses during a game, and determines which player is best in which position. The coach may decide whether the team tries out some special attacking moves or whether certain defensive tactics are likely to upset the opposition.

Even at Age Grade level, there's nothing like coaching your budding little Jonny Wilkinson to a winning season. We devote Chapter 11 to a discussion of all aspects of the coach's role, and especially the joys of coaching juniors.

Rugby on the Home Field and World Stage

Some rugby fans start off cheering for cousin Freddy at the occasional Saturday match, then, next thing you know, they've joined the local club and wouldn't miss a game for anything. The addiction progresses to following an English Premiership, Celtic League or European Cup team and engaging in passionate debates about who is likely to win the Six Nations or the World Cup.

Rugby union is now one of the most popular team sports in the world, having spread across many continents. Although rugby is a long way behind football as the ultimate world game, its influence around the globe is growing stronger every year.

For the addicted rugby fan, the numerous tournaments and competitions only serve to feed their addiction. In Part III of this book, we describe how players can progress up the rugby-playing ladder and, if they're good enough, the club, provincial and international teams they can play for.

Home is where your grassroots are

Rugby union's grassroots are the clubs where keen youngsters are introduced to the game and encouraged to develop their talents and enthusiasm. Local club rugby caters for so many levels of skill and proficiency that it's not surprising that people have strong ties with the club system. Chapter 16 tells you how to get involved in your local club, which is sure to welcome you whether you are a youngster, an oldster, male, female, a potential player or a social member.

If you prefer to watch your rugby on television, the European Cup (Europe-wide), the English Premiership (England) and the Celtic League (Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Italy) are made for it. Supporters of rugby in the northern hemisphere have been electrified by these competitions. Each of the Six Nations countries have their own domestic rugby competitions and rivalries, which are played out in front of stadiums bursting at the seams. You can find all the details of these great northern hemisphere competitions, including the teams that participate, in Chapter 15.

Around the globe: The A to Z of rugby

Players from more than 120 countries represent those countries at rugby union tournaments. The game's ruling body*, the International Rugby Board*, boasts 97 member countries from Andorra to Zimbabwe.

In between Andorra and Zimbabwe are the rugby-playing nations of Barbados, Botswana, Cameroon, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Georgia, Guam, India, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Latvia, Lithuania, Madagascar, Moldova, Niue Island, Peru, Russia, Senegal, Slovenia, Swaziland and Vanuatu – to name just a few.

In some countries, such as New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa, rugby is the national sport and is treated almost as a religion. Even on the wild and windswept plains of Canada, you can find burly locals kicking a rugby ball around.

Playing the world stage

The growth of major tournaments has ensured that rugby has a prominent international identity. The most important of these is the World Cup, first held in New Zealand and Australia in 1987, which involved 16 nations competing in a tournament whose future success was uncertain.

Thankfully for rugby, the World Cup concept took off after that first tournament, which was enlivened by an outstanding inaugural winning side in New Zealand, and several outstanding games, in particular the Australia versus France semi-final which took place in a now-forgotten suburban ground in Sydney. Chapter 12 is full of more such fascinating information about the World Cup. What impressed most rugby fans at the first World Cup was the realisation that rugby had spread itself across the globe, with enough competitive countries to make it work. Since the 1991 tournament in the British Isles and France awakened rugby to its true potential, the Rugby World Cup has grown to the extent that it now requires extensive qualification matches before the 20 teams that actually compete in the tournament are determined.

The 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003 and 2007 World Cups have all been major international extravaganzas.

The two halves of planet rugby have their own major tournaments, which are held annually. The Six Nations in Europe is the oldest and greatest of these, while the Tri-Nations has become the southern hemisphere's flagship rugby event. Also fiercely contested are trophies like the Calcutta Cup (England v Scotland) and the Bledisloe Cup, where the contestants are Australia and New Zealand. Turn to Chapter 13 for details of these major tournaments, other great rugby rivalries and the famous playing fields on which the winners are decided.

Raising rugby's profile at the Sevens

Sevens rugby, rugby union's version of one-day cricket, has also had a significant impact on the international flavour of the game, and that is guaranteed to grow following the re-admission of rugby union, in the form of Sevens, into the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics (see Chapter 14 for more on Sevens).

The advent of the Hong Kong Sevens tournament in the 1980s encouraged numerous lesser-known countries to try their hand at the game, which is played on a normal-size field but involves only seven players on each side. Sevens rugby is very exciting because tries are relatively easy to score and the focus is entirely on attack.

For years, countries not known for rugby union skills would play in the Hong Kong Sevens, where the emphasis was on the enjoyment provided by the game. It was an ideal way to be introduced to the game, and convinced many to return home and set about trying to improve the standard of rugby in their country.

Seven-a-side rugby was played at the Commonwealth Games in 1998, the first time rugby had been played at this international event, and it paved the way for Sevens rugby's new Olympic adventure.

Nowadays countries previously regarded as Sevens novelties are becoming viable rugby nations. The game is slowly establishing itself in Asia. Japan, in particular, has progressed markedly, with local businesses willing to pay exorbitant sums for players. Keen to win honour and prestige, Japanese companies are anxious to have a strong team that can beat every other company side.

Cheering From Rugby Cloud Nine

Rugby is a physical contact sport. When played properly, it is an exciting, edge-of-the-seat spectacle that gets the spectators' blood pumping and their adrenaline rushing. Fair warning: You may need to ask your doctor if it's okay

to become a rugby fan because the thrills and spills can make it a real roller-coaster ride.

If toughing it out on the pitch doesn't appeal to you, you can have just as much fun watching rugby as playing it. The life of a sideline dweller is often very satisfying, and certainly less fraught than that of the grunt-and-groan merchants on the pitch.

Websites, newspapers, radio, television, videos, sports magazines galore and even – surprise, surprise – books are covering rugby to a greater extent and in greater depth every day to satisfy the rugby fan's insatiable appetite for all things rugby. Chapter 17 is your media guide to getting the most out of the rugby that's televised, and Chapter 18 is all about the best rugby Web sites, the plethora of print media that awaits you at your local newsagents and in the bookstores, and the radio stations to tune into to listen to commentaries on the game.

Of course, for soaking up all the atmosphere, you can't beat being there. Cheering your team on from the stands is the ultimate high. All you need to succeed as a first-rate barracker is a bit of bluff, a bit of cunning and the willingness to learn a few specific terms so that those around you believe that despite your pasty, unathletic appearance, you are actually a walking, talking encyclopaedia of the game.

Like most sports, rugby has its fair share of unusual and unique terms to describe the action unfolding in front of you. To help you talk the talk of the rugby veteran, turn to Chapter 19, which is also a mine of information on how to become a knowledgeable spectator.

Showing Off Your Rugby Knowledge

Everyone likes a Top Ten list, and we're no different. Part V of this book is packed full of fascinating bits of information that you can store away and draw on whenever you feel like impressing all those around you at the rugby. Something for everyone!

For our take on the greatest British players, go to Chapter 20; for the greatest highs in the game, go to Chapter 21; and if you want a really good laugh, Chapter 22 is full of rugby trivia.

By the way, if at any stage you need a quick refresher on terms like *scrum*, *binding*, *blindside, prop* and *hooker*, you can find a glossary at the end of this book that explains these arcane terms. Don't worry: You are in no danger of drowning in rugby-speak!