

Sports

Senior's big toe lifts rugby squad

'Little guy' Graber getting his kicks in a rough, tough game

It's a cold, breezy afternoon at Southbank Field and while the rugby players breathe frost and hop up and down to keep their toes from freezing, Jamie Graber sets up a conversion attempt.

Graber stands alone 25 yards from the goal. He steps forward and boots the plump white ball through the uprights and over the fence behind the field where it bounces up a grade and almost reaches the freight train that rolls past in the mist.

Graber excels at kicking. He takes care of the conversion, penalty kicks and occasional dropkicks for the Oregon rugby team and in "a couple of games early in the season his foot has

been the difference between winning and losing," says teammate Paul McCarthy.

But the more fluid effort of pushing, grabbing, tackling, groaning, passing, and driving for the line is the heart of rugby's 80 minutes of constant action.

Graber, a 5-8, 165 pound senior from San Diego, is also a wing forward, doing battle on the edge of the scrum with much larger folks.

"You're down at the bottom of the scrum," Graber says, "and you just get covered with mud. Suddenly you get the ball and there are 15 guys on top of you. You can't panic. Sometimes I wonder whether

somebody's gonna drown down there.

"Contact is where it's at. The bigger they are the harder they fall. It's really easy to hit those big guys. You got to make sure you fall on them and not let them fall on you."

Rugby players have the reputation of being big and mean. But they'll tell you that aggressiveness and quickness are more important than size, and that the meanness is all in good fun.

"You'll have your arm around a guy having a beer together 15 or 20 minutes after you've been hitting the hell out of each other," says Peter Cribb, an Australian with 15 years rugby

experience.

"You beat the shit out of the guy," says Graber. "You even throw a punch now and then. But as soon as the final whistle blows, you leave all your aggressions on the field."

"I've never seen any aggression carried off the field. It's kind of a tradition that the home team has a keg for the visiting team."

On Sunday morning after the game, Graber says he's sore all over, which tells him he's played a good game. He talks about taking a hot tub bath as if it's the Promised Land. And he's also happy after beating the Portland Pigs, 16-8, which brings Oregon's record to 6-0 in league play and 8-1 overall.

"The Pigs are big and just pigs. They're known to get real dirty and scratchy. A lot of raking in the muck and that sort of thing. They're the Pigs and they live up to their name."

Graber played soccer for years and played linebacker on his high school football team. He kicked field goals for two years at Shasta Junior College in Redding, Calif. He tried out for the Oregon football team this year and says he had a good day showing his stuff, but the Ducks weren't interested.

"My theory is that they found out I was a senior and didn't want to invest their time and money on a senior."

Graber says he's going to try out for the new United States Football League within the next few months. He'd like to do some kicking when he gets out of college.

"It's gonna be tough to get in the USFL. There are so many field goal kickers around. That's one of my main goals. You got to set goals for yourself." A Spanish major, he says he'd like to eventually go into interna-



Senior wing Jamie Graber stretches to grab the ball in Saturday's rugby match between Oregon and the Portland Pigs (above). Graber, whose kicking aided Oregon to its eighth win of the season, later takes a breather from the contact in the 16-8 victory (upper right).

tional marketing.

"He's one of the best kickers I've ever seen," says Cribb. "His greatest attribute is his consistency. He can kick from a long distance as well close up. But the times he misses are few and far between. Before training he'll put in a good three quarters of an hour practicing kicking. He's not spasmodic. Week after week he makes six out of seven."

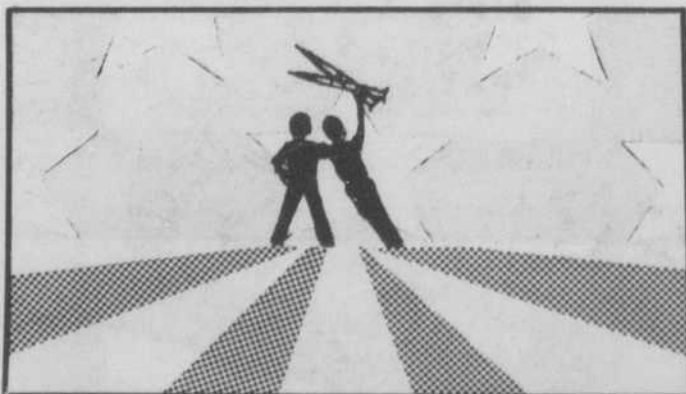
Graber's surely got the heart for the challenge, and the power of leg to kick 50-yard field goals. Whether or not that leg carries him to a pro career, one thing is certain — he will go in kicking and scratching.

Story by Randy Malat
Photos by Mark Pynes

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