

# SPORTS

## Bugger ruggers

Portland Avalanche wraps up fall season

BY EVAN JAMES

Rugby—it ain't just for big and stocky guys anymore. In fact, Portland now has a gay rugby team, the Avalanche. (Well, 98 percent gay, according to president Mark Wilkinson.)

The guys held their last fall match Nov. 13, but you know how queers love to recruit: The team is arranging a "Rugby 101" clinic for new players in anticipation of its spring season. Practice starts in January, and no experience is necessary.

Not yet convinced? Then check out this conversation with Wilkinson about getting "soaked in sweat" and sticking "your face in some other guy's ass." Where do we sign up?

**Evan James:** So, you mentioned on the phone that you hadn't played team sports before joining the Avalanche. Can you tell me a little more about your athletic history?

**Mark Wilkinson:** I grew up in Montana, one of those states where football is everything. My dad always tried to get me to play soccer; I played when I was in junior high for a few years, but I never really got into it. Then in high school, sports start to take on all this baggage. And I just didn't want to have anything to do with it. I kind of hated the jocks, but then I secretly envied them, or whatever. Lusted after them. [Laughs]

**EJ:** Of all sports to begin with, why rugby? It's one of the more high-contact sports you could've chosen.

**MW:** As an adult I decided I wanted to start working out and get into shape. I'd been going to the gym religiously for five years, and rugby seemed like an opportunity to take that to the next level. The people who play basketball



Portland Avalanche players have a ball with their coach, Sharkee Niemi

have been playing their whole lives, so I'd be starting as a beginner and feel stupid. Rugby, especially with our team, is an opportunity to get out on the ground floor and learn with other people who are learning it at the same time.

**EJ:** The general impression I got from reading other gay rugby team Web sites is that they're very inclusive.

**MW:** Yeah, that's very true with the Avalanche, and a very cool thing about rugby. People have this image of rugby players as being these big bruiser guys. [Laughs] Those

guys typically play a certain kind of position on the team; smaller, faster guys play other positions, so really any body type can play.

**EJ:** Do you think that people see gay rugby teams in a more sexual way?

**MW:** Rugby in general has always played off of that. It's very common for the French and British national rugby teams

to do a calendar every year with the players wearing nothing but a rugby ball. I think it's a sexually charged sport, even for straight teams.

**EJ:** How often do issues about sexuality or sexual tension arise on the team?

**MW:** I've been surprised how little that has come into play. I think it's like any team: You can have a bunch of straight guys playing together, and when they're standing around stretching they'll start talking about women. We stand around and talk about guys and tease each other about that, but when you start practicing, the focus is the game.

**EJ:** I imagine once you're in the midst of competition, you don't really have time to think about "gayness."

**MW:** You really don't. The game is so demanding, it's all you can do to just keep running and sprinting and grabbing the ball and getting tackled. You don't really have time to think about some other guy's ass.

**EJ:** Uh-huh.

**MW:** But the other thing, and I think this is true of rugby in general, is that it's a really intimate sport. Everyone's soaked in sweat, you're reaching between one guy's legs and grabbing the waistband of his shorts, you're hugging another guy, and your face is in some other guy's ass—there's a lot of bonding that comes out of that. It's not necessarily sexual, but you get pretty used to physical intimacy.

**EJ:** What would you like the Avalanche to become?

**MW:** I'd like it to become a community institution, really. It's a league, and I doubt there's going to be more than one gay rugby team. So, I'd like it to be something people know about and support, where anyone who's interested at all comes and tries it so they're bonded to the team. [EQ]

PORTLAND AVALANCHE will hold a fund-raiser from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. Nov. 20 at the Eagle PDX, 1300 W. Burnside St. For more information call 503-715-3122 or visit [www.avalancherugby.org](http://www.avalancherugby.org).

EVAN JAMES is a Portland free-lance writer. He enjoys a (adjective) (noun) now and then and loves (verb)ing on his comfortable (noun).

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