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GUTS & GOOSESHIT

Witnessing women's rugby with the Eugene Reign

BY RICK LEVIN

'Everybody thinks we should have moustaches and hairy arses, but in fact you could put us all on the cover of Vogue.' — Helen Kirk, on women's rugby teams

The Collision, as I've come to call it, occurred at high noon on a cold, gray Sunday, Feb. 26, at Riverfront Field. It was vicious. We could all see it coming seconds before it happened, but even so, none of the spectators had time to brace for the sheer anatomical violence of the impact. I myself witnessed it from a good 50 yards away, and that wasn't nearly far enough — the sound still haunts me. If you shot two sides of beef point-blank at high velocity from opposing meat cannons, you might be able to replicate the sickening thud of those two women coming together at full tilt.

After it was over, only one stood up. The other player lay there, motionless, silent, in a fetal curl, her legs oddly twisted — until at last you heard a wail of pain rise into the chilly air.

I offer this not as an example of the brutality of women's rugby — though brutal it can be — but rather as a testimony to the ferocious, frenetic, downright feral quality of the game itself, which is as physically grueling as wrestling, as endurance-testing as soccer, as punishing as football and as hit-happy as hockey.

Most of all, though, rugby is non-stop action. It's a game of bottlenecks and bursts — of growling, grunting Greco-Roman aggression marked by flashes of fluid speed and grace. One-on-one tackling, like the jackknife blows sending some poor player whap-flat on

her back, can be as swift and startling as a gunshot. At other times, the game becomes an undistinguishable orgy of arms and legs, as scrumming players — tangled and livid like some David Cronenberg flesh-machine — bulldoze each other over the loose ball.

All this, and the only protective equipment most rugby players use is a mouth guard — and even that isn't mandatory. A few players, one or two on each team, wear what's called a scrumcap, which is a thin, pithy helmet that looks like the old-school leatherhead on the Heisman trophy. That's it for armor.

I've heard tell that, compared to men's rugby, women's rugby is more ballistic, more fierce and gutsy. So, for any of you dudes out there still spellbound by the archaic notion that women represent the "fairer" or "weaker" sex, I submit the Eugene Reign: a tribal band of serious bruisers. Try telling these women they throw like girls. Try telling them they should stick to tennis and baking and babymaking, and leave the rough stuff for men.

You'll be on the ground, knocked senseless, before you can yell "scrum."

THE GROUND RULES

"When you're on the ground, you're part of the ground," explains Brittany Stepnioski, president of the Eugene Reign, a women's rugby squad that just last year joined the Pacific Northwest Rugby Football Union. Stepnioski — a perfectly amiable person over coffee who, as I learned that Sunday, is a total monster on the field — is explaining the game to me, and so I

write that down in my notebook: "When you're on the ground, you're part of the ground." I thought it was a cool quote, in an Old Testament sort of way. You know, ashes to ashes and all that.

Honestly, though, everything Stepnioski told me during our interview prior to the Feb. 26 game — it didn't really register. I asked questions and nodded and scribbled stuff down, but I didn't get it. Like the idea of New York City, which looms as a gothic myth in the minds of the uninitiated, you simply have to see rugby to believe it. Standing on the sidelines as the Reign played a "friendly" non-league match against the UO Ducks, the sport proved way more impressive and exciting and violent than I ever imagined. It might just be my new favorite sport.

Listen: That "part of the ground" quote ain't no metaphor; it's literal as a slap to the face. Lying tackled with the ball on a field of thawing mud, ripped turf and goose shit — and with a dozen-plus opposing players wanting what you've got like a birthday wants a cake — there is nothing to protect you from getting a wicked face full of cleats.

Nothing, that is, but your wits.

Stepnioski, who grew up in Portland, first started playing rugby as a student at Seattle Pacific University, where she spent two years getting familiar with the basics of the game. She also played two years for the UO Ducks, and after graduation she took a year off — partly to secure a health insurance policy. With that in place, she joined the Reign. Flashing a sly smile, Stepnioski describes herself as a "rugby whore,"