

meaning she'll sometimes drive up to a Portland match just to offer herself as an extra for another team.

The most appealing thing about rugby is "the roughness of it," Stepnioski says. "It's so hardcore. It's non-stop." She says that, for her, "the happiest place on earth" is on the pitch (the rugby field), where play "is exhilarating, exhausting and bliss all at once."

Beyond this rough-and-tumble aspect, the game is just flat-out physically demanding, requiring a rare combination of strength, stamina and speed. "On a pro level, rugby players are the most fit, toned athletes," Stepnioski says.

On the flip side, she points to the seemingly oxymoronic traditions of sportsmanship and fair play that inform the sport. For instance, tackling is a strictly formalized activity, a singular event where "you are responsible for the person you're tackling," she says, including that player's safety. "You can't just chest bump them down," a no-no known as dump tackling. "I still talk crap to the Budd Bay girl that dump tackled me in my first game with the Reign," Stepnioski says. "It's all in good fun, though." A proper tackle can hurt like hell, sure, but it doesn't have to break your neck. The rules of rugby — called laws — strive to avoid long-term damage.

Reign coach Susan Berg reiterates the idea that caution is the better part of valor in rugby. "For me, coaching rugby is teaching the game and techniques in a safe manner," Berg says. "With every game, even if we lose, if no one gets injured it's a win for me."

Of course, short-term damage is another issue altogether. Scrapes, scratches, bruises and bloody noses abound. "It is usually nothing a little beer can't help," Stepnioski says.

Reign vice-president Amber Shaffer says she first heard about rugby from a friend in high school. Shaffer played for the Eugene Housewives a few years back, though she found most of the players lacking in motivation. Like Stepnioski, she took a year off, and then she and Berg "got a big group of people who wanted to start out," and together they built a team from the ground up. The Reign is entirely self-financed, with gear and traveling expenses coming out-of-pocket. The players also hold several fundraisers, such as car washes, garage sales and events where they auction off things like work and lap dances. "A lot of our time, when we're not practicing and playing rugby, we're doing other rugby things," says Stepnioski.

Last fall, as a first-year "associate" team in the PNF-RU, the Reign made the postseason, losing their playoff



AMY PETERSON OF THE REIGN DROPS DUCKS IN HER WAKE

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA



HOISTED ALOFT FOR A LINEOUT

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER



EUGENE REIGN FORWARD AMBER SHAFFER (#1) REFUSES TO LET A FEW DUCKS GET HER DOWN

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA



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