

game to Olympia's Budd Bay Bandits. Both Stepnioski and Shaffer admit that the Bandits are the most dominant team in the league, but they're hoping to take them down in the fall, when official league competition begins.

Playing forward on the pitch, Shaffer presents a towering figure, a fearless, fearsome dynamo of grit and determination. "I like tackling, it's probably my favorite part," she says. "I'm hard to tackle, too. It makes it fun when you get the ball. I really like how competitive it is, too."

During the Feb. 26 match against the severely outsize Ducks, Shaffer often had three or four opposing players hanging off her, struggling to bring her down as she plowed ahead with the ball. She scored two of the Reign's three tries (Stepnioski had the other). "The most important part about rugby is your aggression," Shaffer explains. "You're not going to win the game if you're not ball-aggressive."

RUGBY REFINED

Given the decidedly primitive and unflashy nature of rugby, you might guess its era of invention to be roughly Paleolithic. In fact, rugby hasn't been around all that long. One apocryphal but highly cinematic story dates the game's invention to 1823, when a student playing soccer at England's Rugby School suddenly picked up the ball and, hey presto, started running with it — after which, Rugby School ran with it too, putting up a commemorative rugby plaque in 1895. In 1848, British students set down the laws of



LAUREN LING OF THE EUGENE REIGN,
POST MATCH, FEB. 26

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER



A DUCK KICKS THE BALL UP THE PITCH

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

rugby in writing for the first time. And so it began.

There is a delicious irony in the fact that the first kids to play a pigpen game like rugby were from class-conscious colleges like Eton, the alma mater of George Orwell, John Maynard Keynes and Hugh Laurie. It's like discovering that curling was invented by the Yanomamo. Rugby's tony origins, however, may explain the very un-American propriety and politesse that often governs the game — such as when everybody on the field takes a knee if a player is felled by an injury.

Referee Jonathan Sowins, who headed up the Feb. 26 match, says his priorities as an official are overseeing the safety of the players, maintaining sportsmanship and simply letting the ruggers play the game. "The referee is the sole judge of fact and of law during a match," Sowins adds.

Still, it's not necessary to understand or even know all the laws to enjoy a rugby match. From what I can discern, the game is as arcane and mannered on paper as it is chaotic and gorgeously cluster-fucked in reality. Most of the laws have been written piecemeal and retroactively to clean up the game here and there over the years, like a sort of rugby Geneva Conventions.

But the smashing continues, without pads, remorseless, constant, with none of that huddling or hiking or halting that characterizes games in the NFL. If football is Billy Ray Cyrus, rugby is Johnny Cash. "They just hit to knock down the player and that's it, the play stops," says Reign forward Shaffer of traditional football. "It's