

EUGENE REIGN BALL CARRIER
JESSAMY FABRICANT
PREPARES FOR CONTACT



PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

funny, in football they're starting to use rugby terms," she adds of words like scrum.

And, as opposed to the smack talk and ego-preening and off-field shenanigans of the NFL, rugby is defined by an odd sense of decorum and humane, even polite, conduct. Referee Sowins said this is what makes rugby different from any other sport, "because of the camaraderie after the match and throughout life. Ruggers have respect for other ruggers, all over the world."

"We beat up each other on the field, then shake our opponents hand and hang out with them after," Stepnioski says. "Any smack talk is usually in good fun."

Sure, there are dirty rugby players. As referee Sowins points out, because "rugby has laws, the players do their best to bend them." And Shaffer and Stepnioski give examples of particular players on certain teams trying to pinch their sides, pull their jerseys off over their heads or step on their faces when they're down.

But again, when the game is over, everything is left on the pitch. Shaffer said that a player laid out by a monstrous hit often congratulates her tackler after the match. And then, as Stepnioski explains, the two teams usually head off for a get-together of "carbolicious food, mingling, a keg or two of beer and lots of lewd, offensive songs."

After the Reign's impressive 15-5 victory over the talented Ducks — who rallied in the second half, making a game of it — several Reign players invited us

to join them for a post-match fiesta, which included one keg of "piss" and one keg of Ninkasi (a Reign sponsor, along with Duck Inn, Diablo's and Balls Out! Rugby). I asked one of the girls which keg they were going to drink first, swill or Ninkasi? She smiled. "The piss is for the other team," she said.

RUGBY IS LIFE

"Sports is human life in microcosm," legendary broadcaster Howard Cosell once said. Well, here's how rugby is like life: Most of the time, it's a grunting, grasping, groaning gang pile of chaos and contention, as irresistible force meets immovable object, each heaving itself forward to advance just a few precious inches. And then, every once in a while, you suddenly break free for a moment, busting ass for the goal, the fabled try line — only to meet, all too quickly, another stubborn obstacle in your path.

Unlike much of life, however, rugby is never dull. It's war all the time, endless *Sturm und Drang*, and it's a freaking blast to watch. "It is the best spectator sport, live and on TV, because the action is always around the ball," rugby lawman Sowins says. True that.

Remember elementary school, when you first heard that punchy, three-word warning about what to do if you suddenly find yourself on fire? Stop, drop and roll. To capture the spirit, if not the strategy, of rugby, simply reverse this dictum: Run. Catch. Go. Repeat.

EUGENE REIGN SPRING SEASON SCHEDULE

March 26 at Seattle: Round-robin tournament
w/Tacoma & Seattle

April 9 at Bend

April 16 at Portland Pigs

April 23, noon: TBA at Agnes Stewart
Middle School

And like a fire roaring, rugby has the appearance of madness incarnate, a furious storm consuming everything willy-nilly — though any arson expert will tell you all buildings burn with an invisible inner logic, according to the immutable laws of physics. "Contrary to how it may look, there is strategy," Stepnioski says. "We have plays and, yes, we do have positions. There are great 'old man' tricks I've learned from playing touch with the men's team that I call strategy," she says, though "others may call it a last resort of exhaustion."

"When my players step on that pitch, it's their game," says coach Berg. "I have little say in what they do in the game, meaning they make the decisions."

So far, in its first two matches of this "friendly" spring season, the Reign has been making the right decisions. At a casual game on March 5, they dominated the newly established Willamette University team to such an extent that, at halftime, the two squads swapped a handful of players to even things up. Stepnioski, Berg and Shaffer all say they are encouraged about the way the team is cohering and gaining momentum.

"Our biggest problem in the past has just been getting out there and letting people know that there is a women's rugby team in Eugene — to help, of course, with our recruiting," says Shaffer. "With recent sponsorships, some fundraising events, flyers and word of mouth, we're finally starting to get into a comfortable position with our numbers, and we don't have to scramble to make sure we have enough players before a game."

"We smashed the Ducks, and that is no small defeat," Stepnioski says. "They are a great team. It was a great high point to start the season on, and after seeing how well our rookies did I have high hopes for the rest of the season. I would really just love to get our team well established in the Eugene community."

EW

RUGBY RULES

The Eugene Reign plays a version of the sport similar to the international Rugby Union: Fifteen players to a side, comprised of eight forwards and seven backs. (Oscar Wilde called rugby "a good occasion for keeping 30 bullies far from the center of the city.") Games are divided into 40-minute halves, and there are no time outs. The ball is advanced via running, punting or pitches from teammate to teammate, laterally or backward; forward passes are against the law.

Scoring is achieved by running the ball into the try zone (similar to football's end zone) where, unlike football, the play isn't over until it's downed for five points; a point-after kick through the goalposts is worth two more points. A player also can attempt to kick the ball through the goalpost from the pitch (called a drop goal), which is worth three points.

A tackle rarely stops play. When a carrier is brought to the ground, she places the ball away from her body, often keeping a hand on it; sometimes this causes a ruck, which is when three or more players tangle up and push each other around, trying to free the ball for a backline runner to gain possession. Whenever action is stopped by an infraction, the ball is put back in play by a scrum — that interlocking, head-to-ass huggermugger of crouching bodies pushing each other to free the ball. A lineout — which happens when the ball goes out of bounds — is a bizarre, balletic formation where one player from each team is hoisted into the air by her hips or ass or shorts as she tries to grab for the ball being thrown in bounds.