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Back-to-back titles: Rugby's popularity at Furman matched by its success

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Back-to-back titles

Rugby's popularity at Furman matched by its success

Ten years ago, mention of the word "rugby" would likely have elicited little response on the Furman campus.

Few people would have known much about the sport, which at first glance seems similar to football — and yet is played on a "pitch," and features "props" and "hookers" and "scrumhalves" engaging in assorted "mauls" and "rucks" and "scrums."

Thanks to the Rugby Club, however, the sport has developed a high profile at Furman. In fact, since Furman first fielded a team in 1998, rugby has grown into the university's most successful — and most popular — club sport, with up to 50 men and women taking part each year.

College rugby teams from Florida to Maine are no doubt noticing Furman as well, especially after the men's team claimed its second straight East Coast Division III title this spring. Competing in Philadelphia, Furman defeated Bentley College of Massachusetts 32-7 in the semifinals and then used a late "try" to outlast Central Connecticut State 14-5 in the championship game — and polish off a 10-0 season.

"They had a good team," says co-captain Peter Chamberlain '04. "That was without a doubt the most difficult game of the year. It was back and forth the entire game, and it wasn't sealed until the very end."

Furman had advanced to the Final Four by defeating Duke 18-17 in the Rugby South Division III title game. The Furman women also advanced to the Rugby South championship game before falling to Central Florida 24-7.

Back-to-back championships on any level are rare. They are particularly satisfying for a club team, in which participation is completely voluntary. Chamberlain says, "There is a commitment to rugby that isn't there with most other club sports and activities at Furman. Most require a couple of hours a week for a few days, but for rugby it's a greater time commitment."

The Furman rugby teams, members of the Palmetto Union, compete during both the fall and spring. Matches are played on weekends, and the teams typically practice two times a week.

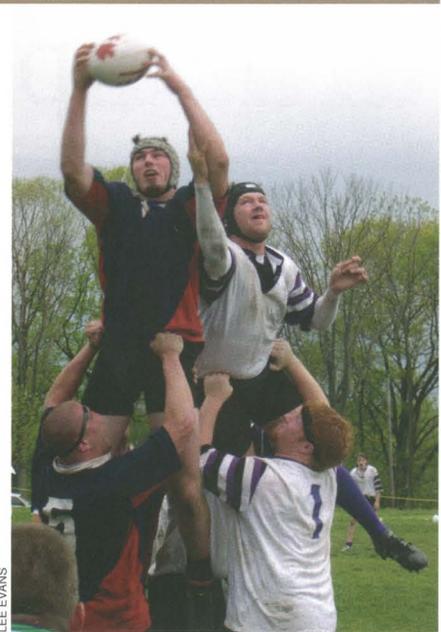
And besides having to fit rugby into their schedules, most team members have never played the sport before, so although they may bring with them athletic skills



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LEE EVANS

Final Four scenes. Top left: A scrum in the championship match with CCSU. Left: Furman and Bentley battle during a lineout. Above: A CCSU player beats Will Brantley to the ball.

honed in such sports as soccer or football, they still have to learn rugby terminology, rules and strategy.

John Roberts, director of internal and electronic communications at Furman, is the head men's coach and helped found the club with alumni Marc Roberts '99 (no relation) and Danielle Snoddy '01. The coach says, "One of the greatest joys for me is watching students pick up this bloated football and not know what it is, but by the end of winter term they've mastered the basic concepts and are running fairly intricate plays."

Roberts praises his players for their dedication and intelligence. "The kids here are very coachable," says Roberts, who played rugby as an undergraduate at the University of South Carolina (a Division II team) and later with men's club teams in Augusta, Ga., and Greenville. "They don't have a whole lot of time to devote to the sport because of academics, but with the time they do have, we try to be as organized as we can."

"We seldom move onto anything new before they've mastered the basics, and we try to build on things each week. By the spring season, we should be hitting on all cylinders and preparing for the playoffs. That's when we typically peak."

As Roberts writes on the rugby Web site (www.furman.edu/furugby), the sport's popularity is growing in the United States but still has a long way to go to match its worldwide appeal. He says, "Rugby has the elements that many Americans crave. Like basketball

and soccer, the game is fast-paced. And it has the hard hitting of football and hockey, only without the pads."

One of the major benefits of the rugby program is the camaraderie it fosters among current and former players, family and friends. When the men traveled to Philadelphia for the championship semifinals and finals, 15 members of the women's team, more than a dozen parents and several rugby alumni made the trip with them. Attendance at some games on the Furman pitch, located above the Minor Herndon Mickel Tennis Center and Irwin W. Belk Track Complex, has reached as many as 400 people.

Rugby alumni qualify to be members of the Furman Rugby Old Guys/Girls (FROG) and are invited back each fall at Homecoming for a reunion and a match against the current squad. FROG members also receive an annual newsletter and periodic e-mail updates on the teams' progress.

So perhaps it's no wonder that rugby is such a popular club sport at Furman. It's successful, it's different, and it promotes a strong bond among players old and new.

Will the Paladins enjoy a three-peat in 2004-05? Visit www.furman.edu/furugby this fall for information and results.

—Jessica Taylor '07

The author is editor of The Paladin for 2004-05.