

## TRAVELING THROUGH

# Scary Potential

U.S. Rugby sees amazing potential here, scary opposition elsewhere.

- BY MATT WOOD -

**T**he U.S. national rugby team's head coach, Peter Thorburn, looked weary answering a question about his team's chances at the upcoming Rugby World Cup in France. "We've prepared as well as we can, with the limitations there are in U.S.A. Rugby," he said. Those limitations, namely fielding a non-professional team comprised of players who also have to work regular jobs for a living, make it hard for the U.S. to compete against traditional powers like New Zealand, South Africa, and Ireland, where kids grow up dreaming about playing in one of their many professional rugby leagues.

Thorburn is a former coach with the All Blacks, New Zealand's legendary national team. He was brought here to help the US reach the World Cup. With that kind of rugby pedigree, it must be tiring for him to constantly answer questions about his team's ability to simply compete. Still, he hopes they can hold their own. "We've had enough opportunity to be as good as we can at this stage," he said.

The Eagles, as the U.S. national team is called, were in Chicago recently, hosting the Irish professional squad Munster in the Setanta Sports Challenge Cup at Toyota Park in Bridgeview. The game was the final warm-up for the Eagles before heading to the World Cup. And perhaps just as importantly for the development of the sport in the U.S.,

You can see people getting converted really quickly as soon as they see rugby."

The Eagles are ranked 15th in the world heading into competition, which may sound impressive to the casual fan, until they realize it's behind countries like Samoa, Fiji, and Tonga. This mediocre ranking won't cut it in a country that by and large doesn't

pool. Unfortunately, it hasn't generated enough interest among younger athletes.

"When I grew up in Chicago, I had never even heard of the game of rugby," said Mike Mangan, a Fremd High School graduate who has played with the Eagles since 2005. He played football at Eastern Illinois University, but knew his football days were over once he graduated. His brothers played rugby though, and introduced him to some local clubs. The Chicago area is actually a rugby hotbed of sorts, with 61 men's and high school clubs, including two, the Griffins and Lions, who play in the U.S.A. Rugby Super League, the highest level in the country. Mangan said the U.S. rugby program is just at the ground floor, perhaps where soccer was 20 to 30 years ago, but that increased participation, especially at the youth level, can raise the level of play. "I'm pretty excited to see what happens, as far as the next generation of rugby," he said. "Because there's enough numbers and talent in the Chicagoland area alone to do it."

Keith Brown, president of the Chicago Lions, says developing enthusiasm for the

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it was a prime marketing opportunity. The game was televised nationally on ESPN, and Thorburn said, "I think it's very important that the game will be seen by a lot of American people for the first time. And it's important that it's a game that's got quality about it. It's how the game should be played, because Americans love physicality in their sport.

care about sports in which we're not the best. The U.S. is considered a second-tier rugby power, hobbled by the lack of professional leagues and an athletic population that rarely picks up the game before college. Because of its similarities to American football, rugby seems like a sport in which the U.S. could field a highly competitive team, given the athletic talent



sport at a grassroots level is key to its development. He cited the American Youth Soccer Organization – or AYSO, the organization responsible for millions of little Dylans and Briannas running around the suburbs in neon soccer jerseys every weekend – as a model that rugby should follow. Yet why would a kid want to play rugby instead of soccer or football, or for that matter, baseball and basketball?

Brown says rugby offers a number of advantages. “First of all, there is almost no equipment needed besides a ball. You don’t even need cleats, really,” he said. “Plus, there’s a place for players of all shapes and sizes at different positions.”

But most importantly, Brown said, rugby is an “honorable” game. He said there are rarely any fights, and very little showboating or disrespect among players, which, considering the Terrell Owens and Chad Johnson antics sure to come this NFL season, would probably be a breath of fresh air for many American sports fans.

Watching the Eagles’ game against Munster, it’s easy to see why rugby would be a good fit for the average fan too. The object of the game is simple enough to grasp in only a few minutes: the offense basically tries to push the ball across a goal line, and the defense tries to stop them. It’s also probably the most physical team sport played today, maybe even tougher than football because the players wear no padding, other than perhaps a thin piece of headgear resembling George Halas-era leather football helmets. Unlike soccer, rugby will never be labeled as a “European wussy sport” by provincial American fans.

But as rowdy as it is, with players running into each other pell-mell like an endless kickoff return, rugby action never seems dirty or underhanded. The violence is very controlled, almost planned, in the way the players jockey for position on top of a pile, or position their bodies in a scrum, waiting for the ball to emerge.

Munster won the Setanta Cup 10-6 in a tightly contested match. The Eagles dominated possession in the first half and led 6-0 going into halftime, but after the break, Munster regained momentum with a penalty kick and the game’s only “try” (the equivalent of a touchdown). Even



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late in the game, when the outcome was obvious, the Eagles made two impressive defensive stops to keep Munster from adding to their lead.

The most telling moment though, from the perspective of a new fan trying to understand the game, happened early in the second half.

Mike MacDonald, who plays “prop” for the U.S. (a punishing position) took a vicious shot in the back from a Munster player. MacDonald – who is built like a fire hydrant, if fire hydrants were 6’1” and weighed 270 pounds – stayed on the turf for a few minutes

while the trainers attended to him, but he eventually got up and continued to play.

After the game, when asked about how he felt, he said almost sheepishly, “Yeah, it’s a little sore.” Then he added, as if in that spirit of honor toward the Munster player who decked him, “It’s all part of the game.”

Munster’s head coach Declan Kidney said it’s only a matter of time before the U.S. fields a top-notch national rugby team. “We’d be quite fearful of some of the American footballers and the basketball players getting

together,” he said. “That team could be a major player in world rugby if they were ever able to get a few more guys in with just a small bit of experience.”

Like seemingly every sport that is popular worldwide but just hasn’t caught on here, the potential lies in getting the kids to play. Kidney summed up what he thought of this prospect for rugby. “The potential for America, it’s very scary.”

Matt Wood is a regular contributor to Chicago Sports Weekly.