

VarsityXtra

Moon girls rugby team a 'beacon' for a growing sport

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Countless years of gender stereotypes in sports has discouraged girls from tough, physical contact in the field of play.

The top six highest-paid female athletes of 2021 span across three sports: tennis, gymnastics and golf. The most popular high school sports for American girls are track and field and volleyball. What do these all have in common? Zero physical contact with the opposition.

But that doesn't quite suffice for 16-year-old Callie Rautenbach. Callie plays rugby, and not the "tag rugby" that's often encouraged for female participants.

"My favorite part about rugby is the tackling," she said.

Callie, like many girls in the Western Pennsylvania region, has fallen in love with the sport primarily popularized overseas. She competes for North Pitt United Rugby and West Pittsburgh Rugby, two of the most popular clubs in the area.

Rocky Nurss serves as president of West Pittsburgh, a K-12 community program that introduces young boys and girls to the sport of rugby, and he also coaches the girls' Moon High School team.

The Moon squad could soon receive an upgrade from club to varsity soon thanks to a recent announcement from



TLMerkin Photography

Moon's Shea Evans tries to break through two State College defenders during a game last season

the PIAA, Pennsylvania's high school athletics governing body. Fueled by negotiations with Rugby PA, a non-profit corporation established in 2012, the PIAA declared an "emerging sport" classification on Oct. 28.

This breakthrough sets the framework for the future of rugby in the state. The magic number to establish a PIAA sport typically sits at 100 — if 100 schools, from one gender, sponsor the sport then it will receive an officially-sanctioned PIAA championship. That sounded like a daunting task to Rugby PA executive director Dylan Hamilton and his staff, so he suggested a more gradual approach.

Hamilton purposed an emerging sport classification, similar to the women's rugby status at the NCAA level, and

the PIAA obliged. This means that if 25 schools per gender establish sponsored rugby programs, it will receive emerging sport classification. Hamilton felt that checkpoint would help gain the support needed to eventually approach 100.

Rugby PA aims to reach 25 programs for both boys and girls by 2023. The organization decided school rugby stood out as the most sustainable route to grow the game in Pennsylvania.

"A lot of the issues that we found in our club teams — whether that be turnover in coaching or admin, access to facilities and things like that — would kind of overnight go away if it was with a school," Hamilton said. "If a coach leaves, the program doesn't fold, they just hire a new

coach. If you need to get a practice field, they just assign you one because that's what the school has."

To facilitate the emergence of school programs, PIAA teams will start off competing in 7s rugby instead of the 15s that Moon has played in the past. Nurss supports the decision, pointing out it will be much easier for schools to put together rosters if they only need about 10 players per team.

Hamilton called the program Nurss has built at Moon a "beacon" for rugby in the region. He praised his team for its participation numbers, but also the fierce competitiveness the girls show.

"What we'd love to do is clone Rocky, and put him to about 10 different schools across Western PA," Hamilton joked.

Now comes the most difficult part of the process: recruitment. Rugby PA must not only persuade schools to field a rugby program, but encourage enough kids to give the sport a try.

Rugby flows through Callie Rautenbach's blood. Her parents grew up in Zimbabwe, where her father played from the age of 5, before competing for a club in the United Kingdom. Her mother, Rosemary, said rugby "wasn't for girls" when she was a child, but has embraced the distinct sportsmanship through her years as a spectator.

"There's one thing that's

exceptionally special with rugby," she said. "You leave your heart and soul and guts out on the field, and then you come off the field at the end of the game and everybody has a meal together and it becomes a social event."

Callie Rautenbach's rugby journey began in the UK, until her family moved to the United States two years later. The game's bug had already bitten her, but it didn't have nearly the same popularity or acceptance across the pond.

Unlike her West Pitt teammates that play for Moon, Callie's high school doesn't have enough rugby athletes to field a team yet. She attends North Allegheny, and hasn't had much luck convincing her peers to give her favorite game a try.

"I haven't had success recruiting friends," she said. "A lot of the time their parents are scared to let them play, as it's a sport they do not know anything about."

The sport's perceived violence remains a large obstacle for parents' approval, especially on the girls' side. But Rosemary Rautenbach said it's a common misconception, and encourages parents to watch the sport themselves before making that judgment.

"The safety aspect is so huge," she said. "Things have progressed and changed so much. The rules have become so much stricter to limit incident levels of big clashes or head knocks. The refs are so

on it when it comes to the safety aspect within the game."

Nurss' daughter took up the sport as well, and he did not discourage her participation in the slightest way. He said the youngest players in the West Pitt program begin with tag rugby before entering the tackle side, and everyone learns how to play the game with proper cautions before anything else.

"When taught properly and played properly, rugby is a safe sport," he added. "It has similar injury rates to things like ice hockey or gymnastics or cheerleading."

With little high school participation in the Pittsburgh area so far, Nurss' team has gotten used to traveling to the eastern side of the state to play against Philadelphia-region teams. The Rautenbach's family routinely drive 5-plus hours to tournaments where recruiters might show up, trying to help Callie accomplish her goal of competing at the college level.

A Western Pennsylvania rugby wave would certainly limit travel requirements for interested families, and Hamilton hopes Rugby PA's breakthroughs with the PIAA will spark an immediate growth in the area.

"We think of this, the idea of making it more of a school sport ... as an opportunity to re-introduce Western PA to rugby and the opportunities that come with it."