

# ***Why Rugby***

*by Rob Wagner*

*(an American perspective from the frozen tundra of Minnesota!)*

It is tempting when trying to define "why" rugby to simplify it all to a few bumper stickers ("Rugby... Because"; "Rugby, The Only Game Our Mothers Let Us Play"). Of course it is far more complicated than that. Notice, for instance, that the subject of this chapter is not "why play rugby," it is WHY RUGBY. This fine differentiation does not have to be explained to ruggers, but for the new or un-initiated, it does bear some discussion. Note also that "WHY RUGBY" is both a question and a statement, or perhaps a question without a question mark or a statement in question form. How appropriate that the topic itself should break the rules, even if they are the rules of grammar and punctuation.

Rugby is not, "like soccer," as we all too often hear. Such a statement is a blasphemy of the good name of Rugby. Rugby is a natural evolution from soccer (okay, football). Soccer, being the Neanderthal pre-cursor to Rugby. The game of Rugby-football started with a man, William Webb Ellis, who followed his finely developed instincts by picking up the ball in a football game, as it was played then, and running with it (i.e. he broke a rule he recognized as stupid and limiting, starting a fine tradition of civil disobedience that was later adopted by Gandhi and King).

Emerson uttered a mouthful when he said "whoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist" (but then he had a nasty habit of being profound). It could well be the rugby player's credo. You will find so many drawn to the game because they want to try something different, something exciting and new, and something that others may be just a bit fearful of.

If that is not necessarily why they come to the game, they soon find a certain perverse pleasure in watching and listening to people's reactions when they tell them, "I play rugby."

Most often the listener gets a strange look on their face, or grimace, and say, "Rugby, that's pretty rough, isn't it?"

"Yeah, kinda," the ruggie responds, as they look you up and down and wonder what manner of person is this?!

This, then, results in the statement changing from "I play rugby," to, "I am a rugby player." A subtle but important difference as the first phrase states what one does, the second defines who one is.

Simply (and frequently) put, Rugby is not a game, it is a life style. Its essence is not drawn simply from the physical competition on the pitch, but also from camaraderie that develops from sharing such an uncommon--common bond. It starts on the field but is reinforced during the post-game gatherings when opponents break bread and toast each other with drink and song. The party is a celebration not just for the victors, but also for the vanquished (and a chance for a redemption of sorts). It is a unique endeavor in athletics. Whereas Vince Lombardi spoke for most competitive sport when he said, "Winning isn't everything, it is the only thing," the ruggie, who still wishes to win, values the test of competition and the spirit of the game even more. So perhaps it can all be reduced to a bumper sticker after all {sigh}, "IN RUGBY THERE ARE NO WINNERS, ONLY SURVIVORS." And we survive well together, teammates and foes alike.

Finally, people play rugby because it is not football, and it is not soccer, and it is not any of the other sport you can think of. It is different, it is unique, and it is rugby. More than a game, more than simple competition, flying in the face of what is expected of the American athlete. Rugby players are nothing, if not non-conformists. Ralph Waldo (yes, we're on a first name basis) would be proud, and would no doubt

have captained the MN all-intellectual and social selects first 15, probably at eighth-man (if he brought his own ball).

We few, we proud, we ruggers must never forget our ideals, our objectives and our principles lest we become just another game that values winning above all else. Rugby has always been above that. It is about camaraderie and sportsmanship. Other sports often pay only lip service to those ideals; rugby exemplifies them.