

Lunch Pail Rugby from Temple

Written by Clark DeLeon
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PHILADELPHIA-- Temple University's rugby club may not exactly be analogous to Rocky facing Apollo Creed in the nationally televised Collegiate Rugby Championship 7's tournament unfolding at PPL Park in nearby Chester, Pa. on June 4 and 5, but if a Temple Owls fan were to ask before the tournament "who?" is Apollo and "who?" is Rocky, the answer is pretty much "all of the above" and "us."

Philadelphia's hometown entry in the 16-team field seeking the 2011 college rugby sevens national crown has never played on a stage this wide nor against competition this deep. Especially not in a two-day tournament consisting of 39 grueling yet short (14 minutes) matches against the best college rugby clubs in America -- among them perennial national champions from the University of California, last year's CRC Sevens champion University of Utah, and always contending rugby programs from Army, Navy and Penn State. Seven-a-side rugby is quickly becoming one the most popular tournament sports in the world. In fact rugby sevens has achieved Olympic status and will be played as an exhibition sport in the 2012 London Olympic and as a medal sport in the 2016 Summer Olympic in Rio de Janeiro.

This is only the second year of the CRC Sevens (last year's was played in Columbus, Ohio), and the first of what the organizers see as a permanent annual fixture at PPL Park, home of the Philadelphia Union professional soccer team, a superb venue for rugby on the banks of the Delaware River. "America's toughest sport comes to America's toughest city" is the USA Sevens slogan for Philadelphia tournament. Temple faces the powerful University of Arizona in its first match at 12:10 p.m. Saturday June 4th and then will face the University of Texas at 3:16 p.m. and will close out that day's long and crowded 24 match schedule in the CRC tournament

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by playing Oklahoma University at 7:30 p.m. The two top teams in that pool will advance to the next day's championship quarter finals against the best two teams from the other three pools.

Temple's arrival to the American collegiate rugby elite has been rapid and recent. In the spring of 2008 newly arrived coach John Sciotto inherited an unfocused and undisciplined squad of individual players who played like individuals rather than a team. "I had to break the mold," Sciotto said of the selfish, ego-centric style of rugby being played by the Owls. It took about a year and the transformation seemed to come overnight. In the spring of 2009 Temple's 15-man rugby team was crushed 70-0 by Salisbury University, a loss that even caused the coaches to doubt themselves. "I thought we might doing them a disservice," Sciotto said of the team-concept lessons he and his assistants had been drilling into his players. There was bitter sniping among individual players against one another for what had been a total team failure.

The next week Temple faced the even more powerful University of Delaware rugby club, a team the Owls hadn't beaten in years. "That day was the turning point," Sciotto said. That was the day Rocky showed up. Each Temple player refused to lose that match and that's why they won as a team. "Now we've taken an attitude, no matter what happens, no one yells at each other," said Sciotto. "That's what I'm most proud of my Temple guys. There's no blame."

In 2010 Temple rugby advanced to the Div. II national championship final at Stanford University against Claremont Colleges from Los Angeles. Temple lost 25-19. "We ran out of time," Sciotto said of a comeback that ended with Temple pressuring within 10 yards of the goal line. "If we had gotten going earlier, we would have been on the other side of that score."

Temple was elevated to Div. I this season and advanced to the sweet 16 of the Div. I National Collegiate Rugby Championship playoffs where on April 30 in the first round the Owls faced the tournament's number one seed, Bowling Green University at Bowling Green, Ohio. Temple lost by 59 points -- 64-5. But the Owls managed to score five more points than they did against Salisbury in that pivotal loss two years ago before Temple's march to a championship caliber rugby program, so perhaps there will be another Rocky moment when Temple plays it's next match in a nationally televised tournament. "Yo, ADRIAN!"

And speaking of Adrian, Temple women's rugby club shares similar honors to the men's team. Temple women will play in the CRC Sevens in an eight-team tournament that same weekend against women's teams from Army, Navy, Princeton, North Carolina, Brown, Virginia and Penn State. The women's finals will be played on Sunday morning, June 5, at PPL Park before the

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men's elimination finals. Last season both Temple men and women's rugby clubs played in the Div. II championship finals in California. "It was a great day for Temple rugby," said Sciotto.

What Temple brings to the tournament is the same gritty, from-the-streets smarts and toughness that is identified with Philadelphia sports. This is a city of gym rats and athletic over achievers who simply out work more physically talented teams. Think of Villanova vs Georgetown in the 1985 NCAA basketball finals. "We call it Blue Collar Rugby," said Sciotto. "We're trying to put our brand on it. We wear work boots and jeans on the sidelines. We're going to outwork and outhit you. Every player knows what is expected. 'Do your job.'"

And go the distance.