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When Army takes the field against Navy in Philadelphia on the first weekend in June, not only will the century-plus-21 year old athletic rivalry between Cadets and Midshipmen be renewed in the city that has hosted so many epic gridiron clashes between the two academies, but each squad will be playing for something almost as important as beating their brothers in arms -- a national collegiate championship. Both Army and Navy rugby teams are ranked among the best in American colleges in a rugged spartan contact sport that more closely resembles the stripped down, armor-free type of football played when Cadet Dwight Eisenhower was trying, unsuccessfully, to tackle Jim Thorpe.

Army will meet Navy during the 16-team tournament played on June 4-5 to determine the U. S. Collegiate Champion in seven-a-side rugby, an even speedier and more stripped-down version of 15-a-side rugby, where multiple teams play 14-minute matches in a round robin competition over two days. (Rugby Sevens' popularity worldwide has grown so much that the sport will be demonstrated in the 2012 Olympic Games in London and given medal status in the 2016 Olympic Game in Brazil).

In the end there can be only one American national champion and players for both Army and Navy know they must go through each other to reach the finals on Sunday, June 5, in a nationally televised (NBC) game from PPL Park, the newly-built stadium on the Delaware River waterfront in Chester, and home to The Union, Philadelphia's major league soccer franchise. And awaiting either team on their way to the finals will be perennial national collegiate rugby champion University of California or the 2010 USA Sevens Collegiate Rugby Championship team from the University of Utah that defeated Cal in sudden death overtime in last year's final. Other collegiate rugby powers in the tournament include Arizona, Boston College, Dartmouth,

Penn State, Temple, Ohio State, Notre Dame, LSU, Oklahoma, Central Washington, Texas and North Carolina.

But as daunting as the rest of the competition, it is still the core rivalry, the family feud between the Cadets of West Point and the Middies of Annapolis that will preoccupy players, alumni and members of the American armed forces around the world, many of whom proudly wore the muddied, bloodied rugby jersey of either Army or Navy. And how intense is that rivalry? After a successful 20 years as rugby coach at the U.S. Naval Academy, Mike Flanagan said, "I don't have to win another game, but I have to beat Army." It's the same at West Point. "It's imbedded in the culture here," said Army Rugby Coach Rich Pohlidal, "You hear more 'Beat Navy' around here than you do 'sir' or 'ma'am." It's very reverent, actually, the way the teams approach it. There's a lot of pride when representing your Academy."

"I thought I understood it, but I didn't," said Mike Flanagan, who recalled his first season as Navy rugby coach in 1991. "When I took over we hadn't beaten Army in years. In fact, we'd been thumped. That year we went to West Point and my guys played their hearts out. It was a terrific game decided in the last minute. Army won 16-13. And afterwards I felt pretty good. I thought we did a good job. But then I looked around and I couldn't see my players. Then I saw them huddled in the endzone.

"I had three SEALS playing for that first team," Flanagan continued. "Real physical specimens. Tough, focused, *SEALS!* When I walked over to them, their faces told the story. They were graduating. . .and they had never beaten Army. Sixteen of my seniors had never played for a Navy team that beat Army. That's when I understood. You don't want to know what that feels like."

Both coaches speak of the rival academy's players as if they are their own, the sons they never coached. The level of respect and admiration is genuine and generous. "They're pretty much the same kids," said both coaches in separate interviews. "These guys are thinkers, critical thinkers, fantastic athletes and love the challenge that contact sports like rugby provide," said Pohlidal. "They're studying engineering and languages like Arabic and Chinese -- the Naval Academy and West Point are not only developing War Fighters, they are developing leaders who will shape the outcome of our country's future. They are very patriotic and honorable young men and women who will soon be making life and death decisions in the defense of our country -- for the graduating seniors this year they will not have to wait too long."

Both coaches tell stories of former players serving in combat in Iraq or Afghanistan who were bailed out of life threatening situations by former rugby teammates arriving like the cavalry behind the controls of an Army helicopter or a Navy jet. "Rugby attracts guys who want to be where the action is. Rugby helps develope quick agile decision makers under pressure. We are asking these young cadets to grow up faster than their peers and based on the performance of our rugby graduates it appears we are getting it right."

Both coaches have lost former players to the dangers of the real world. Both coaches take almost unexpressable pride in the qualities of the young men who play for Army or Navy and then graduate to defend the United States of America. "These matches putting it all on the line and competing until the last second -- soon they will defend the country ass one teamWe defend the country as one team," said Pohlidal.

And because of, or in spite of that, both coaches know the bottom line when it comes to athletic success as perceived by the institutions they represent. A national championship would be great. Beating Army/Beating Navy. . . priceless. The rivalry is not not so much indescribable as it is best expressed in two words. "When you say Army-Navy," said West Point Coach Pohlidal, " you really don't have to say anything more around here."