

Women's CRC Provides Rematch Chance for Penn State, Army

Written by Clark DeLeon

Wednesday, 25 May 2011 19:55

Six-time national champion Penn State women's rugby team and reigning 2011 national champion Army women's rugby team lead the pools in the eight-team Collegiate Rugby Championship Sevens tournament played on June 4 and 5th in Philadelphia, joining women's rugby teams from Princeton, Virginia, North Carolina, Brown, Temple and Navy at PPL Park in Chester for the nationally televised finals on NBC-Universal.

Sevens rugby is a much faster, wide open form of traditional 15-a-side rugby played in a multiple-team tournament setting. A seven-a-side rugby match lasts only 14 grueling minutes and there can be dozens of matches played in a single day. The preliminary rounds of the women's CRC Sevens will be played at Drexel University's athletic fields on Friday, June 3 and the quarterfinals through finals will be played at PPL Park, home of the Philadelphia Union major league soccer team on Sunday during the second day of the 16-team men's CRC Sevens tournament.

Penn State women lost to Army women 33-29 in the 2011 Division I College Rugby Championship on May 14 at Stanford University in California. "We have players who had never lost before," said Penn State women's coach Pete Steinberg of a team that won back-to-back championships in 2009-2010. "If we go to a national championship and lose to Army on the last day, it's been a bad season." If Penn State and Army meet during the CRC Sevens, most likely it will be in the championship final.

Women's rugby and rugby sevens has undergone an incredible surge of popularity internationally. Men and women's rugby sevens will be featured as an exhibition sport in the 2012 Summer Olympics in London and as a medal sport in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Steinberg, who also coaches the USA Women's National Rugby team, says American women are already ranked among the top four international rugby teams, whereas the American men have yet to crack the top ten national rugby teams.

So what is it about a non-stop collision sport like rugby that has attracted so many American women? What kind of mother wants her daughter to grow up to be a rugby player? Penn State rugby alum Devin Keller of Keystone Women's rugby club and the women's CRC sevens tournament director, describes the typical maternal response to rugby, "Football without pads, without a helmet? I don't want my daughter playing that!" Keller would respond to that mother by saying that not only are serious injuries rare in women's rugby, one poll of college athletics revealed that the highest injury rate among any women's sport on campus was cheerleading.

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"Rugby is the same game for both men and women," Keller said. "The nature of the game attracts a very dedicated and successful person. People don't realize what we put our bodies through to be in the physical condition to meet that mental struggle of playing the last 20 minutes of a game when you are physically exhausted."

Coach Steinberg calls it "mental toughness." Coaching rugby, he says, "is a vehicle to work with athletes to build better people." Steinberg grew up in England where the sport was invented and where it was encouraged among the elite public schools (what Americans call private school) in the 19th and 20th centuries to build character. Rugby was a tool to teach life skills of determination, discipline, grace and a unique camaraderie. "The game really doesn't matter," Steinberg said. "It is the mental and physical conditioning required to play the game that matters. Winning is not good enough. Winning must be accompanied by high performance as a team."

Steinberg describes one of his proudest moments as a coach when he received an email from one of his former women players who was attending an intense, four day business retreat for executives. The player wrote, "In the middle of the first day and I was sitting there listening to the individual goals of the four-days of meetings and I realized I had already learned all this at Penn State."

Keller, 28, works in a high stress job as a mechanical engineer for a pharmaceutical company and she cites her rugby fitness as a reason she can carry herself with the physical confidence her job requires. "I'm a woman in a man's world," Keller said. "When you see a woman who walks tall and walks strong, you notice it. I don't struggle with my body image."

In his 16 years as Penn State women's rugby coach Steinberg said that the biggest change he's notice among the players is the level of athlete being attracted to the sport. "These are women who were accomplished players in varsity sports in high school. They chose to play rugby, they didn't fall into rugby after coming to college.," Steinberg said. "These are athletes who came to Penn State so they could play rugby for one of the best programs in the country."

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