

The First Time

I had come that first day only to watch. The match was being played on a Saturday. Here was my chance to finally see what it was all about. My friend Michael had told me about the upcoming game. It would not be at the usual field. A soccer team had already reserved the field with the city, so the club was making do with what was available – one of Houston’s old, inner-loop middle schools. Michael gave me the directions.

Being new in town, I started out early. I was still trying to get something like my bearings in this city. Giving myself a little “lost” time seemed like a good idea. As it turned out, I was right. I went astray more than once. A wrong turn here, missed street there – you know how it is. I was already ten or fifteen minutes late when I found the school and parked. I got out of the car and headed toward the fields in back. It was a little past kick-off, but I was thinking I wouldn’t have missed much.

The fifties-era school buildings were awash in the morning light. They were still being put to good use by the public school system. When I got past the classrooms, I found that the field was too. It was looking, shall we say, rather worn. This ground was obviously used for football practices. All the daily pounding left the field with not much grass. And it wasn’t level, either. There was a definite tilt over to the far side. Scattered around the edges of the field were some southern pines and a few live oaks. They gave some shade but little respite from the summer-like sun. Mostly, everything was saturated in what was soon going to be midday brightness.

In spite of the glare, I could see that the field didn’t even have regular goal posts. At each end, someone had put up a temporary set made from two-by-fours. The uprights didn’t stand quite plumb, either, leaning to accommodate the field tilt. At the far edge of the grounds, two guys were plodding along with an orange traffic cone turned upside down, pouring white powder through it, laying down the field markings – boundaries for the upcoming battle.

Let’s just say that I was more than a little surprised that there wasn’t much happening yet. I was used to the rigid schedule that most organized sports follow. I had expected, being late and all, that the game would be in full, head-

on, bone-crunching conflict. What I found was something different. This was a thing being conjured by the initiated at their own pace. Through collective effort, they were willing a playing field out of nothingness. The contest would come in its own good time.

My eyes were still adjusting to the bright sun. I looked around for Michael. People were scattered around. A group of men – both young and older – were jawing by the freshly marked near-sideline and pulling on shorts, shoes, shirts. Two girls, lugging a cooler, moved towards them. That seemed as good a direction as any. I started following them. On the field a black lab was chasing a tennis ball and yapping. The whole thing looked and felt casual. Saturday fun in the park all around.

Years ago, Michael had told me about the game. After we had finished high school in New Mexico, he went north to the School of Mines in Colorado. I stayed in town. He had started playing in Colorado. We hadn't seen much of each other for years. When we did get together, he would tell me about this rugby thing.

When he was done with his college stint, Michael moved on to a new job in Houston. I had been on the extended degree plan. Eventually, I finished. New diploma in hand, I managed to land a job in the Space City, too. I followed Michael over. Now that I was here, I was finally getting a chance to see Michael and his new club, the Caballeros, play. I would see what he'd been talking about all this time.

As I got closer, I could see that Michael wasn't with the group where I'd been heading. I stopped and looked around again. I spotted him, farther down the sideline, standing in another cluster of men also casually putting on rugby kit. He was pulling a shirt over his head and talking to a guy stepping into shorts next to him. I changed course.

"Michael T," I said when I got there, using the nickname I'd called him by since forever. "T" wasn't even his middle initial. It just always had a certain ring for me. I liked the rhythm of it.

"T-Tom!" he responded. He'd given me nicknames as well, T-Tom, usually, when it wasn't something more vulgar. We were the "Tee" brothers from way back, even though my given name is just plain Tom. Tom Brown.

"Good to see you, buddy. You're a bit late. I was beginning to wonder if you'd make it." Cool, matter-of-fact, obviously my presence wasn't on the top

of his priority list.

"You know you can count on me. I just had a little trouble finding it, that's all. But I'm here now. I've heard too much about this rugby crap to miss it any longer."

"Yeah, well maybe you won't miss much. We seem to be a little short. One of the guys didn't show and we need one more to make a side. You can play with us today."

"You're kidding? Right? I just came to watch. See what this is all about," and then, suspecting he was having me on, "Are you serious?"

"Hell yes I'm serious. It's no big deal. We'll point you in the right direction. All you have to do is stand in. And, tackle anything that comes your way."

"Come off it! I don't have anything like a uniform. I didn't bring any cleats, either."

"No problem. We'll take care of you." Turning to the guy he'd been talking with when I walked up, "Jerry, you got an extra pair of shorts?"

Jerry shook his head, "Sorry, Doc, my extra pair got shredded in training last week."

"Doc?" I had to ask. "Is he talking to you?"

"Yeah, it's what they call me here. Short for Scrum Doctor. Seems that they think I have some medicinal effect on the scrum."

"What's a scrum?" I only had a vague idea about things rugby and needed a little more clarity about what he was trying to get me into.

"That's on a need to know basis, and you don't right now. You'll be playing in the backs. There will be plenty of time for the finer points later – scrums and everything."

Backs¹. I could figure out what that was. But the playing thing, that was a different story. I was trying to stall long enough to get my brain around that one.

"Yeah, but I still don't have any gear."

And, thinking I'd wriggled out of a close one, I started to let out a little sigh of relief. After all, I only wanted to *see* rugby today. Observe from a distance, where it would be safe to make a sane judgment about the whole thing – later. I wasn't quite ready to jump in all the way.

¹ A rugby team is divided into two basic groups: forwards and backs. The eight players who form the "scrum" are the forwards. Everyone else is a back.

But, only half of that sigh escaped. This other guy, built like an oak tree-trunk, roots and all, said, "I got some extra shorts. Here, use these."

Then he threw this pair of shorts at me. They spun through the air, flattened out by the breeze. I swear they were big enough to be used for a sail on a twelve-meter yacht.

I caught them. It would be rude to let the shorts of a guy that size hit the ground.

"I don't think they'll fit," I got out, after holding them up to see their full span.

"Sure they will," Michael said, "They've got a string so you can cinch them up tight. And, you can use my spare pair of boots. You're all set. That t-shirt's okay."

I guessed he meant the black, 'Harder They Come' tee I was wearing. He went on, "They wear red, so it won't be a problem."

"You are serious, aren't you?" I had to ask.

"You bet I am. Otherwise, we have to play short. Besides, there's nothing like baptism by fire."

"All right," I said, hardly convinced. "Where do I change?"

"Right here. We don't happen to have the luxury of changing rooms. If you're shy, you can duck behind that classroom." He pointed to the temporary building sitting past the goal posts and making up one end of the field.

"Doc!" a guy was yelling at Michael. "The ref is calling the captains out."

"Shit. Hurry up. You'll be wing. One of the guys will tell you what to do. Don't worry about it. I'll tell the referee you're new and he'll let you know what you did wrong. Hustle up and get changed. It's time to go."

Michael T ran off towards the middle of the field, and I took the shorts and shoes behind the classroom to get changed. So, here I am, thinking: What am I doing this for? What in the hell am I going to do out there? Make an ass out of myself, that's what. I don't have the first clue about this game.

I got the shorts on and tied them up. I thought about wrapping the cord around twice, but it wouldn't quite fit. I was still worried that if a breeze came up, I'd be caught in a jibe with my pants down, so to speak.

The shoes were a little tougher. Michael had always been smaller than me; a couple of inches shorter and about twenty or thirty pounds lighter. I had never stopped to think about it, but his shoe size must have been about two sizes

smaller, too. I crammed my feet into those shoes of his, toes curled under at the end.

I was just getting them tied when the guy named Jerry came around the classroom building. "Come on. Let's go. It's time to start."

As we started back to the pitch², Jerry put his arm around my neck, pulled my head close and confided in me, "You'll be wing. Stay back and wait for the ball. We'll get it to you. Then run like hell. And tackle anything that comes your way."

"For the kickoff, just go to the far corner by the try-line. That's 'goal line' to you. I'll be on the other side."

We came back around the building, out of the shade into the sunlight. God, it was still bright. I narrowed my eyes again, hoping I could see what I was getting into. The ruggers were spreading out on the pitch. I could just see the other team on the opposite end of the field, dressed in red jerseys and black shorts. Maybe I was imagining things, but I swear they were smiling and pointing at me. Jerry was pointing too, and pushing me towards the far side of the pitch. I jogged over to that side, back by the try-line, and, I thought, relative safety.

I didn't see who blew it, but I heard the sharp, loud whistle. Then the ball was kicked. It arced up into the sky, tumbling end over end. And, maybe you guessed, heading straight for me. I watched it, or tried to as I squinted, the ball turning over and over, alternating dark-light-dark-light, descending on the spot I stood.

Don't get me wrong. It's not that I'm adverse to a little manly conflict. I played football and was a wrestler in high school. I did all that sports stuff. But I was never one to dive into a cold pool, or jump into anything, really. I liked to ease myself in. First the little toe, next the foot, and maybe up to the knee. But, jump in? No, not my style. Then again, here I was, with that ball inexorably tumbling towards me, bringing with it the certainty of total immersion. There was no avoiding it. I was going to find out what rugby was about.

What the hell? I caught it. That was the easy part.

"Kick it!"

² Rugby is played on a "pitch". The standard pitch is larger than a football field, one hundred meters long by seventy meters wide. The in-goal areas add up to another twenty meters on each end. Very expansive. A lot of room to run around in and get in to, or stay out of, trouble.

"Run it, goddamn it!!"

"Pass it!"

"Here I am! Give it to me!"

"Kick! Kick! Kick!"

"Pass it to me! Quick!"

Even the dogs were barking instructions at me. My mind was on overload for a second. Then, I opted for the last input: pass.

While watching the ball arc through the sky, I had neglected to notice the equally inexorable onslaught of those red jerseys. Just as I turned and released the ball, one of the crimson-clad devils dashed between me and Jerry, the originator of the "pass it" command. The red jersey snagged the ball in mid-flight and headed for that classroom building that had so recently hid my bare ass from view. I really wished I was still on its sheltering side. My butt certainly felt more exposed than it ever did when I was just plain naked.

The guy in red ran behind the pine posts and fell on the ball. The whistle blew. Try³ scored. This was my introduction. Pretty shocking, eh? At least it was over fast.

Michael came up to me, "No problem, Tee. We'll still beat these guys. Just don't throw the ball around anymore. Hang on to it no matter what. And, remember to tackle when they've got the ball."

I heeded Michael's advice and didn't throw anymore errant passes that game. Of course, I didn't throw any on target passes, either. In fact, I didn't throw *any* more passes. I did, however, get penalized for "not releasing" the ball. An appreciation for the subtlety of rugby laws takes time to acquire. I was just following my first directive from the Scrum Doctor.

That penalty cost us three points, but Michael was right, we still won the game. In fact, the only times they scored, or threatened to score, were when I made a mistake. So, I estimate my net worth in that first game at minus ten. The try I gave them was five points⁴, and they kicked the conversion for another two. Then there was the three points from the penalty kick they made when I "failed" to release the ball. A total of ten. Not off to what we might call an auspicious start.

³ A "try" in rugby is the primary method of scoring. It is accomplished by moving the ball into the opponents' "in-goal" area and touching the ball on the ground, or "grounding" it. The ball must be grounded, or no try is scored.

⁴ I have used the modern scoring system to avoid a conflict with the game as it is played now. The events in this book are set in the 1980's when a try was worth a mere four points plus a chance for a two point conversion.

On the other hand, I followed Michael's other bit of advice, too. I tackled. Nobody got by me with the ball. Anybody that came my way ended up on the ground. I got a lot of compliments for that. The other players and spectators were willing to overlook my weak passing skills and other shortcomings in light of hard tackling.

Just thinking about that pass leaves a bad taste in my mouth. On the positive side, I had had a good taste that day, of rugby, and wanted more. It had opened up the realm of possibilities to me. I was ready to commit, such as it was, to Michael and his team – the Caballeros Rugby Football Club, also known as the Gentlemen of the Caballeros, or just plain Gents for short. I was looking to try out everything on this new menu. Maybe total immersion isn't such a bad policy.