

Training

In Houston, training starts in August and it is h-o-t hot. Even at seven in the evening, when you'd think it would be cooling off a little, the temperature is still ninety-five degrees with ninety-five percent humidity. Definitely not rugby weather. Our game comes from cool, damp England where brisk physical activity is almost a necessity to keep a body warm. Here, it's a different story.

The pitch, both practice and game, is centrally located in Memorial Park. It's a perfect site, really, back among the pines of the park. If you didn't know it was there, you'd never see it from the park loop. A beautiful sight when you walk out to it, especially at night under the arc-lighting. Full rugby size too. It's not a converted gridiron field that's too small. There are regulation dual-use goal posts at each end with full twenty meter try zones. Spacious.

The problem is that it is on city park property and still owned by the city. We just rent time here. And so does anyone else who wants the space, for any use. It was originally built and dedicated for rugby, but with the exploding numbers of soccer players (globally know as 'footballers') the city puts all of its facilities to maximum use. The Memorial Park pitch is getting run down. It can't support this amount of use. Please shed a tear for the passing of beauty.

Because I just don't like to be rushed, I always arrive early for practice. I pull the car into the small parking lot, get out, stretch in the heat and wonder again about the sanity of playing this sport in Houston. This musing only lasts a few seconds. There's no point in postponing the inevitable.

Since we don't have changing facilities, I have to change in the lot. For modesty's sake, I step between a couple of cars and quickly slip into my shorts. As I pull on my t-shirt, I already feel the sweat beading up on my back and the beads inching down my spine. Is this going to be fun, or what?

I've just started into my stretching routine when Derrick Taylor drives up. "Cream-puff" we call him, or just Cream. He got that name from how smooth and easy he is, or thinks he is, with the hotties. They tend to just melt when he turns on the charm. An ex-gridiron player, he plays wing for us. He seems big for that position, but, still, he is unusually fast for his size and slots in well. Derrick claims to be terribly unfit. He doesn't look it. Young and naturally in

shape – there's no fat anywhere on that frame. Fitness is relative, I guess.

He gets out of the car, ambles over and launches into the standard Derrick lament, “Jeez, I'm not ready for this. I've been working too hard this summer, too many hours. There's been no time to train. I think the last time I ran was at the championship last May. Do we really have to start today? Jee-zus!”

Translating from the Derrick-speak, what this means is that he's been working on his twelve-ounce curls and pickup lines. That doesn't leave much time for fitness training. At his age, he can get away with it, though. A few weeks and he'll be back to his prime.

“Ah, Cream, getting a little soft, are you? I guess you're going to melt away in the heat? Should have been with me when I was running the loop last week.”

Unlike Derrick, I can't ignore fitness over the off season. I'm getting to the age where the pounds stick on from the off-season. If I didn't do some kind of work-out, I'd blimp up so much over the summer that I'd need to sleep at the Goodyear hangar up in Spring. It'd be December before I could get back into playing shape.

While we are commiserating, our fullback arrives. Jerry Sanders has been in South Africa for the summer, playing for a club where we have an informal exchange program. He wants to share – impress us with his experience.

“Brilliant!” he avers, starting right in. He knows that we know what he is talking about.

“The facilities are incredible! They have five pitches and twelve sides! Talk about rugby heaven. I really thought about staying on longer only I would have had to miss the start of the cup season.”

Jerry has given up what amounts to an extended vacation in rugby heaven to come back to us. If you do this kind of physical battle with a team of guys, you develop some bonds that run deep. It goes beyond the simple idea of teamwork into something more. When you risk life and limb with someone, a deeper attachment is forged.

We spend the next five minutes listening to Jerry talk about his favorite subject – himself. His South African exploits are nothing short of amazing.

“Let me walk you through a try I scored in this game against the Pirates. I was playing fullback and fielded a kick just in our own half. Well, their second-row – totally offside by the way – is right on top of me after I catch it. He launches himself at me and I'm thinking, ‘Oh-my-god I'm going to die.’ Just

then, I don't know where the idea came from, I duck.

"He's already in the air for the tackle and just flies right over me."

There is, of course, no chance to interrupt or question. Jerry doesn't pause for a breath so we just listen. The monologue goes on.

"When I come back up, their flanker is burning up on me now. I just pop it to our wing on the outside and he starts heading up the field. I side-step the Pirates' flanker and follow. Our wing gets around their wing and then gets caught by the cover defense. He pops it back to me.

"Now I'm on my own with only the Pirates' fullback to beat. I draw him to me and at the last second grubber¹ it past him. You should have seen the look on his face as that ball went by.

"I stroll on past him, pick up the ball on the third hop and touch down for a try under the posts.

"Brilliant!"

He neglects to mention, of course, that it was for their seventh-side, which truth be told, doesn't play at a bad standard. Then, we hear about his off the pitch feats. Well, they were no less stellar.

Michael has shown up now, too. The Gents are gathering. We're reluctant because of the heat, but still eager for the start of another season and another quest for the Texas championship. Will this be the year? Eternal optimists, we always think so. It looks good from this vantage point. We did well last year and have most of the team back. If we pick up a little new talent, that could put us over the top.

Finally, I've finished my stretching and tell Jerry enough of his stories. I've got to get started. Our practice sessions open with a solo, three-mile, warm-up run. I have to start now, or it will be midnight before I finish. I've come to believe in pacing myself. As I start to get fitter, I'll pick up the pace. Before I've gone ten yards, sweat is flowing rivers from every pore. Already, I'm lamenting not having done more to stay in shape over the summer. Even though I've done some running, it hasn't been enough. Next summer, for sure, I'll stick to a fitness regimen. Michael, Derrick and Jerry soon leave me way behind.

When I make it back to the pitch, my t-shirt and shorts are soaked. I pull off the shirt and towel off. I put on a fresh rugby shirt and my boots, slide the

¹ A grubber is an attacking ploy where the ball is kicked along the ground to move it past an oncoming defender or defensive line.

strap of my kit-bag over my shoulder and wander out towards the pitch to join the rest.

From the touch-line, it looks lush – ready for the season. That's only an illusion. The weeds have filled in the bare spots that cover most of the surface. Sure, the weeds are nice and green now, but they won't last. In a few weeks, they'll be trampled and gone, leaving only a few bits of grass and a lot of dirt. We'll be raising clouds of dust in no time and choking ourselves in the heat.

Most of the club has arrived, and we start running some touch sevens. It's a good handling game and helps us get back in the groove while warming-up – not that we need much warming-up in this heat.

In spite of an inordinate amount of knock-ons² and much time spent instructing the newbies, it starts to look a bit like rugby. The competitive urges kick in and, soon, we're creating gaps and overloads as if we're in mid-season form. Right. In our minds, anyway. Things will be pretty rusty for a while.

The ball gets out to Derrick on the wing, a natural athlete, though as you may have gathered, a little lazy. He's played for a few years now, but hasn't caught on to the continuous nature of play, yet. He's still playing in gridiron bursts of brilliance. Then, we don't see him for awhile.

Derrick takes the ball with both hands, tucks it and runs towards the touch-line. He easily rounds his opposite, one of our props who thought he'd get to rest out on the wing, away from the action. Then, Derrick breaks for the goal line.

Michael and I give chase, knowing Cream-Puff won't run any farther than necessary. We pursue Derrick the full seventy meters to the try-line. Of course we don't catch him, but we've made him run. Not to mention ourselves, which is the point, isn't it? We're trying to get fit here.

Derrick touches the ball down for the score, runs straight through the try zone into the pines where he promptly doubles over and yaks.

Ah, the joys of starting training. Beets will be the order of the day. A little later, this new guy who looks like an ex-football player and I are side-by-side in the undergrowth next to the pitch, ralping a duet.

As we walk back to the field, I ask him, "You play football?"

"Yeah," he answers. "I was a running back at McNeese."

² A "knock-on" is when the ball travels forward off a player's hands and lands on the ground or hits another player. This is a minor infringement and play is restarted with a scrum. The team not making the knock-on gets the put-in at the scrum.

“I could tell. You run hard.” And feeling compelled to share some wisdom, “Still, in rugby, you have to pass backwards. If the ball goes forward from your hands it’s a turnover.

“So, when you don’t have the ball, stay behind the ball carrier. Otherwise, he won’t be able to pass it to you.”

“Thanks. This is my first practice. I’m just trying to get in front to block.”

“No worries. You’ll get it. With your talents, you’ll be on top of it in no time.”

And, the mantra is passed on. After just retching our guts out, who knows how much will be retained? But, it’s our way – share the wisdom and build the game.

Several of the Gents aren’t here tonight. Some are out of town for a select-side camp this week. At least they have a real excuse. Many don’t have excuses. They’ll trickle in over the next few weeks. They’ve all rationalized something in their minds. I wish I could make them understand that what they do, or don’t do, now will impact the entire season. They don’t get it, though. It’s too far off.

After touch, those of us who’ve made it this first day, start running handling drills. Your standard fare: place the ball, pick it, set it, strip it, pop it, place it, repeat. The monotonous drudgery dulls our already boiled brains. But, we keep at it. We’re looking forward to the season and know we’ve got to start some time. Suffering through this heat is the price we pay.

The rest of training is pretty much a blur to my addled brain. Mostly, we work on skills drills. Michael and Geoff, our club president, are running this first session. They realize that in our present state of fitness, we don’t have the mental capacity to work on anything more complex. As you might know, fitness is a requirement for intelligence on the pitch. If you’re not fit, then you don’t have the gas to think. Funny, isn’t it? You’d think the physical and mental were two different things. In a couple of weeks, when we’re getting used to the heat and have developed a modicum of fitness, we’ll start running unit and team drills, and only then start to apply a little grey-matter to our work.

This first training session ends after an hour and a half of sweating misery. I’ve probably lost ten pounds. Most of that, I’ll recover tonight, twelve ounces at a time. The session’s survivors are heading straight for O’Malley’s.

Yes, we’ll have to listen to Jerry’s South African tales again. Not to mention all about Derrick’s romantic exploits. But, mostly, we’ll talk about the

ONLY A GAME

upcoming season and how good we're going to be. How we're really going to do the Barbos this year. Starting the season is a rush – of adrenaline, of excitement, of confidence.