

## Tournaments

My first rugby tournament experience was in Galveston. It was held late spring in that first year I played. I didn't know what to expect. I was a little intimidated by the idea of playing three or four games in a single day. That seemed like a lot of rugby. I didn't know at the time that the games were shortened – twenty-five minute halves instead of the usual forties. It's still a lot of rugby.

Most rugby tournaments at the time were more social than competitive affairs. The Galveston tournament was no exception. We were bringing one side that was a mix of first-, second- and third-side players. It was, however, my first chance to play with the quote-unquote first-side – seeing how this was our only side in the tournament. I was looking forward to upping the competition level, as well as my play.

I started out early on Saturday morning. It was misting rain and going to get worse. Most of the rest of the team had gone down to Galveston Friday night. They had pooled to rent a couple of beach houses for the weekend. I had to work late Friday and couldn't leave until morning.

I got to Galveston in time for the first game and was put on the reserves list. With the two substitutions law – for injury only – it didn't look much like there was a chance of me playing in the first match. It was against a collegiate team and should be a walk-over, even for our mixed side.

As it turned out, I didn't have to sit on the sidelines long. One of the props was hurt towards the end of the first half. The rest of the reserves were all backs, so I was elected as replacement. I hadn't had a chance playing in the front row, yet. I was still having my learning experience in the back row. Now was the time for some O-J-T. Thank god, the college team, from Stephen F. Austin in Nacogdoches, didn't have much experience, either. Their prop, though big and strong, didn't have any more skill at the spot than I did. We did a lot of grunting and groaning, but not much leveraged application of pressure. I also had one big advantage: I had Michael T at hooker to help me get through it.

The big kid wrenched me around and tried to make a pretzel out of me. It

turned out to not be much different than wrestling, albeit, complicated a bit by the wet, slippery pitch. By the second half we had settled down to scrummages that were as stable as could be expected given our skills and the conditions. The Gents had also settled into a lead.

Then that big prop got the ball in open play and was heading for me at midfield. I crouched and got ready for the tackle. Normally, in rugby, the idea is to avoid the tackle and run to space, or pass to the next player, keep the ball alive and moving. This is the U.S., though, and most ruggers have converted from gridiron. Also, keep in mind our relative levels of experience. This big, two-hundred-thirty-pound, youthful Goliath bearing down on me now was probably no exception. And, as you can imagine, forwards, especially props, tend to not be too nimble on their feet. Nor do they have much appreciation for the subtlety or finer points of the game.

All this added up to, more or less, a predestined collision. He lowered his torso, getting his momentum going forward, as his legs spun him faster toward me. I lowered my crouch and coiled up for the explosion into the tackle. The low man wins. That's the basic rule of contact. It holds true for any sport. I was the low man here and uncorked a huge explosion, driving my shoulder into his chest.

Well, there are exceptions to every rule and this was one. When I hit him, I felt a lightening bolt stab of pain in my shoulder. My right arm went numb. The impact did manage to stop his forward movement and I wrapped, as best I could, with my left arm to hold on. I hadn't won this battle. I had stopped him. That was about it. The rest of the forwards arrived to form a maul<sup>1</sup>. I don't know what happened from that point, but the battle between the prop and I ended in a draw. Even so, I had lost the war. My arm stayed numb. It wasn't going to be of much use now.

Useless as it was, I had to stay on. You know, sacrifice for the team. There were no other forwards waiting in the wings to come on. Certainly, no props were waiting, chomping at the bit to get into the action. I stayed on and did what little I could. I was basically a passenger. It turned out to be a ride to a fairly easy win, despite my incapacity.

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<sup>1</sup> The "maul" is a passage of play where the ball carrier is held by a member of the opposite team and remains on his feet. One of the ball carrier's teammates joins and play continues while all players remain on their feet. Other players may join from their respective sides. The ball remains held in the hands, and does not go to ground.

This was a one-day tournament, four games to the championship. Our second game was against our cross-town rivals the Hurricanes. They were taking the tournament a bit more seriously and had brought most of their first side.

The Hurricanes prop was smaller and had a bit more experience, say twenty years more. He was short, squat and strong. At the first scrum-down, I found out he was going to tie me in so many knots that I wished it had just been a pretzel. He turned me every which way and didn't let go. He had my shoulder with the limp arm bent up, my neck bent down at a right angle and my ribs bent over to the side until they were clattering on my pelvis. I was in agony, but locked my legs out and the scrum held, more or less, stable.

After the ball moved out, I prayed, "Please, God, let there be a dearth of knock-ons today!"

The wicked never go unpunished, or, at least, my wickedness never has. Along with the water coming out of the sky, it rained knock-ons. I kept offering up penance: I would write my mother more often; I'd actually call that girl who gave me her phone number on Thursday; I'd even make an appearance in the church of my choice. All to no avail. I trudged from scrummage to lineout to scrummage. The ball never touched my hands and I didn't want it. I just wanted this exercise in futility to end.

At half-time we were only down a try. With the searing pain shooting from my shoulder down my arm, each scrum felt like several. We'd probably only had ten or fifteen, really, in the shortened half, but it felt like there'd been a hundred scrummages.

Michael was rallying the troops, "Come on guys. This is the Hurricanes. We can beat them with our eyes closed!"

Yeah, we can beat them with a full team. The first-side back line had opted themselves out of this tournament. We only had Cy at scrumhalf and Derrick on the wing. The rest of the second-side line filling in were doing their best. It was just a difficult task for them.

Michael T looked at me, he could see I was hurting, "How ya doin'? I can go to prop and we'll make Geoff play hooker. He'd love that."

"I'll be all right," I lied. I can't let these guys down now. I didn't want to forever be known as the guy who couldn't take it. I believed in carrying my share of the load, and maybe a bit of somebody else's, just so there were no

doubts.

“All right,” Michael responded. “We’ll do these guys yet.”

In the second half, the deluge hit, both literally and figuratively. The rain came down in fifty-five gallon barrels the way you only see it on the gulf coast. It rains like this for twenty or thirty minutes before the sky clears out and the sun comes back. Then our back-line defense opened up and the tries poured through. The Hurricanes scored five or six tries in the second-half to walk over us for the win.

The good thing here was, with all the running and try-scoring, there weren’t very many scrums. I started to feel like I could get through the day, maybe. When the final whistle went, although I didn’t dare jump for it, there was more joy in me than there was rain falling out of the sky.

We gathered on the sideline for a few words from our leader, encouragement or whatever.

Michael started off, “Well, now, I guess we get to start drinking earlier than we planned. Here are the mugs. Don’t get too wasted, though. I think we’ve still got a consolation game to play.”

“What’s this?” I asked when he handed a mug to me.

“You take that, go over to that tent over there where the kegs are and they’ll fill it for you.”

“What’s it going to cost?”

“Oh, you mis-trusting bastard. Nothing. It’s an all inclusive deal. And here are a couple of tickets for food.”

It seems that the tournament organizers had handed out the mugs and food tickets early in the morning at the captains’ meeting. It was the captains’ responsibility to distribute them to the players. By virtue of our loss to the Hurricanes, we were getting the distribution a little early.

Michael went away. I took the mug and headed for the beer tent. True to Michael’s word, when I handed over the mug, they handed it back, full with a little foam on top. The beer-tender didn’t ask for cash, or anything. He just said, “Next.”

This can’t be all bad. Free beer and food, and all I had to do was play a little rugby. I could get to like this. I was even beginning to forget the lightening bolt of pain that was shooting repetitively from my shoulder down my arm. A little general anesthetic and maybe I would forget it entirely.

Now how about something to eat. There was a guy cooking at a massive barbeque pit hitched up to the back of a pickup. Hamburgers and sausage, the rugby standard diet. The sausage looked a bit greasy, like maybe fifty-percent grease and fifty-percent I don't know what else. I opted for the burger and forked over a ticket. He handed over a hamburger. I still had another ticket in my pocket. This was getting better and better.

I wandered back to where the guys were congregated, beer and burger in hand, smiling through the pain. Geoff was asking when the next game was. Nobody knew. Maybe an hour from now? Maybe we should go look at the tournament schedule? No one moved.

Michael T came back. He had that big kid with him, the one who propped for the collegiate team we played in the first game.

"The game's in fifteen minutes on the far field over there. Start moving guys."

There was universal groaning. Do we have to dad? Yes, we do. This *is* a *rugby* tournament, after all. The guys started moving, but the whinging didn't stop. I started to stand up.

Michael T came over to me with the kid.

"This is Darryl. Maybe you recognize him? Since we beat them this morning they only got two games in. Darryl's looking for a bit more experience. He said he'd play for us, if we needed him."

If we had a deluge earlier, it was a tsunami of relief that swept over me now – the realization hitting me that I wouldn't have to suffer through another game.

"That works for me," I said casually, hiding my ecstasy.

I can't really remember who won that third game and it doesn't much matter. What does matter, is that I got through the day with my arm still attached at the shoulder. And, the drinking lamp was fully lit now. I was free of commitment.

I wasn't the only one free. A number of teams were already out of the competition. The lines were forming up at the beer tent.

At some point, with all the rain earlier, it was inevitable that a little puddle-diving competition would ensue. It started innocently enough. Someone did a belly-flop into a puddle to splash some of his mates for a laugh. His mates, in good-natured reciprocal spirit, returned the favor. Before you knew it, given

ruggers' competitive zeal, a full-on competition had begun.

The competition, on this day, involved taking a thirty-meter sprint and diving into the puddle. Points are awarded for form, difficulty, distance and level of undress. As the competition continues the puddle gets muddier and muddier, and the level of dress goes down and down.

Also, the crowd begins to gather round the puddle, or mud-pit it becomes. The points are based on the volume of the crowds' cheers. I, fortuitously, happened to be sitting on a bench with a perfect view of the arena. Immobile from pain and degree of insobriety, I stayed where I was.

Michael T seemed to be leading the competition. Down to a jock-strap, his double flip in the pike position with triple axel ending in a fifteen meter slide was looking pretty strong. Derrick followed with a low-difficulty, perfectly executed swan-flop into the puddle exploding the mud onto the front-row of spectators and as far as the back-row.

Someone, realizing that they were already covered in mud, shoved two girls in the front-row face first into the puddle. They screamed, stood up and the crowd hushed, fearing the wrath of god, or at least sullied females. The girls, though, due to their general good nature and maybe the amount of beer consumed, decided to strip to bra and panties and join the competition.

Resounding cheers went up as they prepared for their dives.

I, for my part, tried to remain objective and regulate the decibel level of my cheers appropriately as deemed by the laws of the competition, and without regard to sex, race, creed or position played on the rugby field. All the while, I managed to remain relatively pristine, on my spectators' bench and box seat.

This didn't go unnoticed. As I was formulating the appropriate response level for the second of the girls, I was grabbed from behind. Michael, Derrick, Geoff and Darryl each held an extremity. They had forgotten the abject pain I had been in only a short time ago. Truth be told, so had I. I was past bulletproof. There was no pain left in my body – only a sense of oneness with the world.

They trundled me to the head of the diving track. Face down, I protested not, as I was resigned to my fate and decided to make the best of it. I readied for an Olympic quality dive.

As we rumbled down the track, I heard singing:

...so sing me another one, that's worse than the other one  
and waltz me around by my willy!<sup>2</sup>

Actually, there had been singing throughout the competition. Those tourney-goers not interested in the diving competition, had broken off for a bit of choir practice. It was only in my current, active, hyper-state of realism that I was noticing it. I tried to join the chorus.

Opening my mouth, however, only allowed the mud to be splashed in. I closed it as I was launched in a grand arc landing, chest and belly, in the middle of the pit. I immediately began to disintegrate and meld with the ooze. The puddle that my mind had become melted away entirely.

The next day, after I had been resurrected, Michael told me they drug me from the puddle and put me in his car. Then they took me to the beach house.

On Monday, I went to the doctor. His diagnosis was a mild separation. Mild!? What about all the freaking pain? I would certainly hate to see a major separation. He gave me a prescription for vicodin, a sling and told me to come back in two weeks time.

The one thing I had to be thankful for was that the season was over. It was summer now. I'd have a chance to recover. No rugby until September. Unless, of course, you played that game for backs called sevens.

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<sup>2</sup> Anon., [Sing me Another One](#), limericks sung to the tune of [The Gay Caballero](#).