

My First Cup Match

I showed up for my first cup game early. I had on my new, white shorts. They were still crisp, not yet washed. My jersey was new. The blue and gold Caballeros' hoops were pristine. It had yet to be worn in the heat of battle. Everything was new and ready. I was ready.

I'd been to training for nearly three months, but hadn't been able to play in any of the games since that first friendly. New guy at the office, they'd put me to work on Saturdays. This Saturday I got a break. It was the beginning of November and I was lucky enough to be off for the last cup game of the fall season. I was there, and ready. Bit chomping, you might say. I wanted another taste.

The game was against our chief rivals in the union – the Barbarians. Better known as the Barbos. They'd taken their name from the legendary English invitational side and tried to emulate their play.

I'd heard about them all week. How they were a step up from pond scum but magic on the pitch. How you shouldn't take anything off them, but don't start it either – because they knew how to finish. How we were tied with them in the cup standings, (neither club had lost yet) and we had to win. The whole season depended on this game.

The team seemed to have reached a manic pace. Practice that week had ratcheted up in intensity. There were people at training that I had never seen before. And, there were more of us. The club numbers swelled along with our egos before this critical match. Our bodies were swollen with an extra intensity, or maybe just with adrenalin. When we ran, we ran faster. When we drilled, we executed with more serious intent. If there were mistakes, there was no need for criticism. Each miscreant expiated his own sins. We were harder on ourselves than anyone else could have been.

The members of the club had reached a bubbling state of expectation, an on-edge preparedness where either action or bursting was imminent. Like thoroughbreds in the starting gate, we raged against the restraint of time that kept us from the action we so cherished. Action that would define ourselves – and our worth.

Even our fun at the Thursday night after-training drink-up at O'Malley's had a more serious bent. I don't mean that we were in a serious or pensive mood, only that we were more serious about enjoying ourselves. Almost everyone came to the bar that night. And, we stayed late, savoring our state of internal tension and its pseudo-release.

So, on Saturday, I had arrived at the pitch early. I didn't want to be late and thereby give an excuse to be excluded. As I waited for the rest of the Gents to arrive, fantasies waltzed through my head of the things I would do in the upcoming game. There were ninety-meter scrambles for tries; soaring, fifty-meter drop goals¹; bone-jarring, game-saving tackles. All these things I barely yet understood, maybe only knew from rumor, but they were definitely as real as any fantasy.

Michael T arrived and I sat with him as he put his kit on. We chatted about the week in general, about how ready we were, about how we had to do well today. As captain, he told me to stay ready on the sidelines. The team had been announced at Thursday night's training and I knew I wouldn't be starting the game, but if there were injuries... I might still get my chance.

We have no wholesale substitutions in rugby. The game is played by the team that starts. The coaches don't plot situational match-ups on the sidelines. Coaching, during play, actually isn't allowed at all. The coach's job is to prepare the team for the game and maybe a brief analysis at half-time. There's no signaling in plays. It's up to the team on the field to use their wits – the top ten-inches – to adjust to the opposition, to create the situations that lead to scores and a winning effort.

There are, however, a limited number of substitutions for injuries. Once replaced, the substituted player cannot return to the fray. No player blithely leaves the game.

In that first year of my rugby career, the limit on injury replacements was two. Some of the older players could remember when there were no substitutions at all, for injuries or otherwise. They felt the substitution rule was a watering down of the game. In their day, they played on if they were hurt. They played on for the good of the team.

¹ A “drop goal” is also know as just a “drop”, or a “field goal”. It is a kick from play for a score. The ball must be dropped to the ground, kicked off the bounce , propelled over the cross-bar and between the goal posts. It's currently worth three points. The drop goal is one remnant of rugby that is still in the gridiron football rule book, though never used in a game.

And this unwritten code had carried on. With only two substitutions allowed, you couldn't take yourself from the pitch with only minor injuries like a bleeding gash (this was before we knew to worry about AIDS and other blood-borne diseases), a compound-fracture of the leg, or a crushed cheekbone. You played on, because, after the team had used its two substitutions, if there was another injury and a player had to leave, the team played short. To play short a man was to compromise the chances of winning, to let your teammates down. You only left when you felt staying on was a worse compromise than leaving, or your captain made that decision for you.

So, at kick-off time, I found myself perversely hoping that someone would be brutalized to the point that they would have to leave the game. It wasn't a hope directed at any particular individual. Nor was it even a conscious yearning for pain and injury. It was just a vague realization that for me to fulfill my heroic fantasies, to prove my worth to my teammates, to be unconditionally admitted as a member of this select fraternity someone would have to suffer. And that person, whoever it turned out to be, would be one of my teammates, one of those whose cabal I so earnestly yearned to join.

My wait was finally over. The whistle went, and the Gents kicked-off to start the game. It started badly. The Barbos attacked from the kick-off, created a gap, got the ball to the wing. He carried on and scored in the corner, just beating the covering fullback. Not even a minute gone: five to nil.

I was bursting on the sideline from the frustration and helplessness. I would have tackled the center before he passed. I would have intercepted the pass. I would have caught the wing from behind. Given the opportunity, I would have done something. Such are fantasies. But the opportunity wasn't given and I was forced to seethe as only an impotent spectator can. If I could have, I would surely have exploded on the spot.

The Barbos missed the conversion and we kick off again. From this point the game settles with both sides pressuring back and forth, but neither side gaining an advantage. My own internal pressure ebbed and flowed with the procession of the game. The pressure would build as the Barbos forced their way into our end of the field, then release in a whoop as one of the Gents made a crushing tackle or we would win the ball back in a ruck².

² A "ruck" is a passage of play where the two teams form over the ball in an attempt to win it by pushing the other team off of the ball. The ruck is similar to a maul except the ball is on the ground instead of in the hands.

With ten minutes left in the first half, the Barbos were given a scrummage near our try-line. Their number-eight – a huge man, Big Tonga they call him – picks it up and runs right. He has both skill and power. We barely stop him but he gets the pass off to their number six who dives for the try right under the posts. The conversion was easily made: twelve to nil.

You can only imagine the seething turmoil inside of me at this point and even in your imagination you've underestimated by a factor of ten. I wouldn't have been surprised if steam was bubbling out of my scalp. The pressure had to be released somewhere.

The end of the half is approaching. We kick deep. The Barbos' flyhalf catches it and returns a kick into our half. The ball is fielded cleanly and then shipped out to the back line and our number ten³ runs it back into the Barbos half.

I only knew our flyhalf as Pils. Having been with the team barely a couple of months, there were still a lot of guys I didn't know at all. I would learn later that Bryan Dodgen was his actual name. He was medium height; curly, black hair; and somewhat round. He actually looked a little soft. This roundness had earned him the nickname of Pillsbury Doughboy, Pils for short. He liked to claim the name came from all the pilsner he drank, but the doughboy connection kept coming back to haunt him. Regardless of the outward appearance, he was very quick and surprisingly aggressive for a flyhalf. He loved to run the ball up hard, draw two or three of the opposition and then off-load the ball to take advantage of the overlap.

This time, he runs back towards the forwards and their support. As he reaches the Barbos' twenty-two, he is collared by their number eight. Although Pils is a strong runner, he was no match for a man of Tonga's size. Tonga wraps one massive arm around Bryan's neck and throws him to the ground. There is universal consternation at this high tackle and three or four of the Gents' forwards jump on the perpetrator's back.

This brings a similar reaction from the Barbos, jumping in to protect their mate. It is only after many loud blasts of the referee's whistle that the two teams part. Pils doesn't get up. He is hurting bad. After an application of the magic sponge, he is able to move again. Pils is helped from the field – our first

³ In rugby, the players' positions are numbered. The "number ten" is also known as the flyhalf, or sometimes "first receiver". The flyhalf receives the ball from the scrumhalf and usually leads the backs, calling the plays.

substitution.

Forgetting that I was a forward, I thought the chance I had yearned for had come. I would be called in. I would fulfill all of my fantasies and earn the unbridled adoration of the club. Michael, as captain, maintained a saner perspective and called on the second-side flyhalf. I could only clench my teeth hard and turn away in disappointment at the obvious oversight in not bringing me into the game.

The referee, meanwhile, called the captains together on the field to warn both sides against retaliation, allowed that he would mete out punishment as proscribed in the laws, sternly warned the Barbos' number eight not to make any more high tackles and then awarded us a penalty at the twenty-two for the high tackle. Jerry took the penalty kick and made it easily. The Gents were finally on the scoreboard (though none existed in any physical sense): twelve to three.

Half-time. In rugby, half-time is five minutes. Catch your breath, have some water, a quick chat about what's going right or wrong, then it's back to work. There are no half-time shows, no diversions. After all, what spectators are there have come to see rugby, so let's keep it going.

The second half quickly settles into this pattern: probing runs, heavy tackles and strategic kicks. Neither side can gain an advantage. Both teams were now committed to not making a mistake, to grinding it out and eventually, with luck, creating an opportunity. All that was needed was patience, and concentration.

I continued to seethe on the sideline. The methodical play didn't even allow me the pressure release of cheering for spectacular feats of rugby prowess. I could only simmer.

About halfway through the period, we get a break. Michael T gets the ball in the back line and slips through a gap. Instantly, he was behind the defense. The Barbos were in trouble. Michael passes outside to Jerry, who moves it on to the wing, gliding down the touch-line outside of him. No one was going to catch him. He finishes the last twenty meters easily. Try! Under the posts. The conversion is good: twelve to ten. We are just two points down.

The pressure in my head is both built up and released at the same time. I screamed ecstatically when we scored. But, we are still only close, not in the clear yet.

With ten minutes to go, we were awarded a scrum in their half. Our eight-

man picks the ball up and rambles right. He is instantly taken by Tonga, ranging off the back of the scrum. It is another crushing, high tackle. They both go to the ground, hard. The ball is trapped and the ref blows-up play immediately.

Again fury erupted: the Gents jumping in to protest another high tackle and the Barbos in defense of their own. There was a lot of pushing, shoving and cursing, but no real damage. The game was too close and too important to do something stupid at this point.

With order restored, the ref gave a penalty to us for the high tackle. I can honestly say that Tonga wasn't really a dirty player. He just played hard. These two tackles, were probably both accidents, rather than intentional. Both players were crouching to avoid the tackles when they saw Tonga coming. With his size, Big Tonga just didn't get low enough. He collared both of them and it looked bad. It looked bad to the ref, and that's what mattered. End result, Tonga is ejected, red-carded, for repeated dangerous play.

It was a thirty-five meter kick, definitely makeable. And then, we'd have a man advantage for the remainder of the game. Things were looking good I thought.

Our number-eight was down. He would have to come out. I bubbled with excitement. Surely this was my chance. He was a back-row forward. I was a back-row forward. The adrenaline started to pulse, again.

Michael had a different idea. He elected to go with experience. He brought on another second-row to play number-eight. He wanted players on the field in those last ten minutes who had been there before. He wasn't taking any chances on rookie mistakes. Friendship can only go so far. Commitment to the team, and its purpose, would have to come first.

There was an audible deflating hiss of my ego as I realized I wasn't going to be given the chance to fulfill my dream. The game would finish without me, at least without me participating. I wasn't going to leave. I just wasn't going to be given the chance to do battle.

The penalty kick was made cleanly and we had our first, albeit narrow, lead: thirteen to twelve.

The old pattern resumed with kicks and counter kicks. The Barbos were stepping up the pressure on the kick coverage now, kicking higher and shorter. They had to re-collect the ball off one of the kicks – either that or force a

mistake. Otherwise, the game was over. They needed the ball. We needed to keep it from them.

Somehow we manage to keep the ball in their end, kicking it deep, making the tackles to stop them from moving forward. Playing carefully, avoiding the penalties that would give the Barbos a chance to take back the lead. Time dwindles and, eventually, we hear the whistle. We had prevailed.

That was scant consolation to me, though. The roiling pressure within me began to deflate even faster. It was leaking out of every pore. I hadn't been given the opportunity to participate, and I was disappointed. It wasn't just disappointment, it was anger. No one, not even Michael, had noticed the essential, intrinsic value I could bring to the club. They had not put me to my proper use and purpose. I'd get over it though. And, as I seethed, I resolved to show them all what a mistake they had made. I would work harder and prove my worth. Wait till next time.

One thing about rugby and its limited substitutions: clubs usually have multiple games on the weekend, so all members get a chance to play. As it turned out, I didn't get to play in the second-side game, either. But, I did make it into the third-side match, where I wreaked some havoc, getting that last bit of angst out.

At the after-party, I searched out Tonga, whose real name turned out to be Tony. In spite of the high tackles, I could see that he was the real deal. I admired his play. Neophyte that I was, I had to lay down some adoration.

"I really like the way you play," I started.

He just smiled, and looked a little embarrassed.

His teammates, next to him broke out laughing, "Don't tell him that. He doesn't need any more stroking of that ego."

"Never mind them," he said. "How long have you been playing?"

"I just started this year."

"Yeah, I saw you in that third-side game. You play hard, man. Keep at it.

"After you've played for awhile, you'll start to learn that it's not all about aggression, though. Sure, it's a part of it, but you've got to know when to apply it, and when to try something else. Sometimes deception is better than aggression.

"It all comes down to using your head. That's the great part about this game. It requires both brawn, and brain. If you keep at it, and you keep that in mind,

you'll do well. And, you'll enjoy this more than anything.”

And, that's the other exceptional part about this game. Its adherents respect the game, and work for the general promotion and evolution of rugby. They are not just interested in their own, narrow, parochial self-interest. Why would this guy be giving me, nominally his competition (though no real competition yet), advice to improve my game? Because ruggers are interested in the game itself, not just what they get out of it. They preach the gospel. That's the beauty of it. I took it to heart.