

## Rugby by the Sea

Once a year we travel to Galveston for a cup match. It's not far, but it's a world away. We leave O'Malley's and get there in under an hour. The pitch is across the seawall from the beach. A nice, grassy space tucked in next to some World War Two era bunkers built to defend the island in case of German attack. All is safe today, except for a threat from the thundering herd of Caballeros pounding the turf.

Galveston RFC is a good team built from limited resources. It's not a big town and has a fairly transient population, so it's hard for them to build consistency. They do have a core group of guys at the UT Med Center that keep them going. Guys that played in college and brought the rugby lust with them. The problem is that there are just not enough people in Galveston to fill out the side with the quality players they need.

Today's game stays true to form. We are well ahead by half-time and coasting. Their fullback is Dr. John. We call him that for the obvious reasons that he is one of the UT doctors and his name is, well just guess. He is one of their best players. In fact, they have a very good back line. They are just lacking a bit of size and experience in the forwards.

Anyway, Dr. J sees us starting to coast and takes a kick wide, then hooks up with their wing. We don't cover well. The wing pops it back inside to the center charging up in support. He feeds it inside again to their scrum half who dots down under the posts for a try. Oops. That was too easy.

After the kick-off, they work a similar move to the other side. This time, it's their wing scoring in the corner. Reality-check time for the Gents. A game we had well in hand is now down to less than a converted try difference. We need to get our effort back on the front burner. Compounding the problem, I've twisted my knee in one of the breakdowns leading to Galveston's last score.

I limp back after the conversion for our kick-off. Then I limp trailing the team in coverage. Bryan has kicked it deep, straight to Dr. J.

D.J. has seen me doing the lame-duck routine. Apparently, his first thought is that he'd found a weakness. He is going to exploit it. He boots the ball back sending it towards me. The ball is coming in a low arc, barely over the horizon

line, straight to me. I am the only one there. Everyone else, even our fullback, has run up to cover Bryan's kick.

And, yes, the knee hurts, but I don't have time for that now. The gauntlet has been thrown down and it is time to respond. I start to head for the ball. As soon as I start moving, the pain in that lower joint dissipates. Well, not totally gone, just sublimated. I am filled with purpose. I am not going to let my teammates down. I'm incensed that D.J. thinks he can take advantage of me, that he thinks I am a weak link in the Gents' chain. It raises my hackles and the adrenaline goes straight into full pump mode. Let's just say that the front burner flame was back on high. The pain in the knee is getting to be an ever more distant memory.

The kick is one of those dying quails, a Texas-leaguer, fading to the ground in front of me. I ratchet it up a notch, motoring my legs and aching knee as fast as they will carry me. I'm almost there. My arms stretch. My fingers stretch. No center-fielder moves though. No diving. I need to catch this and do something with it, just a few more inches.

Contact. My fingertips snag the ball at ankle level just before it can thud to the ground. I feel the ball give in my hands as the speed of the ball and the resultant impact cause the internal bladder to stretch to a shape other than ovoid. My fingers close firmly on it, further stretching the bladder and distorting it. I can feel the raised nodules on the surface of the ball, manufactured to give it grip, each one an individual sensation in my focused brain. I slide it up under my arm, tucking the end under my armpit and cradling it tightly behind my forearm. I can even feel the ground, firm under my feet, as I pound it with each step. The spongy turf gives under my boots and the earth beneath parts, accepting the insertion of the aluminum sprigs on the soles. Head and torso move back up from my doubled over position and I change focus to survey the field in front of me.

Galveston are spread out, moving on generally converging tracks, covering the kick. D.J. is leading the charge. I can see the look of surprise in his face that I'd actually caught the ball. The realization is coming to him that the duck isn't so lame. It's not that the knee doesn't hurt. The pain is just removed from my reality for the time being. The only thought is to move the ball down the field. Never too subtle as a player, I run straight for D.J.

His eyes start to grow wider as the distance closes between us. I probably

have forty pounds on him. He is having second thoughts about this decision to kick the ball to me. He is breaking down from a sprint to a tackle position. He sidles to the right a hair, setting up the classic rugby tackle – wrap the legs from the side and let the ball carrier’s own weight and momentum carry him to the ground. I shift the ball under my left arm and adjust my course directly at him. I want the confrontation. I can taste it.

He keeps moving to my right and I keep following him. Finally, at the last instant, when we are a nanosecond apart, I sidestep left and extend my right arm to fend off his tackle. He dives low for my legs. My hand catches him on the trapezius, right where the shoulder meets the neck, thumb on clavicle and fingers on nape. I extend my arm, straightening the elbow, and driving his head and face into the turf, while my hopping sidestep lifts me over his flailing arms.

Right foot lands and pushes off, recovering from the sidestep. The next tackler is coming from my left and behind. Quick shift of the ball to the right hand, twist of the torso and a left hand fend has him sliding down the backs of my legs and left behind.

Refocusing in front of me, I see their big second-row, a freight-train bearing down on me from the left front. He has been doing his best to obliterate our players all day. I’m in his sights now. I’m not ready to go down, just yet. As he lunges for the tackle, I stutter-step, slowing just enough. He can't slow his momentum and misses the point of impact passing by just in front of me. I give his jersey a yank as he goes by, helping him stumble to the ground behind me.

There are two left in front of me, closing from either side. I’m not going to beat this tackle. My luck has run out on that and I know it. So, I slip the ball down and pop<sup>1</sup> it gently, lovingly, off my toe and over their heads. They have to quickly abandon the idea of making mincemeat out of me and spin in haste as they realize they have been duped. I sprint by them and catch the ball ten meters up the pitch before it hits the ground.

There are still twenty meters to the try-line. I know my limitations, and know that I’ve already exceeded about five of them in the last five seconds. One that I know all too well is that I’m relatively slow in a flat out race. Besides, I’ve

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<sup>1</sup> A “pop-kick” is a technique where the ball is kicked gently in a low arc for a short distance. The idea is to move it over an oncoming defender or defensive line and regain possession behind them, optimally on the fly, before it bounces. It’s a good ploy to break down a defense that comes up fast and puts pressure on an attacking line.

about used up that adrenaline surge.

The two hoodwinked Galveston defenders are closing fast. I'm not going to make it. I start looking for support. And there is Derrick, at full sprint, coming in off the right wing. The first tackler wraps my legs and I'm laying out for a belly-flop on the Texas turf. I stretch out my arms, the ball cradled delicately in my finger tips. I gently pop<sup>2</sup> it up in front of Derrick. It seems to float endlessly as we all watch. Derrick streaks through on the downward arc. He snags it in full stride and glides in under the posts for the try. A thing of beauty.

All burners back to full on. We run in two more tries before the end of the game and win comfortably. A game that was hanging in the balance swung back to our favor with a moment's commitment and focus. A walk down the edge of possibility brought the game in line with our purpose and direction. As a team, we fought the chaos and ordered it to our liking.

After the game, we take a mad dash across Seawall Blvd. for a dip. This is one of the beautiful things about playing in Galveston. The pitch comes equipped with this huge tub called the Gulf of Mexico. We immerse ourselves washing the mud, dust and sweat away in the salt water. It's a heavenly experience. Every pitch should come with one of these.

The Galveston party is held at their "clubhouse", which is a shack at their practice pitch. No matter the milieu, a keg, two rugby teams and a few ditties, and the party is on. We get well lubricated and start into the singing early:

...She's nasty, she's filthy,  
She spits on the floor,  
Charlotte, the Harlot, the cowpuncher's whore...<sup>3</sup>

And it goes downhill from there. By the time the keg runs out and our voices are deadened, the drive back to Houston is to be a challenge. No matter, though, we are always up for a challenge. Back into the cars and we aim them towards O'Malley's.

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<sup>2</sup> Similar to a "pop-kick", the "pop-pass" is floated in a low, easy arc although not over a defender. It simply is thrown laterally and gives an oncoming teammate time to run under it and make the catch.

<sup>3</sup> Anon., Charlotte the Harlot, sung to the tune of Sweet Betsy from Pike.