

## **Transgressions**

There is an annual tournament in Austin. It's a social tournament, the highlight of the Texas rugby social season. There are tons of teams, teams you wouldn't normally play, coming from all over. It's a great time and good fun – an event not to be missed.

One year, we were going up on our own, individually. No bus. To maximize social opportunities and enjoyment, each rugger would work out what was best for him in travel and accommodations. We would come together as a team on the pitch, otherwise we were individuals off for a weekend jaunt.

That's not to say we wouldn't get together at the tournament party, or after. It's just that we were out of lock step. We were released to follow our own whimsy. That could be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on which way the wind is blowing.

When we assembled at the pitch, we had a new mix of players. The first game was at 9:30 and against, of all the prospects, Fort Worth. Ah, well, we had to play some teams from Texas in the tournament. It was pool play to start with and our pool included Fort Worth, New Orleans and Oklahoma City. Not a bad bracket, some familiar faces and then some we don't see every year.

The set up was the three pool games on Saturday, and then two rounds in the knockout stages on Sunday, should you win your pool. If you lost in the pools, you were guaranteed at least one consolation game on Sunday morning, then another should you win that. The Sunday morning consolation games were generally the best motivator to win the pool round. No one, and I mean no one with a rugby spirit, wanted to get up to play a meaningless rugby game at 8:00 am on Sunday morning following the Saturday night Austin tournament party.

Let's just say that we were properly motivated. At least, some of us were. There were a few on the team who obviously hadn't thought it through. They failed to show up at the 9:00 am Saturday team call for the first game. We only had thirteen players for the start of the Fort Worth game. In true Texas tradition, we would soldier on with thirteen. Maybe we could pretend we were playing League?

League or Union, we started with our thirteen at the 9:30 whistle. As with most tournaments, the halves were shortened. We were only playing twenty-five minute halves in the pools. It's still works out to a lot of rugby when added up over the course of the day and weekend, but a lot better than playing the full forties. Especially in the Texas heat, which I'm willing to bet challenges Africa hot. We've got the humidity to go with the heat. It is killing.

So we started out against Fort Worth down two. We scrummed with seven and let the backside wing cover deep, like a fullback. We just had to up our effort and perform extra duty to make up for it. Fort Worth came out hard and was determined to take advantage. They took the kick off and swung it wide to the wing. They probed the edges to see if they can get around us. We managed to cover for a while.

On our possession we just attacked up the middle – ten-man rugby, or nine-man in our deficient state. We tried to force them to over-commit and then ship it out where we had Derrick waiting to finish.

Both strategies seemed to be working, more or less. Fifteen minutes in, Derrick got sucked in to tackle the fullback who came into the line. The fullback managed the offload to their wing and he was off to the races – try scored.

We manage to hold it at that until halftime, when Dopey and Darryl finally show up. They had other commitments, honey-dos and such. Funny how some unencumbered, unattached bachelors get stuck doing honey-dos. It was a social tournament and they were letting someone else carry the slack – all well and good but you need to be sure that that “someone” knows they are supposed to pick up said “slack”. No one did in this case.

No worries, though. No sense in looking back. The task at hand was to fix the deficit against Fort Worth and get through this game. The good thing for me was, with Darryl there now, I could get out of the front row. I moved back to eight. Dopey slotted in at fullback.

Fort Worth kicked off for the second half and came down hard after it. In the ensuing ruck, one of their players punched Michael, for no reason that I could see. Is there ever a reason for a punch?

I was never one to take injustice lightly. It's how I got my nickname, “the Enforcer”. Michael T gave it to me following one game where I had gone a little overboard. The Doc had been in a little scuffle in a ruck. When the ball

came out and was kicked down field, he chased. Well, the other scufflee didn't think things were over and chased him the length of the pitch. As they arrived at the next breakdown he just came in and punched Michael in the back of the head.

I had seen the whole thing and was trailing the two of them. As soon as the punch was thrown, I tackled the guy off the back of the ruck and landed on top of him. Of course, the ref was tracking it, too, trailing us all. Before we had hit the ground the whistle was blowing.

“Penalty, against blue.” That was us. “I was going to give it for the punch, but I'm reversing it for retaliation.”

And the ref's word was law. We got back ten to defend the penalty move.

Later that day, Michael told me he saw the guy coming. He also saw the ref behind him. He saw the ref putting the whistle to his lips. He saw the whole thing.

“Who do you think you are, ‘the Enforcer’? I took that punch for nothing. The ref was going to blow and we had a penalty under the posts, an easy three. You just couldn't contain yourself, could you?”

This would have all been well and good. I would have taken my upbraiding and liked it, or not. Either way, I had earned it. Except, there were a few guys around who overheard.

“The Enforcer, eh? You don't even look like Squint. Where's your .44 Magnum?”

Like any unhappy moniker, it stuck. It's probably got some accuracy to it, as well. It's not that I'm a particularly tough guy and I'm not much of a fighter, but I do have this over-developed sense of justice. When I see a wrong, it's a knee-jerk reaction to fix it. Particularly when it's someone close to me, and that would translate as anyone wearing the same rugby shirt. I have to right the wrong.

So, here against Fort Worth, I react immediately. I knee the guy who threw the punch. Once again, as always, the ref blows the whistle. He has missed the punch and seen the knee. They always catch the retaliation. I get a talking to.

“No more of that stuff or you'll be cooling your heels for the rest of the tournament.”

There was no bin in those days. Being sent off meant staying off. And in a tournament, that translated to the rest of the weekend. There was no appeal or

pardon. You were done.

The injustice of it. I was righteous in my action. But I contain myself. For the greater good and expediency's sake, that is to say, not to screw the team over anymore than I already had. They need me for the whole tournament. At least, egotistically, I think they do.

Once we had fifteen on the pitch things started to click. We managed to pull out the win over Fort Worth.

New Orleans was next. They had actually made the trip. Austin was one of the few places they would go. It was a party city, something they relate to. Not quite up to the Bourbon Street scene, but different and worth the trip. Usually, though, they just stayed home and let people come to them. And people did. Everyone enjoyed a trip to New Orleans for a little rugby. Win or lose, there was always the Quarter after. Can't beat that.

A few more Gents were straggling in. We actually had some reserves for the New Orleans game. Michael kicked some butt in the pre-game chat.

“What do you guys think you are? Good, or something? You think you can sleep walk through this?”

“I know it's the Austin tournament, but that doesn't mean it doesn't matter. Do you want these guys to go around saying they can beat the Gents?”

“Get off your asses and make an effort. Quit waiting on the next guy. Each of you has to do a job.

“Get stuck in from the start this time.”

Whew! Nothing like a motivational speech in the morning. We did get stuck in and actually started to click a bit. We handled New Orleans without too many issues. Well, there was one. Derrick broke his nose getting tackled while scoring a try. Cream was out. That's a loss that would hurt.

Next up in the afternoon is Oklahoma City, or OKC as they were listed in the tournament tables. We don't know them well, nor what to expect. What we did expect is that we would impose our game and things would be all right.

That was a bit mistaken. OKC's flyhalf had a tremendous boot and he ruled the game. Every time he got the ball he launched it down field. Their wings had speed and covered well. We played a lot with our backs to our own try-line. The pressure was on.

With Derrick out, we didn't have the strike threat in the back three to carry it forward. Once we got the pill, we had to grind it up the field. Phase, after

phase, after phase, until we would get in striking distance. Dopey was on the wing now, so that pretty much meant we needed to be inside their twenty-two.

We would do that, then make a mistake. A penalty, a forward pass, a knock-on, something would happen. Then, boom, their flyhalf put it back down field and we started over. Very frustrating. And very nerve-racking, especially in a short game.

Neither team had been able to score up to midway through the second half. I took it upon myself to do something. Pushing the edge here, I decided I would hit the flyhalf late after one of his monster punts. See if I couldn't put him off his game.

He kicked. One Mississippi, two mississip – you get the idea. Just a little late, then blam. I laid him out.

It had been a niggly game up to that point anyway. When I made the late tackle, all hell broke lose. The referee didn't seem to mind, though. More accurately, he missed it. He was already into the pattern and had turned to chase the kick to the other end of the field. He was gone before the hit. I don't think he even saw the tackle.

I stayed on top of the flyhalf after the tackle. I knew he was going to be pissed and was afraid he was going to get up swinging. I thought I'd just keep him there, rather than dodge punches. Their fullback and center were on me before I moved. Denny and Michael were on top of them. Obviously, I wasn't the only enforcer on the team.

The melee had ensued. We were joined by more from each team until it became a massive ball-less maul wheeling around on the pitch. The ref returned, honking on his whistle but took no other action. What could he do? He had to just wait until we tired of our horseplay. Finally, we did.

Everyone stood around wondering what to do next, and all were a little embarrassed at our loss of composure. The ref called the captains over. The rest of us simmered a bit as the ref read the riot act. The thing of it is, since the ref had turned his back, he hadn't seen anything and couldn't mete out any just rewards. No real damage was done anyway. I don't think there were even any punches thrown, or at least none connected.

He gave the captains a stern warning that there would be send-offs if there were any more indiscretions. The captains related that bit of information to the teams, and it was on with the game, as if nothing had happened.

Well, not totally as if nothing had happened. We picked up the intensity and manage to string together a few phases for a score. Then we did it again, taking the lead and finishing as winners. We just needed the little kick in the butt to get the juices flowing. Sometimes a little step over the line pays off. Sometimes it's needed. Just don't stay there.

Now we were cut free. We had the rest of the day, and night, off. And social tournaments are meant to be enjoyed. We set ourselves to that task.

First, know that there is beer to be had at a rugby tournament. In the old days, and they were the days, you got a mug and could drink your fill, at least until the kegs were floated. Now, to maximize earnings, the tournament hosts tend to charge for beer. Generally speaking, as a way of managing expenses, we brought our own. When that was gone, we would start investing.

There was plenty more rugby to be played on Saturday too. We wanted to see some of our likely Sunday competition in action. There was a team of expat South Africans that assemble for the tournament every year. They are always pretty good. Then there was a touring Scottish side that turned out to be rather average by touring standards. Finally, the coupe de grace for Austin, the tournament hosts, was a touring R.A.F. side. That's the one we would watch.

The R.A.F. were playing the Barbos. This would be a contest, we thought. Note that it was the tournament hosts' prerogative to set the brackets. Austin had managed to somewhat load this side of the bracket. Let's see, they had the Barbos, the South Africans and the R.A.F. all on one side. On the other side were us, the Scots and Austin. Maybe just a little lop-sided. We weren't complaining though.

Suffice it to say, that the R.A.F. were very, very good. They were a bunch of guys that looked like all they did in the air force is P.T. and then were the marketing face of the R.A.F. throughout the world. This was their job and they did it well. By the way, this was as close to professional as a rugger could get. Since the sport was "amateur", what better way to participate than have the government pay you to play? We understood that there may be a few private corporations practicing this "shamateurism" in Britain and around the world. It wasn't something that happened in the states. Rugby wasn't big enough. I'm sure if it was, though, we'd be all over it.

After the games, the tournament party was being held at Fiesta Gardens down on Town Lake. The park was just across the lake from the tournament

venue, Zilker Park. And it was close to Sixth Street, the all important, ultimate social destination in Austin.

We got to the party around eight as the sun was just going down on the day and sanity. There would be nothing resembling sanity the rest of the night, at least not that we would see. Why else would we keep coming back?

Some of the crowd had apparently come straight from the pitch and were well into it. The singing was already on:

Aye, yi, yi, yi,  
Your mother swims out to troop ships  
(and catches them)  
So, let's have another verse  
That's worse than the other verse,  
And waltz me around by my willy.<sup>1</sup>

It was a mass of supposedly adult men, and women, acting like children. And that's the way we liked it. Maybe it was our fountain of youth. Or maybe just releasing the inner child. Whatever it was, it made us alive. It gave us that inner joy that glowed and gave our lives feeling if not meaning. All of it together transformed our meager existences into something palatable, something special to us. It made it all worth while. We reveled in it.

We played the usual games: scrum half bowling, boat races, the famous three-man lift, and on, and on. We had all the fun. Childish fun, yes, but it was ours. And we weren't hurting anyone, so what's the problem?

Well the problem was the next day, and recovery. We weren't worried about that at the time. We were in the moment. It was our nirvana and we could achieve it almost weekly.

From Fiesta Gardens, we went to Sixth Street, expanding our rugby fun to the world at large. The tournament bar was Maggie Mae's. It was jam-packed. Sure, there were a few rugby teams in town, but Sixth Street is always like this. The UT students, the tourists, the Austin drop-outs – everyone congregated on Sixth Street at night. It was a massive, mobile party, moving on sneakers from bar to bar.

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<sup>1</sup> [Sing me Another One](#), op. cit.

This, of course, was unknown in Houston. Nothing was close together in Houston and when you hopped, it was always by car. There was no feeling of community, no marching shoulder to shoulder from bar to bar and the next level of titillation. You were always insulated and passing through from place to place. On Sixth Street, everyone *was* the place. We were all, collectively, ruggers and non-ruggers, the destination. It was what made Austin alive, and was the highlight of the Austin tournament.

The morning always comes too soon, especially after Saturday night. We were playing the Scots. They had managed to come out on top in the pool rounds, edging Austin. They were a good side, by our standards, but nothing special – a bunch of guys who got together to go on tour. Being Scottish, and having played since they were like, three, they all had good skills. Also they'd all played together for a long, long time.

On the other side of the coin, the guys who came on tour were the ones who could afford it. They weren't necessarily the best players on their club back home, but they were here, and they were making it work.

And also, like us, they were here to enjoy themselves. They were on tour for fun. They weren't bent on world domination, though that would be nice if it happened. Job one was to extract the most from Kipling's, and their own, "unforgiving minute"<sup>2</sup>. Just like us. This would make for an interesting Sunday morning.

They showed up at the pitch, just like us, squinting to fight the light and the pain it engendered. The Texas sun is always bright, especially in the eyes of a hung-over rucker. Everyone was moving gingerly, slowly, coming back to a reality that included imminent bone crunching, bodily contact on top of the self-induced inner pain. That didn't even include the inherent soreness from three little matches on Saturday. It was a test of will. Who had the strength to overcome? That was the question.

We had seen the Scots frequently out on Sixth Street. They were deeply into the moment. Perhaps more so than us. They certainly were enjoying themselves. And they, as well as ourselves, talked a lot of trash about this match and our various skills. The time for talk had ended. Only the moaning

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<sup>2</sup> Kipling, Rudyard, Rewards and Fairies, "If—", 1910.



remained....

Game time. Ready or not here it was. We managed to have fifteen for the kickoff with a couple of invalids laying in wait in touch, hoping they wouldn't be called on anytime soon.

The ball flew directly to me. I took it and began to move up field. Everything was in slow motion. Each step felt like I was pulling my feet out of sucking ooze, even though the Texas clay was as hard as the limestone underneath it. It was an effort to move at all. Will power was the only thing that kept me inching forward. That and the commitment to my teammates. They expected it from me, just as from themselves. Every one of us was suffering. We're doing it together, for the common good.

And we were all moving at the same speed, even the Scots. I saw them converging on me, slow-motion. Contact was unavoidable. It's a rugby game, after all. As I lowered my shoulder into the chest of the first tackler, it passed through my mind, "This is going to hurt."

Forward motion was stopped. I felt the impact. Then another and another as the second and third tacklers arrived. My aching brain reverberated in my skull. This was what it was going to be like. Will power – get me through this.

The tackle took me to ground. Just another impact and more reverberation. I set the ball and we rucked over. Cy had it out. Play continued. I got up and chased, aching head and all. It was going to be a long, long game.

Play continued with both sides feeling each other, and themselves, out. We were trying to figure out how we could get our minds into the game. Once the mind was there, the body would follow. Right now, the bodies were saying, "Uh-uh! I'm not doing *that!*"

The ball was kicked downfield. Then kicked back. We had a lineout and it's kicked out again. In this "feeling out" stage, it seems everyone was avoiding contact. Maybe we can get through sixty minutes (the semi-final games added another five minutes per half) and not have to make another tackle? I don't think so.

Finally their number eight took one of the kicks on the fly and starts to move it up field. He's had enough of the aerial ping-pong. He's tired of the running back and forth, chasing kicks, for no good reason. It was time for some action.

He moved right towards the group of Gents' defenders coming up to cover

the kick. He picked the biggest one, Lug, of course, and lowers his shoulder for the impact. Now, Lug had suffered more than most from the excesses of last night. His body was still saying, “I don’ wanna! I don’ wanna!”

But his mind, and his commitment made him bend down for the tackle. The problem was, with the body’s resistance, he couldn’t get low enough. He stuck his arm out and caught the Scotsman around the neck. The number eight’s feet went out from under him and his body went horizontal before he crashed flat to the ground. He laid there a moment, in pain, with Lug standing over him.

Then, pandemonium. The high tackle is universally denigrated. It’s dangerous and something that is just not rugby. As the whistle blew, two of the Scotsman’s teammates began pushing Lug. Then one of them threw a punch, and another.

Lug was in shock, too. He hadn’t meant it. It was an accident. He just couldn’t get low enough for the tackle. Then the guy went even lower before contact. Lug was just fending the blows at this point, not sure how to react. On the one hand he’s apologetic for a tackle he knows was wrong. On the other hand, he was beginning to think the reaction and the beating he was taking passively was a little over the top.

I arrived next and tackled the guy throwing the punches, taking him to the ground. Whether the guy was justifiably upset, or not, Lug’s my teammate and I felt the need to defend him in time of strife. Both teams joined right behind me.

Have I used the word “melee” before? Here it was again. The spark had set off the fireworks. The next Scotsman arrives, and kicked me in my exposed hip. That’s going to hurt, I thought, but continued wrestling with the guy I had taken to ground. Michael tackled the kicker off of me and they piled on after that, Gent on Scot on Gent ad infinitum.

It was probably thirty seconds, but felt like ten minutes, before we responded to the ref’s whistle blasts and came to our senses. The two teams separated and milled about somewhat sheepishly while still seething. The ref called the captain’s together.

“Boys,” he said, “It’s Sunday morning and we’re here for a little fun, not this kind of thing.

“Both sides are guilty of retaliation here. I’m going to go with the original penalty to white for the high tackle. I want you to take a minute and talk to

your teams. Tell them to calm down. Any more foul play or retaliation and I'm going to be making ejections. Consider this a warning.

"Now, go, talk to them."

And they did. The whole melee was sort of swept under the rug and ignored, except the added threat of no more tolerance from the ref.

The difference was that now Saturday night was forgotten. The blood was flowing again. The minds were into it and the passion back. Game on.

The Scots scored first with a nice switch move performed by their centers, running in a try from twenty-five meters out. We struck back, winning possession from the short kick-off, then banging it up through eight or ten phases to force over a forwards try. The teams were fairly evenly matched and showed equal passion through the rest of the game.

It came down to the last few minutes, with us down by a couple of points. We were pressuring in their end, but since half-time, they'd made some adjustments and were controlling our attacks in the forwards.

So, we shipped it out to the backs. It went through the hands moving out, one by one. It came to Dopey, who was one-on-one with their winger. I think I might have mentioned that the Scottish team brought those who could afford the trip, not necessarily their best players. In this case, their winger was white-haired, probably sixty years old and looked like he might have been a grocer in his day job. He had come on early in the second half as an injury replacement. You have to go with who you got.

Dopey juked in, which their winger bought totally, then went around him to the outside. He sprinted the final twenty meters to score under the posts. We took the lead, then the kick-off and held possession to kill off the clock. It was on to the final.

Well, the less said about the final against the R.A.F., probably the better. We were pretty much in tatters by this point and they were just hitting their stride. We put in the effort we could, and came out on the losing end. They were just too good.

All in all, still a good weekend. We came away second, which isn't bad considering the quality of the competition. And, we had a few stories to tell.