

WHY RUGBY

by Rob Wagner

It is tempting when trying to define "why" rugby to simplify it all to a few bumper stickers ("Rugby... Because"; "Rugby, The Only Game Our Mothers Let Us Play"; "In Rugby There Are No Winners, Only Survivors"). But, of course, it is far more complicated than that. Notice, for instance, that the subject of this chapter is not "why play rugby," it is WHY RUGBY. This fine differentiation does not have to be explained to ruggers, but for the new or uninitiated, it does bear some discussion. Note also that "WHY RUGBY" is both a question and a statement, or perhaps a question without a question mark or a statement in question form. How appropriate that the topic itself should break the rules, even if they are the rules of grammar and punctuation.

Rugby is not, "like soccer," as we all too often hear. Such a statement is a blasphemy of the good name of Rugby. Rugby is a natural evolution from soccer. Soccer, being the Neanderthal precursor to Rugby. The game of Rugby-football started with a man, William Web Ellis, following his finely developed instincts by picking up the ball in a soccer match and running with it (i.e. he broke a rule he recognized as stupid and limiting, starting a fine tradition of civil disobedience that was later adopted by Gandhi and King).

Emerson said a mouthful when he said "whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather mortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness," (but then he had a nasty habit of being profound) It could well be the rugby player's credo. You will find so many drawn to the game because they want to try something different, something exciting and new, and something that others may be just a bit fearful of. If that is not necessarily why they come to the game, they soon find a certain perverse pleasure in watching and listening to people's reactions when they tell them, "I play rugby." Most often the listener gets a strange look on their face, or grimace, and says, "Rugby, that's pretty rough, isn't it?" "Yeah, kinda," you respond as they look you up and down and wonder what manner of person is this?!. This, then, results in the statement changing from "I play rugby," to, "I am a rugby player." A subtle but important difference as the first phrase states what one does, the second defines whom one is.

Simply (and frequently) put, Rugby is not a game, it is a life style. Its essence is not drawn simply from the physical competition on the pitch, but also from camaraderie that develops from sharing such an uncommon--common bond. It starts on the field but is reinforced during the post game gatherings (ok, ok, the party) when opponents break bread and toast each other with drink and song. The party is a celebration not just for the victors, but also for the vanquished (and a chance for a redemption of sorts by "winning" the, um, gathering). It is a unique endeavor in athletics. Whereas Vince Lombardi speaks for most competitive sport in saying, "Winning isn't everything, it is the only thing," the rugger, who still wishes to win, values the test of competition and the spirit of the game even more. So perhaps it can all be reduced to a bumper sticker after all {sigh}, "in rugby there are no winners, only survivors." And we survive well together, teammates and opponents alike.

Finally, people play rugby because it is not football, and it is not soccer, and it is not any of the other sport you can think of. It is different, it is unique, it is rugby. More than a game, more than simple competition, flying in the face of what is expected of the American athlete. Rugby players are nothing, if not nonconformists. Ralph Waldo (yes, we're on a first name basis) would be proud, and would no doubt have captained the all-intellectual and social selects first 15, probably at eight-man (if he brought his own ball).

We few, we proud, we ruggers must never forget our ideals, our objectives and our principles lest we become just another game that values winning above all else. Rugby has always been above that. It is about camaraderie and sportsmanship. Other sports often pay only lip service to those ideals, rugby exemplifies them. Mr. Robert Frost also captures the spirit of the game in "The Road Not Taken." Read on, and enjoy... and do not forget to read the explanation below the poem.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I ___
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
-Robert Frost

It's a little known non-fact that this was written by Frost to explain to his parents why he played rugby. They were adequately confused, mumbled their thanks, and wandered down to the local pub to lament the strange turn their son had taken. *"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."*

--Henry David Thoreau (writing of ruggers, I'm sure)