

# Rugby: A safe sport for America's youth

by Lyle J. Micheli, MD *Commentary by a past president of the American College of Sports Medicine*

I support efforts to establish rugby teams in American high schools and colleges, and wish to alleviate any possible concerns about the sport's relative safety. I offer a unique perspective given that I've been closely involved, as a player and supporter since the early 1960s (where I began playing as a Harvard undergraduate), as a physician, and as past president of the American College of Sports Medicine. I have authored over 200 scholarly journal articles on sports medicine (including the first-ever published study of rugby injuries in the United States). In my practice, I've treated athletes of all ages from sports as varied as figure skating and football. I also serve as chairman of the Massachusetts Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

**A popular sport worldwide:** Rugby is a dynamic contact sport played all over the world by men and women of all different classes, creeds, and races. It fosters friendship and camaraderie between players. To celebrate one recent Christmas, men from American and New Zealand research stations in Antarctica played a game of rugby in their frozen wasteland. Most rugby players have played with and against people from other nations.

Rugby is played in over 100 countries and is the most popular team sport in nations such as Japan, Fiji, and Wales. This sport could not be as popular as it is among the peoples of so many different cultures if it were dangerous! In fact, the risk of injury in rugby is relatively low compared to sports Americans embrace – such as football, ice hockey, and lacrosse – a fact borne-out by numerous studies to ascertain the risk of sports injury in different activities. The reasons for this are quite straightforward to those of us who study sports medicine.

**Why rugby is a safe sport – paradoxically:** The main reason rugby players have a relatively low risk of injury compared to football players is paradoxical – rugby players don't wear protective equipment. Thus the rugby player doesn't have the same disregard for the safety of his or her head, neck, and shoulders when tackling or trying to break through a tackle. The other reason is that unlike football, rugby is a game of possession, not yardage. Consequently rugby players don't tackle by "driving through the numbers," as football players are taught to do with their heads when tackling a player. In rugby, players are taught to use their arms to wrap a player's legs and let the momentum of that player cause him to go to ground. Furthermore, there is no blocking in rugby, and so players who without the ball don't get hit when they're not expecting it.

One of the reasons rugby has a reputation for being "dangerous" in the United States may simply be the result of ignorance on the part of the average American sports fan. Rugby is a free-flowing contact sport. Because it doesn't have the familiar stop-and-start character of football and other TV-shaped sports, to the uninitiated rugby can appear confusing and "scary."

Furthermore, while the bumps, bruises, and scrapes you see on the elbows, knees, and faces of many rugby players can appear alarming, they are of considerably less concern than the anterior cruciate ligament ruptures, finger fractures and dislocations, and chest contusions characteristic of a sport such as football in which heavy protective equipment is worn.

**Injury rates:** I performed one of the first studies of rugby injuries in the United States, which showed that compared to football, the incidence of injury in rugby is quite low (10 percent in American club rugby compared to 52 percent in NCAA college football). The study was published in the peer-reviewed *American Journal of Sports Medicine*. Subsequent studies have supported my results.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that rugby players never get injured. However, based on the numerous studies, the scientific conclusion we reach is that rugby is not as injurious as certain other contact and collision sports. Sports that most believe deserve NCAA status. Rugby is a relatively safe sport in the panoply of athletic endeavors available to our young men and women.

Since my early study, sports medicine has grown as a specialty. A considerable body of literature on the safety of all sports, including rugby has emerged. Review the literature and you will find no evidence to suggest that rugby should be denied a legitimate place in youth athletics around the world. For the reasons outlined above, I have no hesitation declaring that rugby is worthy of a place in American colleges and high schools.

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