

SHANGHAI RUGBY TALES

Simon Drakeford's book delves into sport's history

BY ANDREW CHIN



When former Shanghai Hairy Crabs club captain Simon Drakeford discovered a namesake also played rugby in the city at the beginning of the 20th century, he went on a four-year journey that took him across three continents and culminated in the accountant's first book.

It's a Rough Game but Good Sport is an exhaustive history of rugby in Shanghai with appendices detailing over 1,500 games and thousands of players. However, Drakeford notes the book also serves as a history of Shanghai.

"The people that played were essentially elite," he explains. "They were board directors and members of the Shanghai Municipal Council that basically ran the International Settlement."

A chapter is devoted to the city's rugby players that fought in WWI and the book is full of characters like Oliver Phillip Edwards. The 1930s player was imprisoned by the Japanese, where a rugby opponent served as a guard. He escaped to Chongqing and married a Eurasian despite heavy protests from his HSBC employers. He later died fishing on the England-Wales border with a salmon found on his leg.

Shanghai's rugby history starts in 1867 with the formation of the Shanghai Football Club – four years after the Football Association developed the rules for what the Yanks call soccer but four years before the Rugby Football Union codified its rules.

Early attempts to organize a rugby group were marred by squabbles over what rules to follow. The first dedicated rugby club was founded in 1881 but quickly collapsed like other attempts in 1889 and 1892.

Breakaway members of a larger group founded the Shanghai Rugby Football Club in 1904 and the sport enjoyed a stable decade up to the onset of WWI.

"The first Interport matches were played at what is now People's Square and they were massive social organizations," Drakeford says. "They were happening every year and the season started to have a rhythm to them."

Post-war games resumed in November 1920 and rugby exploded, buoyed by a massive influx of foreign soldiers sent by the colonial powers. The season jumped from 13 games in 1921 to over 100 by the mid-1930s.

They were truly international affairs, much to the chagrin of the predominantly British players representing Shanghai.

"They were getting beat by the US 4th Marines, who started losing to the Japanese

IT'S A ROUGH GAME BUT GOOD SPORT

THE LIFE, TIMES AND PERSONALITIES OF THE SHANGHAI
RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB



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university championship teams by the mid-1930s," the English native chuckles. "They were all polite about it, but you know they had to be pretty peeved."

Rugby slowed as international rivalries bled into Shanghai's streets. Drakeford notes games were played where "you could hear bombs dropping and machine guns firing in Zhabei District."

Many players left to serve in WWII, and efforts to resume ultimately failed. The last rugby game in the city was played in March 1950, until the reformation of the Shanghai Rugby Football Club in 1994.

A chapter is devoted to the sport's recent renaissance, which Drakeford has been intimately involved in. The former Chairman of the Hong Kong Pot Bellied Pigs and the

Beijing Devils moved to Shanghai in 2006. He joined the Hairy Crab's committee, serving as secretary, second team captain, club captain and honorary historian.

While Drakeford moved back to London last year, his impact on Chinese rugby lives on. He co-founded rugby leagues in Shanghai and Beijing, as well as the Yellow Sea Cup – a three-team tournament between Beijing, Shanghai and the Seoul Survivors.

Smartly declaring himself both a Beijing Devil and a Shanghai Hairy Crab, Drakeford fondly recalls being on the sidelines as Shanghai defeated his former squad to capture their last Yellow Sea Cup in 2009. However, he admits his most memorable on-field moment in Shanghai colors is still legendary, albeit unfortunately.

"I went to score a try but it wasn't the try line," he chuckles. "I put the ball down but there was no reaction. I did it again and then the opposition came and took the ball away. Then there was a reaction."

It's a Rough Game but Good Sport is published by Earnshaw Books and is available at Garden Books, the Shanghai Rugby Football Club and the Peace Hotel.