



SUN PHOTOS BY THOMAS NELSON

What looks like a full-fledged football brawl is really a rugby scrum as players from Cleveland Area Touring Side and the Detroit Tradesmen battle for possession of the ball.

It's a cold Saturday in the park

Rugby CATS move up the competition ladder at Humphrey playing field

By PAUL SVIGEL
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They lock arms in mortal combat dressed in uniforms right out of World War II.

They toss and chase an overinflated white or black football around like it was a greased pig.

For all the world, they'd look right at home in an Old Spice commercial.

As the winds whip up off the lake near Humphrey Park, grown men are getting cold and dirty playing the sport they love — rugby.

Chesterland's Carl Vella and several of his Bowling Green State University teammates didn't feel like giving up the sport they played in college, so they formed one of the three area clubs.

There's the Cleveland Rovers, the Cleveland Rugby Club, and Vella's Cleveland Area Touring Side.

"There was the Bay Area Touring Side (BATS), so I figured why not the CATS," Vella joked.

Seven teams vied in the annual Cleveland Cup Tournament Memorial Day Weekend, with the Rovers claiming the Cup. Proceeds from the event benefitted the National Head Injury Foundation.

Rugby is a sport played on a field 120 yards long and 70 yards wide. Touchdowns, or "trys," are worth five points and extra point kicks count for two. A field goal, like in football, nets three points.

Scrum, or faceoffs, start play and the game becomes a series of hot potatoes as teams try to lateral the ball down the field.

"We play an A set (varsity) and B set (second team) game each week," Vella said. "The game is two 40-minute halves with no timeouts and with just three substitutions."

"The game is played with 15 players per team and everybody is eligible. There's no equipment and no forward passing. It's continuous action."

There are eight forwards and seven backs in action. Forwards are like linemen and have names like prop, hooker, breakaway, lock and number eight.

Backs can also be named scrum half, standoff, inside center, outside center and wing.

"What we try to do is get the ball to the backs and create an overload. They can run until they think they're going to be tackled and then they can kick the ball or lateral it."

After winning the Junior Division title in the United States Midwest League the past three years, The CATS have had a tough time of it in the Senior Division (Midwest Division I Northeast).

The team dropped to 1-5 with the 31-11 lost to Detroit and will close its regular season at 1 p.m. Saturday against the Pittsburgh Harlesquinns at Humphrey Park.

"Most of our players are young and probably average 24 years old. Most of the teams in the division average about 28 years old," coach Robin Norton said.

The leading scorers on the team are fullback John Lonsert of Indian Lake and loose forward Al Caserta of Mayfield Heights.

Local players on the A set are club president Ed Cvelbar of Euclid, Tim Eppich of Euclid and Steve Prelock of South Euclid.

Players in rugby are truly comrades in arms, right down to the officials. The game is officiated by one striped shirt and two touch judges.

Officials are only compensated by the league when they travel.

The players pay \$60 at the beginning of the year for expenses. With

Akron, Pittsburgh, Canton and Detroit in the league, the host team is expected to provide a postgame spread for all competitors.

In the case of the last Detroit visit, CATS provided a keg of beer and food for an after-game party at the Euclid Beach Tavern.

Vella has between 30 and 40 players in the club and wants to get back to the business of winning again.

Many of the players qualified for national tournaments in college and have succeeded at the junior level.

The goal each year is to qualify for the Midwest Championships, this year to be held Nov. 4 in Pittsburgh.

For fans wanting one last glance at the sport, Humphrey Sports Complex is located at E. 161st Street and Grovewood Avenue in Cleveland.



Dave Millett of Cleveland Area Touring Side tries to keep possession of the ball as Detroit players head up field at Humphrey Park.



The pack converges on a CATS ball carrier as he tries to get outside and advance the ball down field against Detroit. The Tradesmen won the rugby match, 31-11.



No, it's not a blocked field goal or punt attempt. It's John Lonsert trying to advance the ball down field for CATS, while a Detroit defender has other ideas.