

Diplomats Find Washington Venues for Rugby, Polo, Cricket *by Alan B. Nichols*

Rugby, polo and cricket are time-honored sports played much more commonly overseas than on U.S. shores. For foreign dignitaries and others in the Washington-based diplomatic corps, it might seem that the chances to play these sports would be rare. But a closer investigation reveals that in the Washington area, these ancient games are not only running, but breaking a sweat.

Every year since 1996, two stalwart teams of rugby players—representing some of New Zealand's and America's finest—kick, scrum and maul on the "pitch" (field) on the campus of Hyde Leadership Public Charter School in Northeast Washington.

Dubbed the "Ambassador's Shield Rugby Match," the game was initiated by New Zealand Ambassador John Wood, an erstwhile keen player in his country's amateur and semi-pro leagues. Rugby is New Zealand's national sport, and Wood wanted to stage a distinctively Kiwi event that would also promote rugby in the United States. The event—which attracted some 4,000 spectators at the 2002 game (about 50 attended the inaugural event in 1997)—is also a fundraising vehicle for the Hyde Leadership School's youth rugby program.

The game pits New Zealand diplomats and other Kiwis residing in the United States against an all-star team from the Mid-Atlantic Rugby Football Union (MARFU). For MARFU, the Ambassador's Shield serves as a prep match for the National All-Star Championship matches held in Florida during the summer, which comprises all-stars from the Rugby Union's seven territories and the U.S. military.

For Wood, the game—which in a few short years has gone from a "backyard" scrimmage to a bona fide major sporting event—is a kind of diplomatic tour de force, helping to draw attention to his nation.

Since 1987, rugby has had a World Cup competition that, like its soccer counterpart, draws millions of spectators. This year's World Cup matches will be held in Australia, and if form holds, New Zealand will again prevail. The sport was founded at the Rugby School in Warwickshire, England, after which the sport was named. Although it was the English who defined the first rules and set the early style of play, it was New Zealand that took the sport to a higher level with its trademark aggressive physical style, which stresses continuous ball movement and supreme fitness.

"Statistics show that the majority of games are won or lost in the last quarter," said Wood, "when stamina becomes crucial to the outcome."

To most of us, the terms chukka, bump, tailshot, hook and ride-off have little significance, but a group of sportsmen and women know them well. These are the polo players of the Washington area, some of whom also work at area embassies.

In polo, players ride full-size horses (called ponies) and wield long mallets to hit a hard ball into a 24-foot-wide goal. The field is 300 yards long and 160 yards wide. Polo is the world's oldest known team game and is believed to have originated in ancient Persia around 600 B.C. It was played in Byzantium, China, Japan, Tibet and India, where it came to the attention of British colonialists.

Today, it is played in some 48 countries around the world, most notably Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Great Britain, the United States and Pakistan—nations known for producing great equestrians. Noting that polo was more than just a sport but a doorway to diplomacy, Winston Churchill once said, "A polo handicap is your passport to the world."

In the Washington area, a number of clubs—including the Potomac Polo Club and the Great

Meadow Polo Club—sponsor matches, inviting teams from around the United States and overseas. Many of these matches are charity events.

One charity match of note is the Range Rover International Polo Classic. The inaugural classic was to have been held in September 2001, but it was canceled due to 9/11. The first match proceeded in June 2002 at Chetwood Park in The Plains, Va. Chetwood Park is the estate of Stephen Seager, a veterinarian who is using his research on animals with spinal cord injuries to study reproductive fertility of spinal cord-injured men at the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Washington.

The match, which pitted a British team against an American team, was organized to raise funds for the hospital. This year, plans are to stage the event again in June at Chetwood, and organizers are considering renaming the match the International Ambassadors' Cup.

The Ambassadors' Cup has a historical precedent. Ambassador Marion Smoak, the U.S. chief of protocol from 1972 to 1974, has long been an avid polo player. While he was at the State Department, he organized an international polo competition, bringing in some of the world's greatest players. The idea was to promote international goodwill in a sporting event and a gracious setting, and to the winner of the match went a grand Chief of Protocol Trophy.

Countries participating in these early matches included South Africa, New Zealand and Great Britain. The match evolved into a U.S.-Great Britain duel for a number of years, after which the cup was discontinued.

The Potomac Polo Club, based in Maryland, has regularly sponsored charity matches, attracting top-tier players from around the world. A particularly noteworthy match sponsored by the club is the Taste of Argentine Cup, which benefits The Children's Hospital in Buenos Aires.

Much of the credit for the success of the cup match goes to the Argentine Embassy in Washington, according to Charlie Muldoon, club president and diplomatic sales manager at the Madison Hotel. "Embassies go out of their way to put on great polo matches, especially when it involves raising funds for charity," Muldoon said.

Like polo, cricket is enjoyed by a relatively small but very active group of players in the Washington area. The leading cricket organization in the area is the Washington Cricket League, which is made up of some 26 local clubs that compete against each other over a season that spans from April to September.

Cricket's origins are obscure, but some theorize that shepherds first began playing the game centuries ago to entertain themselves while they watched their flocks. Others think the game started in churchyards. The first recognizable reference to cricket occurred in England during the 1300s.

At one time, the Indian, Pakistani, British and Australian embassies led an organization called the Massachusetts Avenue Cricket League, but the league folded after support fell off, according to Deepak Patel, a project director at the Fairfax County Department of Public Works.

According to Patel, the Indian and British embassies played a "friendly" game in 2002. Though by no means a threat to displace soccer, Patel said that cricket nevertheless is becoming quite popular in countries that never used to play it. These include the Netherlands, Canada, the United States and nations in the Middle East.

Alan B. Nichols is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Md.