

Hyde Enters the Scrum

Rugby Takes Hold, Changes Lives at D.C. School

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Tal Bayer is a self-described rugby junkie, and it did not take long for his students at Hyde Leadership Public Charter School to figure it out. He plastered the walls of his classroom with posters of rugby stars. He answered their inquisitive questions about the sport. He tossed the large, oblong ball around with anybody who would join him outside after school.

It wasn't long after arriving in 1999 as a math teacher that Bayer got the idea to start a varsity rugby team at the inner-city charter school just off Michigan Avenue in Northeast. He was convinced rugby could benefit his students in the same way it helped turn around his life in high school. Bayer also saw an opportunity to increase minority participation in a sport dominated by white players in the United States.

Three years later, Hyde is the only all-black rugby team competing in the 18-school Potomac Rugby Conference, which includes Georgetown Prep, DeMatha and Gonzaga. Some players have attended summer camps sponsored by USA Rugby, the sport's governing body. Others have been selected to the conference's all-tournament teams.

Two Hyde players have been invited to the 50-player national trial camp in Detroit on Labor Day weekend with the hope of making the U.S. under-19 team, which will travel to the Youth World Cup in South Africa in February 2004.

"We have had African-American kids in the league from day one, but they would be a minority on their particular team," said Lee Kelly, who directs the area's high school rugby league for the Potomac Rugby Union. "I think [Bayer] has done a fantastic job with those kids. I believe it's more than just a game to him. He's opening up a part of the world that those kids would otherwise not get to experience."

Hyde's rugby team, like most new high school sports programs, has struggled in its early seasons. The Lions lost all 14 games in their inaugural season in 2001 and went 12-12 in 2002. This past spring, the Lions went 6-12 with a young squad.

"We were terrible" in 2001, Bayer said. "There was a lot of trash-talking by the guys about how they were going to crush our first opponent with hits. But on the bus coming back from the game, there was dead silence. We lost 65-0 with . . . only two weeks of practice with kids who had never played the sport before."

There have been other tough games since, but every so often, Hyde produces a special moment. One came against three-time defending league champion Gonzaga in March -- after a penalty, the Lions' Patrick Komongnan snapped up the ball, ran 110 yards and rolled into the end zone just beyond the outstretched arms of the last defender chasing him.

The Lions' momentum did not last long, as Gonzaga struck back quickly with two more scores and eventually won, 48-5. Although disappointed by the loss, the Hyde players knew Komongnan's score was an indication that Hyde had taken another baby step toward narrowing the gap they face.

"We knew they couldn't catch us on the outside because of our speed," said Komongnan, one of the two players who will attend the Detroit tryouts. "It feels good to score against opponent like Gonzaga. Sometimes, we just want to prove that we can play the sport, too. My teammates and I hate to lose, but we're establishing something here. That takes time."

Despite a rough regular season, Hyde has excelled in summer tournaments, where teams field only seven players. The Lions finished second to the Maryland Exiles in May as host of an eight-team tournament, which featured strong area programs Gonzaga and Episcopal. Two weeks later, in the Severn River Battle by the Bay Tournament, coaches Bayer and John Robinette joined their squad and entered the men's division, where the Lions defeated the Maryland Exiles II for the championship. Hyde then avenged its earlier loss by defeating the Exiles in June.

Summer tournaments have "the same size field, but with less than half the number of players," Bayer said. "With that kind of space and speed, it's difficult for a team to defend against us. We practiced hard at sevens, where most high school don't do that. We know if we can move the ball quickly and get our wheels, it's bye-bye people."

Bayer, 32, started playing rugby after he was kicked off his soccer team while at Lake Braddock High. He joined the West End Rugby Club as a way to stay in shape and remain in a competitive sport. He was a member of the West End team that placed fifth at the high school national rugby championship in 1989, and went on to play at Radford University.

"There is a certainly camaraderie about rugby," said Bayer, who is now Hyde's athletic director. "To this day, most of my best friends have come from playing the game. It has allowed me to make contacts that have proven valuable throughout my professional career, and I have traveled places that I would never have gone without having played the sport."

Bayer's push to get high schoolers to try rugby at Hyde shadows a national trend. The total number of rugby teams rose 7 percent nationwide in 2001 (the most recent year for which data is available) with two-thirds of the growth coming from youth club teams,

according to latest figures available from Rugby Magazine. The number of boys' youth club teams increased from 267 to 337 in 2001.

"I wish I had the opportunity to play the game as a kid like [Hyde players] do," said Don Ferrell, an African American who is an assistant coach for the rugby club at Penn State and the U.S. under-19 national team. "There are a lot of brown faces playing the sport overseas. But as it becomes more available in high schools in the U.S., more students may be willing to give it a try."

Bayer has a budget from the school to pay for referees, transportation and uniforms. The Washington Rugby Club, of which he is a member, donated the goal posts at an estimated cost of \$4,000. He even got friends from the club to help seed and landscape the field behind the school.

He is always engaged in fundraisers, with proceeds helping to send players to rugby camps. Most recently, 12 players were able to attend the USA Rugby summer camp from July 10 to 13 in Strasburg, Pa.

In February, Bayer took five players to a three-day camp at Penn State. Several players have attended the summer camp sponsored by USA Rugby at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. This summer, Carroll High alumni have invited several Hyde players to compete on their team, the Flying Lions.

The work has paid off as several current players -- including Komongnan, Joshua Williamson, David Gaddie, Robert Cain, J'rah Harper-Douglass and T.J. Brown -- have been selected to the all-tournament teams.

"It was a great opportunity to meet new people and to learn skills that I didn't have before," said Gaddie, a 2003 Hyde graduate who attended the camp in Colorado last summer. "I saw all these people and didn't realize that many people played rugby. Once I got into it, the training was similar to Hyde. Just as serious."

But Bayer does not simply focus on the competition with his players. He views the team as a way to help his players stay in school, improve their attitudes and chances for success in the future. Many of the players have come to Hyde after running into trouble at District public schools.

Komongnan was drafted onto the team after Bayer caught him throwing broken glass on the field during practice.

"The team has really helped me understand how to deal with people," Komongnan said. "I've learned how to react better in difficult situations. I've learned how to support others, and in turn, receive their support."

Bayer also arranges a spring break trip each year, with Hyde traveling for games in several cities along the East Coast. This year, the team made its first stop in Katonah, N.Y., where it played the Harvey School. Hyde players and coaches stayed overnight in the home of Priceline.com founder Jay Walker and met John Walsh, host of the television series "America's Most Wanted," whose son played for Harvey.

On the final day, the team traveled to Warwick, R.I., for a mini touch tournament on the beach with players from Bishop Hendricken High. Afterward, the players returned to the home of Bishop Hendricken's coach for a seafood cookout.

"I'd never been inside a house like that," junior T.J. Brown said. "Then, we got to hang out with the kids in Warwick and go to the mall. It was trip I'll never forget. It wasn't so much about playing, but getting a chance to interact with new people and have some fun. That's what being a part of this team is all about."

Only a handful of Lions have significant experience playing the game. Some players have excelled in other sports -- mostly football, basketball, soccer and golf. The remainder have been lured by the thrill of trying something new.

Junior Joshua Lee Williamson Jr. has played football for the Lions since arriving at the school three years ago. As a middle linebacker, he rarely got the chance to touch the ball. But that has changed since he took up rugby as a freshman.

"It's nonstop, constant motion," said Williamson, a team captain. "You can involve everybody in ball-handling. The sport is like therapy to me. I feel like by playing we're opening up opportunities for other minorities to see us and think maybe they can play this game, too."