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## The Unlikely Scrum

By WILL BARDENWERPER

WASHINGTON — The rugby practice field at Hyde Leadership Public Charter School bears little resemblance to the manicured lawns of the English boarding school where the sport was born. It is more brown than green, and sirens sometimes drown out the shouts of players. Then there are the occasional interruptions, like when play was briefly halted during a recent practice as a man darted about wildly on a nearby street, calling football plays and evading imaginary tacklers.

But this patch of mud and grass is more than the home of what is believed to be the nation's first all-African-American high school rugby team. It is also where a growing number of students have been exposed to a sport they once knew nothing about and to parts of society that once seemed closed to them.

Hyde players have a hard time explaining rugby to friends who do not attend their school and who do not know much about the sport. Others say things like, "You're crazy, that's a white person's sport," said Lawrenn Lee, a senior on the team. One parent, Clifford Lancaster, recalled his reaction when his son Salim announced he was going to play: "My eyes got this big. I said, 'That's a wild sport.' "

The man most responsible for all of this is Tal Bayer, 38.

After several unfulfilling years in finance, Bayer became the first teacher hired when Hyde opened in 1999. He said he rejected his mother's admonition that becoming a teacher would leave him "broke and miserable." After a recent practice, Bayer smiled and said, "I am broke but far from miserable."

He never imagined Hyde would have a rugby program. But from the start, students would ask him why he sometimes appeared in class with black eyes and other minor injuries. He explained they were the result of rugby tournaments. The students had never heard of rugby, so Bayer invited them to a pick-up game after school. Those informal games led to the birth of a team in 2000. It began with 15 students. Now, 45 of the high school's 110 boys play.

The first season was dismal. Hyde lost every game by more than 60 points. Bayer even encountered some difficulty scheduling games with teams from more affluent suburbs.

One private school attempted to back out of a game without offering a reason. After some prodding, Bayer said, he learned the opponents "were concerned that the kids would be driving expensive cars to the game and were worried that they would be broken into."

Desperate to establish his program, Bayer instead bused his students to the leafy suburban campus. Hyde now hosts that opponent regularly — a development that Bayer described as another "barrier that rugby has broken down."

Hyde is strapped for resources. The team lacks a suitable field, and its weight room consists of two donated benches jammed into an already cramped locker room. One rival, Gonzaga College High School, a local Catholic school that edged Hyde to win the city championship in 2007, has more boys in its rugby program than Hyde has in its entire school. Nonetheless, Hyde has become one of the city's top programs, finishing second out of seven teams in the Metro Area Varsity Rugby Conference last year. Even more important, Bayer and his players said, is how rugby has exposed them to experiences and opportunities.

"Rugby brings the world to you and you to the world," Alex Pettiford, a sophomore, said.

All sports can help break down racial and cultural barriers, but certain elements of rugby make it especially suited. With its raw physicality and traditional postgame bonding, rugby forces an intimacy among opponents not found in many other sports.

Because rugby players wear no equipment, Bayer said, they compete "right there, eye to eye, face to face." Then they hang out with their competitors. Still, Hyde's players have encountered ugliness. Bayer recalled a trip to New England, where only five families agreed to host his players. It is customary for host-team families to invite visiting players to stay with them.

"They didn't know what to expect from this group of black kids from the inner city," Bayer said. After watching an afternoon of touch rugby on the beach, and noticing how the Hyde players conducted themselves, he said, "all of a sudden, the parents were fighting to host a player."

The team has also been on the receiving end of generosity. While visiting Dallas on a shoestring budget for the 2004 high school national championships, the Hyde players subsisted on a fast-food diet. Parents from Gonzaga noticed, and the school's booster club offered to help.

P. J. Komongnan, a player on that squad who has returned to Hyde to serve as an assistant coach, smiled as he remembered how the Gonzaga parents took everyone to a rodeo and dinner. Komongnan has since played on the United States National Rugby Sevens team — which competes in a faster-paced version of the sport with smaller teams — and has traveled the world for the game. He credits the sport with helping to turn his life around after he had been kicked out of four schools before enrolling at Hyde.

"Rugby has taken me places I've never imagined going, and I'm thankful when I can go to places where I don't always have to duck and dive," he said.

Players do not always instantly embrace the sport. Some, like Ernest Pearson, go out for the team only to start skipping practices.

Bayer recalled Pearson's excuses for his absences, like having to hurry home to attend to "my sick, pregnant cat." After repeated entreaties from Bayer to stick with it, Pearson went on to excel. He played for Ursinus College and returned to Hyde, where he recently succeeded Bayer as the athletic director.

The differences between his players' backgrounds and his own is not lost on Bayer. One afternoon in 2003, he and his players discovered a body in some high grass near their field. The gruesome sight left Bayer shaken, but he noticed that most players seemed unmoved. Soon, the players were sharing dead-body stories, leaving him to reflect on "how tough it must be to be a kid in this city and maintain any kind of

innocence.”

Some players marvel at the ability of Bayer, a bald-headed white man approaching his 40s, to relate to them. Pettiford joked that some “wondered if Coach was white or black because of the way he interacts with us.”

Hyde players are accustomed to being pioneers. Salim Lancaster and a fellow sophomore, Antoine Johnson, barely thought it was worth noting that they were the only two African-American players at a rugby camp in California last summer. Just getting to Berkeley proved to be a challenge because neither had been on an airplane before. They barely made their flight after Johnson went to the wrong airport and Lancaster’s ride failed to appear.

Lancaster said he was initially a little nervous on the plane, although he settled in and took advantage of the airline’s satellite television service, tuning in to — what else — international rugby.

He rises at 4:30 a.m. to make it to Hyde on time every day. Between rugby and school, he said, “I don’t have time to get in trouble.” Relaxing in his southeast Washington apartment with his family on a recent Friday night, he said going out with friends was the last thing on his mind. There was a game on Sunday, anyway.

That game was part of the annual Ambassador’s Shield tournament, sponsored by the New Zealand Embassy. The embassy has been a friend to the Hyde program, promoting New Zealand’s national sport while helping raise money for the school’s team.

Hyde lost the game, but the players enjoyed the international atmosphere and were impressed by the New Zealand expatriates who played later in the afternoon. Mathew Brown, a Hyde senior, provided the ultimate seal of approval, saying, “Those Samoans are ballers,” as a New Zealand player of Samoan descent took off down the field.

Afterward, the team attended a reception at the New Zealand embassy. While diplomats and representatives from USA Rugby sipped cocktails and mingled, the Hyde players escaped the formalities and gathered outside. One of them found a rugby ball. Before long, he was teaching youngsters how to play on the moonlit lawn.

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