



Ruck and Roll

Think rugby is just a sport for broad-shouldered men? We cry foul on that. Read on for a female player's insight into the sport, and some need-to-knows about the high-energy game just ahead of the season, and the eagerly awaited return of the Dubai Rugby Sevens...

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

Often described as a hooligan's sport played by gentlemen, rugby sometimes gets a bad rap—especially when it comes to women. But who says it's just a man's game? With the same rules, the same-sized pitch, and the same equipment, women's rugby union is an identical sport to the men's version. But thanks to social pressures and the image of rugby union, the women's sport could do with a little more awareness, never mind some myths debunked.

And so last weekend, I found myself in a sports bar packed wall-to-wall with what can only be described as keen rugby fanatics. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intimidated—but I needn't have been: The bar, which also happened to play host to Australian rugby legend Matt Burke that evening, was filled with friendly enthusiasts only too eager to explain the basic rules of the game to me, and fill me in on the many victories and downfalls of their teams.

Thankfully, there are a considerable amount of women out there who are not only keen fans who know every in and out of the sport, but play it with passion. And so I found myself turning to Amy Garnett, a former English Rugby Union Player—who played for Women's Premiership team Saracens Women as a hooker and was the first player to earn 100 caps for the England women's national rugby union team—to find out what it was really like to get involved and play the sport.

"I first started playing at Liverpool John Moores University in 1994, when a friend introduced me to rugby," she says. Amy—who actually works as a police officer—never let the fact that it's known as a very male-dominated sport faze her. "To be honest, it never crossed my mind when I started playing, and has rarely since. I was surrounded only by positive coaches, team mates, managers and ground staff, who all loved playing the game, regardless of who was playing it. I still consider myself an athlete in every way. I didn't get paid, but every other aspect of training and preparation was completely professional." It was an endlessly rewarding experience for Amy: "I have the usual highlights: My first cap (pulling on that white shirt for the first time), my 50th cap against France in the quarter finals in the 2006 World Cup (one of those games where everything I touched turned to gold—it never usually happens like that), and of course my very last game, and 100th cap in August 2011 in the Nations Cup Final against Canada in Toronto. To surprise me, my mum flew out to watch, all the way to Toronto for two days, and

we won.” Then there was the tour to Australia and New Zealand in 2001, where Amy and her team were the curtain raiser for the All Blacks vs Samoa at North Harbour stadium, playing in front of a capacity crowd and beating the Black Ferns for the first time in 10 years. Or the time they won the Premiership title and National Cup just last year for Saracens, having come out of retirement and thinking she was just going to be coaching at the beginning of the season.

“There were always challenges, training to be at your best to keep hold of your shirt and hold down a full-time job. It is a constant physical, mental and emotional roller coaster of a ride, as any athlete in any sport will tell you,” Amy says. “The game involves power, strength, agility, finesse, flare, speed, mental toughness, intelligence, trust, team work and contact. What other game in this world showcases all those skills and traits? Get involved; not only will you get strong (mentally and physically) and fit, but you will make friendships for life,” she adds, saying that playing the sport makes her very proud. “I consider myself very lucky to have discovered something that I love and that I happened to be pretty good at,” she says, continuing: “It’s not until you retire that you realise that it isn’t about the extrinsic rewards but the intrinsic rewards. Cheesy I know, but it’s the true, greatest rewards like friendship, pride and love.”

Dubai-based former professional rugby player, Fleur Healy, agrees that the camaraderie is one of the best aspects of the sport: “It’s not a sport you can just show up to and play on a weekly basis. No-one can play it alone—there is a real feeling of team support, because you have to rely on each other so much and it really takes a team effort.” Fleur—a mum of three who made captain just two years into taking up the sport, and who has played both for Dubai’s Jebel Ali Dragons and the UAE Women’s Rugby Sevens team—was never intimidated by the idea of playing either. Having grown up around

HARDER, BETTER, FASTER, STRONGER

Training for rugby and want to improve? Taif Delamie, rugby coach and former captain of Dragons Rugby Club and the National Team, plus a Strength and Conditioning Specialist and Sports Scientist at Up and Running Dubai (upandrunningdubai.com), shares his top tips:

◦ Your training needs to be specific to what happens in a match. Generally, you work for approximately 30 seconds before a break and during that 30 seconds, you need to be moving forward, backward, side to side and taking contact. A lot of your training should replicate this, so running for an hour in a straight line isn’t going to be of huge benefit to you on the pitch.

◦ Get the ball in your hand as much as possible: Skills, skills skills!

◦ Watch a few games: The Men’s Rugby World Cup is on now. The best teams and players in the world are on show and there’s a lot you can learn from them.

◦ Mental training is just as important as physical training. Visualise making a tackle, scoring a try, where you should be and what

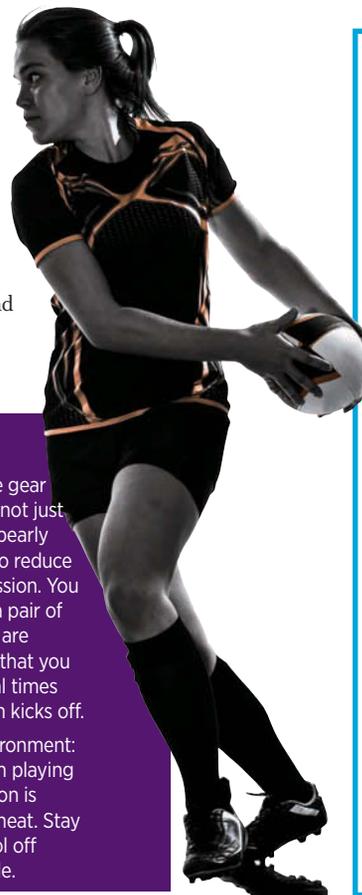
you should do at kick offs, lineouts, scrums, and you will be better prepared on the day.

◦ Whether you need to bulk up or trim down and lose some body fat, your nutrition is extremely important to your performance. For more energy and ideal body type, you will need to focus not just on your match day nutrition but your daily diet.

the sport, thanks to her brother and father, she also has a military background and, as such, it fit in easily to her active and sporty lifestyle. “Yes, it’s a contact sport, but if you’re trained to tackle and handle it properly, you’ll be fine. It can be daunting to watch, but once you’ve tried it, and you’ve felt that adrenaline rush, you’re stuck in,” she says. The physicality is another part of the appeal, Fleur explains. “To play rugby will push you to your limits. You don’t get that in your everyday life. You don’t realise how strong you can be. Don’t be scared to get involved; part of the beauty of this sport is that there really is a position for everyone, no matter what shape or size you are,” she says. And what if you just want to watch it? Fleur says it’s a must-try, insisting that

it’s surprisingly easy to follow once you know a few rules. “The passion of each game, and all of the players, is unmatched—there’s something honourable, old-school and heroic about it. It’s just like nothing else out there!” ■

The Emirates Airline Dubai Rugby Sevens is from December 3rd to 5th. Tickets start from Dhs300 (with free admission for kids under the age of 12). To learn more, visit DubaiRugby7s.com.



SACK THE STIGMA

Taif Delamie debunks the 5 top rugby misconceptions:

> “YOU NEED TO BE BIG!”

Rugby is unique in that it caters for a wide variety of body types, as different positions on the pitch are suited to different sizes.

> “RUGBY PLAYERS JUST RUN INTO EACH OTHER!”

“Spaces not faces” was what I was always taught when you are running with the ball.

> “IT’S ONLY FOR BOYS!” Not true—come down to the Dubai 7s and you’ll see plenty of women’s teams playing a great standard of rugby.

> “RUGBY IS A VERY DANGEROUS SPORT” While the physical contact can lead to higher injury rates versus a sport such as badminton, if you adhere to the injury tips (left) you will reduce those chances.

> “THERE IS TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON THE SOCIAL SIDE OF RUGBY” ...Okay, there may be some truth to this one!

Hustle, injury-free

Playing rugby can get rough, but it doesn’t have to be dangerous. Taif shares his guide to playing it injury-free...

◦ It’s a multi-directional sport, so you need to train to confidently change direction quickly. Your training needs to be specific to the sport. A touch rugby match would be better for your specific conditioning than an hour-long jog.

◦ Get down to pre-season

training, since increased fatigue increases the risk of injury. With a solid base of fitness developed before your first competitive games, you will reduce the chance of injury.

◦ Technique practices are key, particularly in tackling, at the break down, and in the scrum. If you are a new player, these techniques should be taught in a progressive manner.

◦ Wear protective gear like a gumshield, not just to protect those pearly whites, but also to reduce the risk of concussion. You should also find a pair of rugby boots that are comfortable and that you have worn several times before the season kicks off.

◦ Know your environment: The big issue with playing rugby in this region is dealing with the heat. Stay hydrated and cool off whenever possible.