Rice's rugby match is a scrum show

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Last Thursday, while the world slept (or, more probably, while the world frantically put finishing touches on the last of hundreds of overdue papers or crammed for the last exam before the start of spring vacation, a known event), a little noticed event of world-shaking importance took place in venerable Rice Stadium: the first international rugby match ever held in Rice Stadium.

Yes, dear reader, when the home team, composed of the cream of the Baylor Medical School, the University of Texas Dental School, and, of course, the Flight's Rice Owls, and coached by Dr. Gun-ner of the history department, took the field against a team from a British Frigate docked at the Ship Channel amid tumultuous applause from the 500 or so wildly enthusiastic fans jamming Rice Stadium, (most of whom weren't quite sure what was going on-they'd merely been curious about the cause of all the excitement) the astounding thing was not that the good guys, (i.e., the home team) won handsily, not that during the game it was announced that two rival rugby leagues had been formed, but that the game was played here in our own humble ball park, instead of in Boy Hofland's great hamhouse-in-the-sky.

Theoretical object

Rugby is a strange sport which, though it has certain similarities to soccer, football, and street brawling, provides a brand of excitement all its own. The most obvious aspect of the game is to touch down the ball on the other side of your opponent's goal line, (or failing this, to kick it through the uprights (which, since the game was played on a football field, strangely resembled football goalposts), in exchange for which the team doing the aforementioned receives either two or three points. An equally worthy objective, however, or so it seems, is to keep the ball on your side of the field in approximately the same physical condition as you entered it. In fact, after only a few minutes we immediately perceived why the game is so popular among pro-men (fully half the people in the stands were future-doctors, each equipped with his little black bag-possibly the med school assigned the game as a lab). Strange rules

Although, as mentioned above, the object of the game is to advance the ball across your opponent's goal line, the rules of the game, as far as we could see, seem designed specifically to prevent crossing this line. For example, the ball may not be advanced forward except by kicking, which is just as well, since the ball, despite a certain amount of magic, is too awkward to pass with any degree of accuracy, any forward pass tending to resemble a severely wounded animal.

As a matter of fact, apparently there are an enormous number of things that you can't do in rugby, for the referee would from time to time allow a penalty kick for some foul or other (the nature of the foul is not explained by the bystanders: the only thing we ever managed to hear the referee say while administering a penalty was: "You should know better than that.") Perhaps the most interesting thing about the sport, though, is the names of the positions. First,

each team is divided into the "scrum" (roughly equivalent to the line in football) and the "backfield" (roughly equivalent, interestingly enough, to the backfield in football); a major difference is that the scrum has right players and the backfield has seven.

Prop, lock, and hooker

Among the most important players in the scrum are the "props" (right and left, of course), the "lock," the "hooker" (who sounds like he should be arrested for passing out marijuana on street corners) and the "backsawhers" (left and right), who perform God knows what function.

Although the names of the backfield men are considerably less fascinating, they include the "scrum half," the "wings," the "standoff" (perhaps he comes from one of the nobler families?), and the "center 3/4" a name that defies explanation while encouraging speculation.

Needless to say, to be called "the scrum of the earth" is indeed a compliment.

Lateral of successes

The game is rough and violent, tackling being the accepted form of defense, and no one pays; in the fine British tradition, however, it is considered only sporting to apologize to a fellow after splattering his frail body on the earth.

But there is plenty of action: the most common way of advancing the ball is for one man to carry it, and lateral before he is tackled to a man behind him (a move that would cause any football coach to have nightmares), who then laterally when he is tackled, and so on until there is no one left to lateral to (Needless to say, Chuck Lateral-ette would excel at this), at which time a scrum magically forms, and the game is off again.

British sportmanship

The British type of sportmanship becomes evident when you realize the referee has complete control of the game, a substitute player, for example, is required to ask the referee's permission before entering the game. Although there are no time outs, in this now-celebrated contest, there was a long, inexplicable pause which put a lasts among the knowledgeable fans; as it happened, the discussion was over who had brought the post-game refreshments.

Rugby, to be sure, could provide a much-needed sport in America, or at least a sideline for the lightweight player with a flair for broken field running: the type of player which specialized football with its emphasis on size, as well as speed, now is unable to utilize.

Staggering vistas

Vast vistas, then, open up for Rice's athletic future. Since rugby players would be somewhat difficult to recruit for a few years, surely the University could follow the example of the two recently formed soccer leagues and buy an entire team from England to represent Rice for the first two or three years, or until sufficient interest is generated to enable America to produce its own rugby-players. In addition to producing needed funds for the University, the sport would provide a common link for alumni, as well as many other important and beneficial functions.

The next step, of course, would be to form a Rice University fishing team.