

Rugby at Fordham Prep: The Successful Revival of a High School Program

By Carlo DiNota '85

Sporting events were underway everywhere on Fordham's Rose Hill campus on a bright Thursday afternoon early this May - baseball, track, lacrosse, tennis. But nothing was as big as the rugby match at Murphy Field between two long-time high school rivals, Fordham Prep and Xavier, which brimmed with energy and excitement.

Parents and supporters of Fordham Prep's 110-player rugby team were seemingly everywhere, with cameras, lawn chairs, and picnic baskets. Fordham's Varsity XV had entered the game a clear underdog to their Jesuit archrival and perennial national powerhouse, Xavier High School. Down 14 points at the half, Fordham stormed back to tie the game with five minutes remaining, only to lose on a penalty kick before the final whistle.

It was a proud and gutsy Fordham performance. And judging by the caliber of play, Fordham's huge squad, the professionalism of its coaches, and impressive fan turnout, Fordham Prep rugby was on very solid footing.

Tough Early Years

Yet twenty-eight years earlier, an article in *Rugby Magazine's* September 1985 issue reported that the Fordham program - then coach-less, broke, and orphaned - was on the verge of extinction.

I know because I was the author of that piece.

As a graduating high school senior, I was upset at the neglect of Fordham Prep Rugby. Neglect not only by the school administration, but also by the community of New York-area men's clubs that had chosen "to turn their backs on high school rugby."

The recent renaissance of rugby at Fordham Prep is remarkable, considering that the sport had been completely erased from the school's extracurricular catalog by 1989.

Exploring the program's pedigree, however, may offer clues as to its resurgence.

Fordham Prep RFC: Founded 1976

Fordham Prep Rugby is steeped in New York City rugby tradition. Its family tree can be traced to the Old Maroon RFC (which would later become OMEG), founded by Fordham Prep graduates and Fordham University players. Fran Cunningham '67, a Prep assistant football coach, had been playing for Old Maroon in the mid-1970s when he invited Fran Perdisatt, head coach of the Prep's football program, to some Old Maroon games. Perdisatt saw rugby as a

perfect spring conditioning sport for his football players. And in 1976, Cunningham and Perdisatt founded the Fordham Prep RFC with a miniscule budget.

“We always had enough players for two sides,” recalls Cunningham. “At the time, Tom O’Hara was trying to form Xavier’s program and St. Francis Prep was the only established team in the area. We designed our jerseys, practiced on a field on Southern Boulevard, and played at Randall’s Island. We were like a family.”

Says Sean Davey ’80: “Playing rugby in the late 70s was amazing. There were very few local high school teams (Fordham, Xavier, and St. Francis Prep), so in addition to playing each of the other teams three times a year, we had to travel outside of New York City to face new competition. Back then, the only nearby rugby pitches were on Randall’s Island, which were glass-strewn, with sewer caps scattered throughout. The fields were not level and wind from the East River frequently caused erratic kicking.”

Within two years, Fordham Prep’s fledging program had toured England (winning three matches) and twice visited Toronto. These tours led to return visits from Canadian and English teams, supplementing Fordham’s spring schedule.

Rugby’s Decline

After 1983, however, rugby at Fordham Prep went into decline. The 1985 *Rugby Magazine* article that I authored chronicled the program’s gradual demise and by the end of 1989, rugby at Fordham Prep was gone.

Fordham Prep’s Rugby Revival

Fast forward twenty-four years to 2013, and Fordham Prep Rugby is back with a well-organized and competitive program that is built for longevity. The initiative, cooperation, and planning among various constituencies that accomplished this comeback can serve as a “how-to” for U.S. high schools that might be considering rugby.

It started with a business proposal by two enterprising Fordham Prep athletes: football captain and 2010 Bronx/Manhattan Player of the Year Anthony Bronzo ’11 and his football teammate Mike Mahon ’12. According to Bronzo, now a junior at Tulane, where he plays both football and rugby, the two were wondering what to do next after defeating Xavier in the annual Fall Turkey Bowl football game, and capping a 10-win football season.

Skeptical that he would be recruited to play college football, Bronzo was on the lookout for a new sport, and rugby’s physical demands and camaraderie held great appeal.

For Mahon, who grew up in the heavily Irish, Woodlawn section of the Bronx, rugby was not unfamiliar. “I had seen a few Six Nations games and rugby seemed like fun,” said Mahon. Now a sophomore at the University of South Carolina, he is the starting #8 on the school’s rugby club.

The intense Fordham-Xavier sporting rivalry played a significant part in Fordham’s rugby revival. Says Bronzo, “After the 2010 Turkey Bowl football game, we decided that there was no reason Fordham shouldn’t have as successful a rugby program as Xavier has.”

According to Mike Mahon, Fordham Prep principal Robert Gomprecht asked the boys for a proposal after they approached him about reinstating rugby. Early in 2011, Bronzo and Mahon presented Gomprecht and Fr. Kenneth Boller, president of Fordham Prep, with a detailed business plan that covered everything from prospective coaches and insurance policies to field usage time and funding.

“They were shocked at how much research we had done,” says Bronzo, who is now majoring in finance and marketing at Tulane. “There was no way the administration thought two high school kids would get this done.”

But get it done, they did.

Despite Spring 2011 being a startup season with borrowed equipment and jerseys, the Fordham Prep RFC - then led by head coach Ed Tweedy - managed early success. With a respectable 40-man roster, they managed a runner-up finish in the Long Island Cup and a semifinal appearance in the Jersey Cup.

In 2012, Christian Mayo of Play Rugby, who helped coach, connected Fordham with NYAC flanker Neil McMillan. A former standout for Ulster (Ireland), McMillan was excited about the opportunity to coach a high school team. The impact of having a high level Irish player at the coaching helm, along with active parent and alumni support, became palpable in the success of the program. US Eagle flyhalf Toby L'Estrange is also part of McMillan's coaching staff.

In 2012, McMillan's first year, the team won the Jersey Cup and placed third in the Jesuit Cup. Their impressive 75-man 2012 roster then expanded to a jaw-dropping 110 players in 2013. In fact, there are not enough matches to accommodate each and every player from Fordham's two varsity sides, down to their JV and freshman teams. This year, Fordham finished third in the Met NY league and won the Jersey Cup for the second consecutive year.

Alumni Support

Sean Davey and another player from the 70s, John McCaffrey '78, have been instrumental in corralling alumni players to support Fordham Prep Rugby, while educating current players about the pride and sense of family among past Fordham ruggers.

McCaffrey coached Fordham Rugby in the early 80s, and his 1983 team, moderated by teacher Ferd Beck, fielded one of the best A-sides in team history. McCaffrey and Beck's players would go on to play for such collegiate rugby clubs as Yale, Boston College, Navy, Fairfield, Fordham, Villanova, Rhode Island, and Hartford. Up until now, the 1983 squad was the last great Fordham Prep rugby team.

Administrative Support

The importance of support from Fordham Prep's administration, in allowing the program to exist and grow, can't be understated. In the past, administration support seemed reluctant, non-committal, or non-existent.

Clearly, Fordham Rugby is succeeding today because of a more complete faculty and community buy-in. Says former coach Fran Perdisatt: "It's great to see the Prep prosper in its rugby development. Having the support of the Fordham Prep community - parents, teachers, administrators and alumni - is a winning combination for the school and should be a model for other private schools."

Current Program

- Fordham Prep currently fields four rugby teams: Varsity A, Varsity B, Junior Varsity and Freshman.
- There's a no-cut policy and students receive Varsity and JV letters.
- The team is comprised of crossover athletes from all of Fordham's fall sports, as well as those whose only high school sport is rugby.
- Coaches receive a small stipend for their services, and the school assists by arranging buses for their matches.

Parent Support

Indispensable to the resurgence of Fordham Prep Rugby is its very active Parent's Club, headed by Linda Costelloe, wife of assistant coach Joe Costelloe.

The Parent's Club has raised an impressive \$20k and holds an annual rugby fundraising dinner that taps into alumni and parent generosity (uniforms and equipment are acquired, in part, with these funds). The dinner has honored pioneers of Fordham rugby, such as Cunningham and Perdisatt, in order to bond current players with the program's proud past. Last February's dinner featured Eagle lock Brian Doyle and the year prior, Eagle scrumhalf Mike Petri.

Says Simon Walsh '83, who went on to play for the Yale, Old Blue, and Washington RFCs: "The students are doing a great job but the moms are off the charts. The mothers are a juggernaut. They've arranged fundraising dinners and raffles, planned trips and tournaments, and basically kept everything on track. That takes a lot of pressure off the kids."

"My inbox is inundated," says Linda Costelloe, as she describes the rapid-fire parental support she receives when asking for help on game day. Costelloe's long-term plan is to expand and refine her parent's group into a Gonzaga High School-like booster club.

Up and down the line - from players, coaches and alumni - all acknowledge that Fordham Prep Rugby would not have the bright future it has today if it weren't for the tireless efforts of Costelloe and the parents.

Xavier: Providing Help and Inspiration

Like Linda Costelloe, head coach McMillan looks to another Jesuit school, Xavier, for inspiration. And he is very clear on where he would like to see Fordham Prep Rugby in the not-too-distant future: "In three to four years' time, I would like Fordham to be on par with Xavier."

Xavier, one of the premier high school rugby programs in the nation with four National HS Championships, has played a vital role in Fordham's regeneration. Fordham coaches and alumni

credit Tom O'Hara, Xavier '69 and a founder of Xavier Rugby, with drumming up early support for rugby's return to Rose Hill.

According to O'Hara, Fordham Prep's head football coach Pete Gorynski (Xavier '73) had called him in January 2011 to ask if he could assist Bronzo and Mahon with the rugby program. "They were impressive kids," says O'Hara. "I was very happy to help."

Ed Tweedy (Xavier '70), a close friend of O'Hara's from the US Merchant Marine Academy and New York RFC, was named Fordham Prep's head coach in 2011—the program's first year back. Fr. Boller, formerly of Xavier, had also been close with the Tweedy family.

Tweedy then recruited O'Hara's son Ciaran (Xavier '06) as Fordham's first assistant coach.

Mike Tolkin (Xavier '85), then Xavier and NYAC head coach and now US Eagle head coach; Bruce McLane (Xavier '85), then Tolkin's top assistant at NYAC and now NYAC's head coach; and Joe Sweeney (Xavier '85), Xavier's director of rugby, all helped Fordham organize an experienced coaching staff.

Tolkin, Sweeney, and Tony Paolozzi, then Xavier rugby moderator and assistant AD (now AD), all provided invaluable advice to Fordham on the operational, financial, and logistical aspects of organizing and running a rugby program.

Says Jerry Wolf, a Fordham coach and parent, who along with Christian Mayo visited Xavier in 2011 to meet with Tolkin and his coaching staff: "Xavier opened their hearts to us. They were extremely supportive and helpful in giving us as much info as possible."

Cooperative Spirit

The cooperative spirit between the two Jesuit rugby programs goes all the way back to 1976.

As Tom O'Hara recalls, "We got along great. Fordham Prep and Xavier worked together in those days. In fact, the first time either team toured—to Toronto in 1977—it was a joint tour. The two teams traveled together by bus and played the same schools separately, in rotation."

Despite their intense sports rivalry, the collaboration between the two rugby clubs is both fraternal and mutually beneficial. One Jesuit rugby team helping the other—but each program also understanding that good local competition among well-coached teams will raise each program's level of play.

Says Fordham rugby and football alumnus Simon Walsh: "What Xavier has done is admirable. It's a great testament to the way they look at life and the way they put the Jesuit mission into practice. It would be easy to just build on their success and turn their backs on a long-time rival. But they haven't done that. They've reached out and helped build a strong foundation."

Fordham and Xavier's cooperation should serve as a model for high school teams and leagues around the nation.

Keys to Success

Solid parent involvement, quality coaching, quality administration, alumni support, and mutual cooperation between rivals have been instrumental in Fordham's resurgence. And the more kids play the game, the more they get hooked and spread the word among their friends to join them. This is evidenced by Fordham's robust roster expansion (from 40 -110 players) over the past three years.

"The momentum has really come from the boys," says coach Jerry Wolf. "There is huge interest. At the end of the day, they really want to participate."

Rugby Tradition in Jesuit Schools

Fordham Prep Rugby is now on terra firma, and that continues the unique and proud rugby tradition in America's Jesuit high schools. This tradition will continue to play a significant role in USA Rugby's ability to compete on the international stage.

"Rugby is a sport that currently differentiates Jesuit schools," says Xavier's O'Hara. "Rugby is a game built for Jesuit kids; if the sport wasn't around we would have invented it."

O'Hara speculates that the tight bonding, so apparent in Jesuit prep schools, combined with rugby's strong sense of fraternity, is a major reason for rugby's appeal at these institutions. The Jesuit academic tradition, that promotes sound body and mind, adds O'Hara, may also be a factor with rugby's popularity: "Rugby is a thinking man's game."

Browse through a starting A-side on a college rugby team and the chances of seeing a rugger from one of North America's 25+ Jesuit high school rugby programs are very good. Players from Jesuit schools, O'Hara opines, are also likely to lead rugby clubs in college and beyond. And if there isn't a club, they employ their missionary ethos of spreading the word and starting one from scratch.

Administrators on the fence about starting a rugby program would be wise to reach out to Xavier, Gonzaga, Jesuit-Sacramento or Fordham for blueprints and counsel. Given the lack of bureaucracy in a Jesuit school, a program could be up and running in fairly short order and support could be drawn from the large Jesuit support system nationwide.

A workshop, sponsored by the Jesuit Secondary Education Association, on bringing rugby to member schools, would also be a great idea.

Due to the bold initiative of two Fordham athletes, the subsequent school community buy-in (parents, players, administrators, and alumni), and Xavier's crucial early support, rugby is back at Fordham Prep – where it should be.

And this time, Fordham Prep Rugby is here to stay.