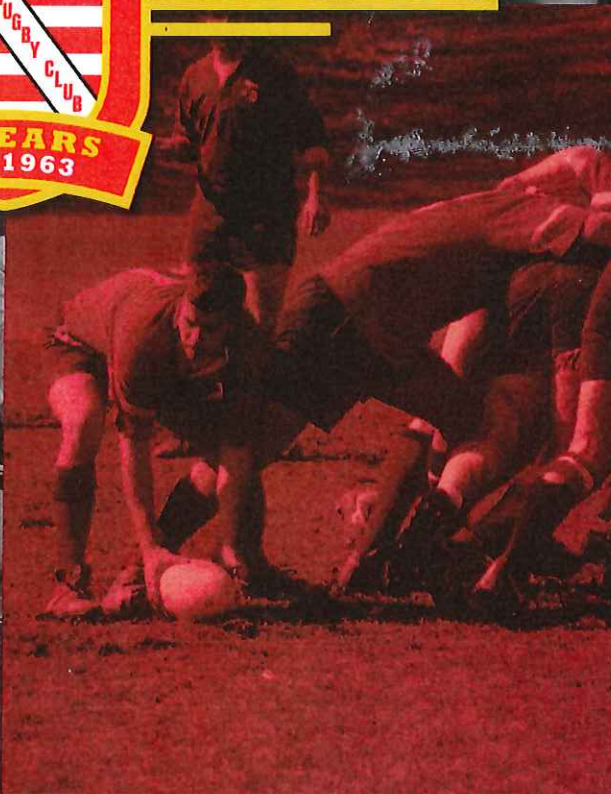
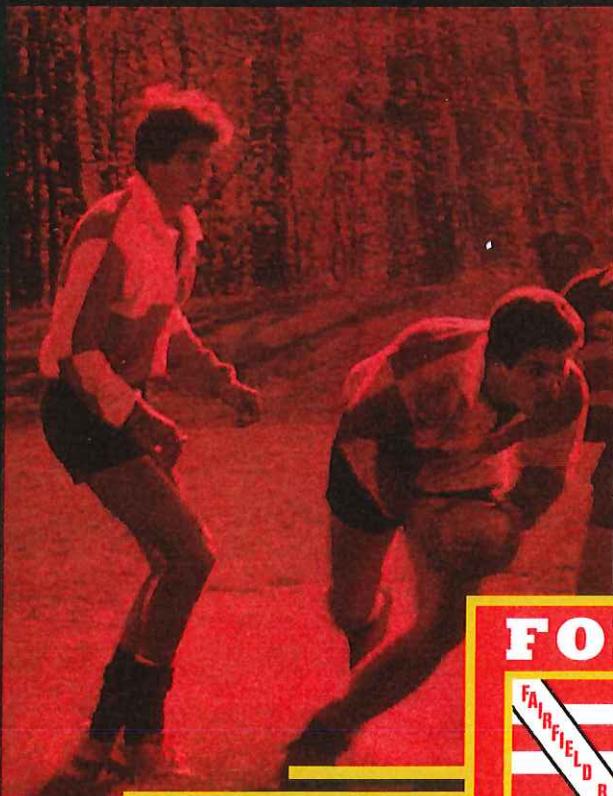


FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB



50TH ANNIVERSARY

October 5, 2013



The First Fairfield Eagle: "Rugby Changed My Life"

Paul A. Sheehy, Class of 1985

I can remember it as if it took place yesterday: "Sheehy, you're in," yelled team captain Tim "Yogi" Sheridan. It was a third-side side game against St. Anselm's College, the spring of 1983. My introduction to the sport of rugby was now complete. The game was unremarkable, other than scoring my first try. But that event sent my life on a new trajectory, one that would culminate eight years later at the 1991 Rugby World Cup. I would be standing opposite the vaunted "Haka," representing the United States of America against the number-one team in the world, the New Zealand All Blacks.

Fairfield, specifically Fairfield Rugby, made much of that possible. Fairfield University had a number of resources that allowed the sport of rugby to thrive. We had a regulation, dedicated rugby "pitch" – unheard of in the 80s and a critical component most teams still struggle to find to this day. Fraternities did not exist at Fairfield, so rugby represented a time you could spend with college friends who had similar interests and wanted something more than intramural sports. We had Paul I. Davis, a historian who introduced us to the 180-year-old game and its many traditions. He provided the basic structure for the team to grow, a key part of any successful team. Laws were handed down through oral tradition, as were the subtle nuances of the game. We had the *Fairfield Red Rigger Song*, a unique trademark. The practices were run by the players, not ideal but certainly manageable. All these traditions were started by those who preceded us. We advanced the ball down the field.

Our team was a very talented, athletic, and motivated group. Joe Dowd was our unrelenting captain and a force around the base of the scrum. Mike Gavigan was our second row, line-out winner, and an excellent goal kicker. Jake

Freel had serious speed and was always a threat out wide. During our senior year, we lost only two games. We trained hard and started each practice with a run around campus, up the hill at Bellarmine and back to Grauert Field. Those who arrived early would work on kicking skills, many that proved unnecessary, like attempted drop goals from 50 meters out. Selections were handled by the players, and everyone was anxious to see the results posted near the bookstore the following morning. You would be living with whatever name they assigned you for the next few weeks. You were always expected to "puff out" the night before a big match.

I learned many valuable lessons from my experiences at Fairfield. Skill work would be critical to my further advancement and I would have to arrive early at practice to improve. Fitness was my responsibility and I would have to motivate myself to be better than my peers. I also learned rugby was a lifestyle as well as a sport. A great writer once wrote, "Does rugby simply attract the type of people I want to be around or do the rigors of the game mold people into players and like-minded folks?" I think it was a combination of both at Fairfield.

What I learned at Fairfield was this: You have your friends, you have your best friends and then you have your rugby friends!



Paul awaits the ball as a Fairfield winger



New Orleans FURFC Tour, 1985

When I graduated in 1985, rugby helped me land my first job. I returned to the Washington, DC, area and located the Washington Rugby Club. Their captain, Chris Doherty, after interviewing me on the field before practice, helped get me a job working for Senator Ted Kennedy as his personnel assistant. The Senator was keen on rugby and had played it briefly at Harvard. Mike Gavigan would take over my position a year later.

Washington RFC was a fantastic club. From 1985 through 1993 we never lost a Potomac Rugby Union match, won three East Coast championships, five Cherry Blossom tournaments, two Saranac Lake tournaments, and beat the Gentlemen of Aspen in Aspen. We finished second in the nation in 1991 in a heartbreaking 12-9 loss to OMBAC on their home field in San Diego that haunts me even now. A small (very small) consolation was I had all the points that day and was named Most Valuable Back on the weekend. I counted eight losses during my time with Washington that I played A-side, and three of those losses were to California teams.

Washington RFC also won the Cape Fear 7s tournament twice and an East Coast (sort of) title in 7's. We had phenomenal players: Willie Stewart, a one-armed Olympic All-American who lost his arm in a tragic accident, only to be the inspiration of our team's never-quit attitude. I credit my time living with Willie in the summer

of 1991 at 10,000 feet in Breckenridge, Colorado, with my fitness level that moved me into the player pool for the Rugby World Cup. And there was Kevin Swords, one of the greatest locks to ever play the game and captain of the US team that took the field against the All Blacks. What an honor it was to receive my first cap from my fellow teammate and friend. His *Henry V* Crispin's day speech before the game had us ready to run through a wall. Kevin would go on to outplay his opposite number during that match—a pretty amazing feat. The US would win the line-out battle 13-10 that game. Another great teammate was Chris Doherty, a fellow Eagle, who had a winning attitude and a boatload of confidence. He made us believe we were better than the other teams and expected us to win. And also Bill Bernhard, Eagle fullback and the player I had to beat out to make our A-side and eventually the US team. All these players and many more kept all of us working hard at practice, just like I had done at Grauert field many years earlier. They made me believe in myself and taught me to never be intimidated because we had each other's backs.

My time with the Eagles was some of the most memorable in my life, with many highlights. I earned my first cap against the All Blacks in Oltey, England, in 1991. My father still recalls a Cockney Englishman asking my mother why an American was watching rugby. She let him know she was watching her son, to which he responded rather emphatically "you must be the proudest (part of a female anatomy) in the stadium!" My Dad still loves that story.

I received my second cap against England four days later in front of 70,000 Englishers in the Rugby Mecca: Twickenham. My parents were honored with seats in the Ford corporate box. I recall our walk through and seeing my name appear on the stadium board and realizing I had been selected for the game—Wow! We scored an electrifying try from 40 meters out on the England backs—runners up at the Rugby World Cup and some of the greatest English backs of

continued next page...



Facing down the famed haka.

all-time. A great memory is beating Hong Kong and scoring my first try for the US. And there was the US 7s team that went to the finals of the Lisbon 7's in 1993 and dismantled a heavily capped English team among others. I also think of the East Coast All-stars team that played against Scotland in New York City, led by Gary Lambert and six Washington players that lost a hard-played match 12-10. The core of that Scottish side in New York made up the team that lost in the quarters of the Rugby world Cup. I think of my first international match against France's B side in Colorado in the summer of 1991. The tour was led by the great French fullback Serge Blanco. I was reserve three days later in a 10-3 loss to the French team (semifinalist at the '91 Rugby World Cup) and what to this day is the closest the US has come to beating a top-tier nation.

What we did not know then was the US would not qualify for the 1995 Rugby World Cup. That year South Africa would return to the world stage, now made famous by the movie *Invictus*. The United States would not qualify for the tournament until 1999.

I went on to play in Australia in 1992 for the Manly Sea Eagles. This was just before the professional era started and I was able to make their first-grade side. It was a major feat, since Australia was the pre-eminent rugby country, having just won the '91 Rugby World Cup. I quickly learned how good they were when I saw they had six guys capable of equaling or beating my 40 time. They nicknamed me "Bushy" after the first President Bush because I moved my hands a lot when I talked. They were a wonderful group of Aussies and friends. I later regretted leaving my first-grade spot to attend the Melrose 7s for the US, because I never got off the bench and we lost our first game. I also lost my first-grade spot for Manly.

I had my fair share of heartbreak: Losing in the national championships three times, twice when I played. The CIPP fiasco that cost our Washington RFC 7s team a national title in 1993, a sevens team that featured four Eagles, an Australian international, Mitchell Cox, and a UCLA football player. Then there was being dropped from the US team in the winter of 1993. And losing my last game with Washington RFC in the play-offs and retiring for good that same year.



But . . . as one door closes another one opens

During our team tour to California, my sister brought an attractive friend to one of our games. We struck up a relationship at a local Irish pub and it was literally love at first sight. I later found out her father had attended Fairfield, so we were clearly destined to meet. She joined me in Australia for a month and we traveled to Bali together. Our relationship was rooted in rugby. We married in 1994. We now have four beautiful children, all of whom play rugby. Two play for Gonzaga High School, which recently lost in the National High School Championships finals 21-16 and currently ranked third in the nation. I help coach the freshman team and a youth team in the summer.

In 2013 I will celebrate my own fiftieth year as will Washington Rugby Club and Fairfield Rugby. When I meet someone and we realize we have a love for rugby in common, it as if we have known



Tackling Michael Jones, arguably the best player in the world at the time, merits a cover shot.

each other a lifetime. Rugby is a uniquely human experience. Representing the United States was a great honor and one of the proudest moments of my life. My eyes still well-up when I remember the National Anthem playing before the game. I was fortunate to arrive at Washington when it had an abundance of talent and a winning attitude. I played my part in making Washington RFC one of top teams in the nation for five years.

All of this started because of Fairfield Rugby and changed my life forever. To the classes that graduated before 1985, I stood on your shoulders, and none of my accomplishments could have been achieved without your efforts. Thank you!

*"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother."*



US Sevens team, Finalists in Lisbon 1993



1991 US National team