



Photos By: Jim Sabo

MLR: A Growing Phenomenon

BY: Tonya Huffman

When most people think of the major leagues, sports that usually come to mind are football, basketball, baseball, ice-hockey, and soccer. But now gaining popularity, there's a newer major league sport on the block, Major League Rugby (MLR).

Origins of Rugby As America's interest in rugby matched the rest of the world's frenzy about the sport, for there are currently over 2,500 existing rugby union clubs around the country, the need for a professional association became clear. Endeavoring to drive North American rugby to the highest level as a professional sport, coupled with having a platform for participants to play the sport while learning and exhibiting the core values of respect, inclusivity, and tradition, in 2017, Major League Rugby was formed. While rugby is more popular than it's ever been, especially now with being declared a major league sport, it is not a new sport. According to legend, in 1823, as a student at English boys' preparatory school the Rugby school, during a modified soccer game, English Anglican clergyman Reverend William Webb Ellis caught a kicked air ball and ran it towards the goal to score and hence, rugby was born. Since then, playing rugby grew at a dramatic pace. In 1874, the very first rugby game in the U.S. was played in Boston, Massachusetts between the two universities McGill and Harvard. In the early 1900s, rugby continued to grow, as between 1905 and 1913, the U.S. received regular visits from New Zealand and Australian touring sides. Rugby became so popular to the point where it became an event at the 1920 Summer Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium where the U.S. defeated France and won a gold medal. Four years later, rugby was again a featured event at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, France where the U.S. again, won the gold medal, beating their opponent France, forcing the Americans to battle a hostile crowd to exit the Paris stadium. Subsequently, rugby was removed as an Olympic sport, and for many years, the U.S. reigned as Olympic champions. It wasn't until over nine decades later that rugby was reintroduced as an Olympic sport and was featured in the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Rugby versus American Football The common major league sport that rugby compares to is American football. Rugby and football have similarities and differences. Although rugby is more controlled, both rugby and football involve intense physical aggression. Both rugby and football are played on a sizable rectangular outdoor field. The field that football is played on measures roughly 110 meters X 48.8 meters, while the field rugby is played on measures 100 meters X 70 meters. With both football and rugby, on the field, there are two end-zones and two sets of goal posts. With rugby, the goal posts are placed at the front of the end-zone, while with football, the goal posts are situated behind the end zone. Both sports use the same shaped ball called a "spheroid." The football is about 28-29 centimeters long, is 53-54 centimeters in circumference, and weighs a few ounces less than a rugby ball. The rugby ball is 28-30 centimeters long, is 58-62 centimeters in circumference, weighs about one pound, is bigger than a football, is elongated, and is designed for easier grabbing and carrying.

As football players can pass the ball forward, in rugby, the ball can only be passed backwards. In football, as only 11 players per team are allowed on the field at any given time, rugby teams have 15 players each on the field. Football and rugby matches evolve similarly. Football has a match length of 90-minutes divided into two halves of 45 minutes each. Rugby matches are 10 minutes shorter, lasting for 80 minutes divided into two halves of 40 minutes each. While both the rugby and football regular seasons are played over roughly 18 weeks, the MLR season is from roughly March through June where each team plays basically 16 regular season games, and the NFL season is from roughly September to early January where each team plays about 17 regular season games. Past the regular season, both rugby and



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football have playoffs. While football requires players to gear up with protective equipment such as wearing a helmet, gloves, mouth guard, and padding around the body, rugby players wear a mouth guard, and may wear light padding, if any, and soft head gear, as wearing helmets is illegal. In both football and rugby, players have the purpose of scoring goals for their team. In football, this is done by players carrying the ball beyond the opponents touch line with a series of run and pass plays known as a touchdown, and they kick the ball between the goal post to earn a field goal. In rugby, scoring is done by players carrying the ball and placing it on the opponents touch line or kicking it between the goal posts. In football, as players can only touch the ball with their feet and legs, and as only the goalkeeper can touch the ball with his hands, in rugby, players can hold the ball, kick it, and run with it so it gets to the opponent's goal line. In football, there are numerous occasions when both play and the clock are stopped. In rugby, the clock usually keeps ticking, even when play is halted.

Concerning MLR, to celebrate the sport of rugby itself, following an intense rugby game, regardless of win or lose, players, coaches, referees, reporters, and fans often convene for food and drinks, a unique, but signature way to end a match. Rugby: A Six-Sided Experience People may get to experience the best of all six major league sports when playing rugby, including rugby itself. Rugby offers the physicality of football without players having to don much equipment and deal with the constant stoppage of the game. Rugby extends the running and flowing grace of soccer, and figures in the sheer power to drive the ball across the finish. Rugby grants the transition and constant ball exchange of basketball, boosted with multiple ways to score points. Rugby extends the camaraderie of baseball and includes more people on the field. And rugby bestows the intensity of hockey, but adds mutual respect amongst ball players. In the sense of what the sport offers, rugby is essentially the best of six worlds.

In the MLR world, the best continues to come in sixes and sevens. As MLR is in game conference format, six teams comprise the Eastern Conference and seven teams comprise the Western Conference for a total of 13 teams, twelve from the U.S. and one from Canada. MLR Eastern Conference The New Orleans Gold joined the league in 2018 and their games are held at Gold Mine Stadium, also called Shrine on Airline Stadium in Metairie, Louisiana. Rugby New York joined the league in 2019 and their games are held at JFK Stadium in Hoboken, New Jersey. The New England Free Jacks joined the league in 2020 and their games are held at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Quincy, Massachusetts. Old Glory DC joined the league in 2020 and their games are held at Segra Field in Leesburg, Virginia. Rugby ATL joined the league in 2020 and their games are held at Atlanta Silverbacks Park in Atlanta, Georgia. And the Toronto Arrows joined the league in 2019 and their games are held at York Lions Stadium in Toronto, Ontario Canada.

MLR Western Conference The Austin Gilgronis joined the league in 2018 and their games are held at Bold Stadium in Austin, Texas. The Houston SaberCats joined the league in 2018 and their games are held at Aveva Stadium in Houston, Texas. The San Diego Legion joined the league in 2018 and their games are held at Snapdragon Stadium in San Diego, California. The Seattle Seawolves joined the league in 2018 and their games are held at Starfire Stadium in Tukwila, Washington. The Utah Warriors joined the league in 2018 and their games are held at Zions Bank Stadium in Herriman, Utah. The LA Giltinis, named after a combination of the premium cocktail and the team owner Adam Gilchrist's last name, joined the league in 2021 and their games are held at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles, California. And the Dallas Jackals joined the league in 2022 and their games are held at Choctaw Stadium in Arlington, Texas. MLR Seasons & Beyond as MLR was formed in 2017, the inaugural season of the sport began in 2018. During season 1, in a 2018 game between then MLR team the Glendale Raptors versus the Seattle Seawolves, the Seawolves won the match 23-19 to take their first title. In season 2, in a 2019 game between the San Diego Legion versus the Seattle Seawolves, the defending champion the Seawolves won the match 26-23 to take their second championship title. The third 2020 MLR season was suspended on March 12, 2020 due to the pandemic, but resumed for the 2021 season. In the 2021



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MLR season 4, in a game between Rugby ATL and the LA Giltinis, the LA Giltinis won their first championship match 31-17. Along with the Seattle Seawolves, the LA Giltinis were the second professional team ever in U.S. history to win a title in their maiden season. This win was a triumph that reflected everything the LA Giltinis built in Los Angeles, especially with joining MLR as a new team during the middle of a global pandemic. And MLR is currently in its fifth season that began on February 5, 2022, and the regular season goes until the end of June 2022. Major League Rugby continues to create pathways with the Collegiate Draft, develop youth programs, and continues to recognize and support amazing athletes who are dedicated to growing the game. In fact, MLR implemented its first collegiate MLR Draft in 2020. During the same year, MLR teams began forming youth academies.

Enjoying Games Major League Rugby teams continuously encourage fans to attend games in person, to experience the aura, friendly faces, and excitement each game offers. But if fans have to watch the game from away, then that's okay. Major League Rugby programming runs in prime weekend time slots on Saturday afternoons and Sunday evenings. The CBS Sports Network televises 13 matches nationally over the course of the season, including a Game of the Week during each of the 10 rounds of the MLR regular season along with all three post-season matches. Live streaming is also available through the CBS Sports Network streaming platforms. ESPN has the national and international rights to an 18-game package covering regular season matches to audiences across its various platforms. AT&T Sports Networks have a 17-game package covering six of the seven MLR teams for games not broadcast on the CBS Sports Network. And like last season, during this fifth 2022 season, MLR and FOX Sports have partnered up to broadcast the matches for the 2022 season. In addition, in March 2021, MLR launched The Rugby Network/Rugby Pass, the first of its kind in North America, and is a free streaming platform in conjunction with Rugby Pass which will stream all MLR content, including matches, game highlights, international rugby matches, and exclusive behind-the-scenes content. Moreover, in March 2021, MLR launched its official mobile app that allows fans to view breaking MLR news, schedules, match scores, team profiles, statistics, and exclusive video content. This app is available to download on the iPhone App Store and on Android Google Play. So, whether it's viewing the TV, using the mobile app, or better yet, attending a live game, all the same, the aim is for teams to stay abreast of MLR happenings.

Rugby offers popular elements of common major league sports...and more. Hence, rugby may soon kiss its days of being labeled just another recreational sport goodbye, and the day rugby is finally thought of as a major league sport may be nigh. And with MLR offering aggressive play, coupled with following the core values of respect, inclusivity, and tradition, especially with rugby's signature where players convene after games, it's in line with former UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill's statement: "Rugby is a Hooligans game played by gentleman." It's no wonder why: "After Fierce rugby rounds, polite socializing abounds."





