

Bert Sugar Recalls Earliest Days of UMRFC.

Letter written to commemorate UMRFC 50th Anniversary.

October 2009

It all began one late-late night, or maybe it was the morning after, back in the spring of 1959...

There I was in the living room of my fraternity house, so hung over from the night before when I had to use my barstool as a walker to get back to the frat house that now even my hiccups were slurred, trying my damndest to focus my eyes by reading the latest issue of Sports Illustrated. And what to wondering eyes — or maybe just one eye — should I see but a small article in front of the magazine that told of Harvard and Yale going off to Bermuda to play in some rugby tournament.

So the thought — less a brainstorm than a thought drizzle — occurred to me, why can't "we" do that, go to a rugby tournament? Only trouble was, like the old joke about Tonto saying to the Lone Ranger after he had said "we" have to take on a horde of Indians, and Tonto had replied, "Where did you get that 'we,' White Man?" There was no "we" there. Not only was I alone in the frat house, sitting there so hung over I was trying to play a pizza on the stereo, and waiting for the light of day to hit the brew of the night, but there was no rugby team to constitute a "we."

By the time I had sobered up, sorta, another thought had invaded my by-now slowly awaking brain: why not form a rugby club?

And so I took an ad out in the Michigan Daily announcing the formation of a rugby team, pretentiously calling it "The Ann Arbor Rugby and Cricket Club," or something like that. And threw in a "come-on:" free beer for all who attended.

Well, to my surprise, over 100 so-called rugby players answered the ad. Unsurprisingly, most were there for the free beer. However, amongst their number I found some who were sincerely interested more in rugby than in the free beer. And most were from countries where rugby was played, countries such as Great Britain, Australia, South Africa, et cetera, etc., etc...

There was Robbie MacFarland, from Scotland, Bajii Packawala from India, Mich Oprea from Romania, Brian (and here, after 50 years, I've forgotten his last name) from Australia, and a handful of others, including a few Americans who more or less "knew about" the sport, like Dick McClear and Marv Wilensik and Ron Riosti. Together, we agreed to form a club of sorts.

We even began to practice, no simple chore since we didn't have a rugby ball. And so I volunteered to go into Detroit and find a ball. More importantly, I was able to find booklets

explaining the rules of the game, which I passed out to the uninitiated. I mean, how in hell were we supposed to play this game — and, hopefully, go to Bermuda or wherever — if we didn't know how to play the game?

And so it was that we held our first —ever practice, down at Wines Field. It was about as organized as a prison riot, with several of us running around the field with rule books in our hands trying mightily to figure out what it was we were doing. Fortunately, there were a few who did know, and they “coached” us, even as we bumbled through practice. Even Yours Truly, who had been appointed captain of the team, who didn't know what the hell I was doing.

As practice followed practice, we eventually began to resemble a team — helped by several who had joined our ranks — Tom Burroughs, who had played at Dartmouth, and Mike Burrows who helped make order out of the chaos I had created, plus a couple of football players, Harry Newman, Jr., and Ken Tureaud, a Canadian who knew the game, both of whom were probably intrigued by watching players throw the ball backwards instead of forward.

Before long, secure in our ability to at least know the game and actually work as a team, we started thinking about challenging some team or other. But there were none to challenge, the cupboard being bare of other teams in the area to challenge. We even had the “chutzpah” to proclaim ourselves “Champions of the Big Ten,” there being no other teams in the Big Ten at the time! Someway, somehow, one school did accept our challenge: the University of Toronto, champions of Canada (or, so they said), who came down to Ann Arbor to play us one March day in '59.

As they congregated in the law fraternity house at 1212 Hill Street, in an effort to get that proverbial “home-field advantage,” I managed to feed them enough liquor to less drown them than to irrigate them. And if that weren't enough, to provide them with companionship some dates of questionable morals to “greet” them (and don't ask how I knew them!) as well as having my dog, Ron-Collie, named after the Pope, to yap at their doors at about three in the morning.

And lo and behold, with Burroughs, MacFarland, Packawala, Riosti, et al, playing their damndest, we managed to beat them 10–6 — with even Yours Truly contributing with a “try.”— clad in our Lippman Delicatessen uniforms which we had borrowed. We now began to take ourselves seriously, even if others hadn't. We were now a “team” in the truest sense of the word and began to recruit others — like Froncie Gutman, a pre-med student who had been quarterback at Purdue, another pre-med student, Dave Dingman who, not incidentally, would become the first American to climb Mt. Everest — and several others.

As we began to grow, there were several close calls. Literally. The first came from the University of Michigan band. See, when we practiced on Wines Field, we practiced — and didn't give a damn that others wanted to use it. Seems that in several of those practices, when the U of M marching band showed up, they demanded we vacate the field. Our answer

was something along the lines of “get lost,” and now they wanted their field. The second came from the offices of athletic director Fritz Crisler (better known as “Jesus Crisler”) demanding to know why his football players were playing rugby rather than participating in spring practice. Hell, we responded, we were undefeated and “Champions of the Big Ten,” and the 1958 Michigan football team had been 2-6-1. In short, we paid them no nevermind.

In the meantime, in between time, someone or other had arranged, through a friend, a series of games for us out in California — against UCLA, Claremont College, and San Diego State. And so, we embarked to the West (or “Left”) Coast, many of the team in hearses, which we obtained from a dealer in Detroit who wanted them delivered to California, the rest of us in a chartered plane which looked like the one Amelia Earhart had been lost in. Anyhow, we didn’t win any of the three games, but had one helluva time out in California, which is by this time what we thought rugby was all about.

And over the succeeding 50 years is still what it is all about. Hell, back then rugby was the most fun I ever had with my clothes on, and for the subsequent 50 years I hope it has been for you, too.

Here’s for 50 more years of playing rugby and having fun. And the hope that 50 years from now, many of you will have the same fond remembrances of the game and the University of Michigan Rugby Club as I have now.

Bert Randolph Sugar