



# MICHIGAN OLDE BLUE RUGBY

## THE EARLY YEARS OF MICHIGAN RUGBY

By

**Mike Burrows, 1<sup>st</sup> UM Captain**

### **Spring, 1959**

Either Bert Sugar called me or I saw an ad. he'd placed at the International Center. He and some of his ΦΔΦ law fraternity brothers wanted to get a rugby team started. At our first meeting I described the game to them. We had our first scrimmage on Ferry Field. There were 10 to 20 of us: his group of law students and some foreign students who had played the game and who I guess had seen Bert's ad.

Bert said he'd try to schedule a game with the University of Toronto and find us a place to play. My role was to get our team ready. We were a rag-tag bunch --- law students who had played football but didn't yet have any rugby instincts or know the rules, and a disparate collection of mostly British Commonwealth types with varying degrees of playing experience. We practiced; the match was set up. Luckily the Canadians were happy to travel to Ann Arbor.

Bert found orange jersey's for us with the declaration *Lippman's Trailblazers* on the chest. We played on Wine's Field. Each half of the match was refereed by a different person, both from Ann Arbor, because neither could be there for the whole match. Remarkably, we won, 10-6. We were overjoyed; we couldn't believe it. (The Canadians regarded their whole trip mainly as a chance to visit a big American campus, and so didn't really take the match too seriously.)

I have a yellowed sheet of paper recording the fact that the roster on that, our first team to take the field, was Brian Browne (fullback), Baji Palkiwala and Mich Oprea (right and left wings), Ron Reasti and Dick McClear (right and left centers), Peter McKenna (stand off), Dave Dingman (scrum half), Arturo Crenovitch (number eight), ? Warren and ? Burnett (right and left wing forwards), Mike Burrows (captain) and Bert Sugar (right and left second row), Bob Blair and ? Smith (right and left props) and Tom Burris (hooker). One of our two referees was Brian Parker from England; I can't remember the name of the other one. Maybe someone can help me with the gaps in this record.

### **1959-60**

During the 1959-60 academic year, I was back in England. The young club survived and I believe played a match that year against the University of Wisconsin at some intermediate venue. As I remember it, Ann Arbor, Madison and St. Louis were then the only places in the mid-west where rugby was played.

### **1960-64**

I came back to Ann Arbor for the Fall of 1960, staying for four more years. The club was by then sufficiently organized for us to have on our schedule several matches in both the Fall and Spring seasons. Initially, our competition was wholly Canadian. We played Windsor, Sarnia, Brantford, London, Guelph, Toronto Scottish, Toronto Irish, The University of Toronto, Oshawa. Gradually other American schools acquired rugby clubs. I remember playing Notre Dame in Ann Arbor, for example. They were good athletes, but there was enough hesitation in their game arising from lack of rugby instinct that we were able to win.

All our home games were at Wine's Field. (Or should that be Wines Field?) Typically the ground was as hard as asphalt, a result of its main purpose being the practice field for the Michigan Marching Band and their pounding feet. And being lined for football, it wasn't wide enough. (We were used to it; the problem was felt more by our visitors.)

One high point for me was going up to Toronto in the Spring of 1961 for the Ontario Seven-a-Side Tournament, U of M's first time there. Towards the end of a heady day's competition, in a semi-final win popular with the Canadian crowd, we beat Balm Beach, which had been mowing its opponents down until that point. We lost in the final to Toronto Scottish, but in a grand gesture of international goodwill marking our notable first-time achievement at the tournament, the Toronto Scottish players handed over to us their winners trophies, engraved pewter tankards. I still have mine.

Running the team at that time was Froncie Gutman, who'd played quarterback for Purdue. Other Americans whose names I can remember playing then were John McHale, John Appleford, Dave Dingman (who was to become a hero on the first successful American assault of Mount Everest), Bill Longhurst, Jim Canfield, Tom Dalglish and Ed Kurz. There was also a bunch of British Commonwealth and Irish types: John Smith, Bob Nicholls, Tom Triggs, Alan Levett, Whata Winiata, Desmond McVeigh, Terry Robinson. Other names would certainly come back to me if I got into reminiscing with players from that era.

Froncie and his friends in the Medical School were great players, and we would usually win our home games. But they were reluctant to travel or attend practices, no doubt a result of a grueling medical school schedule, so the other less skillful club members who did travel and practice resented not getting to play in our home games and began dropping out. The membership dwindled. Then we found ourselves canceling our away games at the last minute because we couldn't get fifteen people together. The club was going down hill fast. We were getting a reputation for being unreliable. We were expecting next to find the Canadian clubs refusing to schedule fixtures with us.

We all met together in, I believe, late Fall of 1962, to face this problem. I was afraid the club was just going to fade away entirely. So I volunteered to take over the club to try to get it back on its feet. Some of my motivation was that I didn't want to see fail a club that I felt was in part my baby.

I instituted a vigorous recruiting campaign, including ads., rugby movies, promotional meetings, and a declaration that players would be considered for home games only if they showed up at practice and were willing to travel to away games. I also made it our policy to create as many teams in the club as there were players available to fill them, regardless of ability. It worked, in the sense that the membership mushroomed and we were able to keep our scheduling commitments. On the other hand, our winning record nose-dived. But that was the price I was willing to pay while we were in a building mode. Whata Winiata's support and effort were an invaluable component in this effort. He was the complete rugby player who also possessed a talent for organization.

Two high points for me during this period were, first, setting up and playing in a tour by the Michigan Rugby Club in the New York City area in, I believe, the Spring of '63. We played Columbia, The New York Rugby Club, Princeton and, I believe, Manhattan. We lost all four matches, but had a great time. The second high point was going with the team to a Spring rugby festival in '64 on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago with teams from all over the mid-west. The sun shone, the breeze ruffled the surface of Lake Michigan, the new grass was bright green and the multicolored uniforms of the different teams celebrated the festival. This was confirmation that rugby had finally firmly established itself in the mid-west.

### **Fall of '64 and After**

I left Michigan in the Summer of '64. There were so many members in the club that Fall that the club was split into a Blue division and a Maize division. One was run by Whata; the other by his fellow New Zealander, Alan Levett, also a capable guy. There are stories to be told about that era, and the disputes between the two of them, but I'm not the one to tell them. I'd left already.

Please contact me with corrections and additions, especially personal details to add personality to the names.

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P.S. It could be argued that since American Football evolved from Rugby Football, introduced to the US in the latter half of the last century, the current U. of M. Rugby Club is strictly speaking a Second Coming. Keeping this in mind clarifies what we are celebrating in 1999.