

Soccer Mom Makes Move To Rugger Hugger **by Laura Hill, columnist for the Tennessean**

March 20, 2002- Until a couple of weeks ago, all I knew about rugby was that it often involves blood and that, as I recollect, college rugby players drink beer before, during and after games.

I never knew that both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush played rugby as students (you'll have to ask them about the beer thing). Never dreamed the United States is the defending Olympic champion, having won the gold the last time rugby was an Olympic sport - in 1924. And I certainly couldn't have told you what a blind side flanker does.

Of course, I still can't tell you much about blind side flankers, or loose head props or hookers for that matter, except that they're all player positions. But I am negotiating a fast learning curve that should have me comprehending the basics sometime before the high school season ends in a few weeks.

It's a shame, really. Having watched two children play 2,347 soccer games (record: 4-2, 329-14), I had accumulated a vast storehouse of useful information. I not only know the price of a Snickers bar and a cup of coffee at every concession stand in the southeast, I can spot an offside play.

Now, all that's as useless as last year's television schedule. My youngest soccer player has become a rugby player, and I'm at sea in the bleachers again, squinting and wondering why the whistle blew.

We've played and won two games this season, but even that hasn't made much of a dent in my rugby ignorance, though I've deduced that the game seems to be a hybrid of soccer and American football, with some plain orneriness tossed in. For example, instead of scrimmage, rugby players have a scrummage, in which a pile of players holds on to each other's arms and legs and waists and pushes a similar pile of the other team's players until a football pops out and someone grabs it and runs.

Like football, players can run with the ball, but unlike football, they can only pass it backward. Defenders can't tackle anybody but the ball carrier, who must let go of the ball when he hits the ground, so that everybody can jump on top of one another trying to recapture it. Yeah, I'm confused too.

There are many scary things about this game or at least scary names like "mauls" and "rucks" and, although Gatorade, not beer, is the beverage of choice, the play can get a little rough and tumble.

On the field there's enough testosterone in the air that you'd sprout whiskers if you walked out there. But rugby still gets my vote as a sport perfectly designed for the high school male, 80 minutes of camaraderie, tradition, grunting, sweating, shouting, hand slapping and falling down in a heap.

Now that's some serious fun.