



BREAKING GROUND

a 38-year-old plan realized

BY DANIELLE BESSETTE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY JOINS THE ESTEEMED RANKS OF CLUBHOUSE OWNERS, THANKS TO THE UNRELENTING EFFORTS OF ALUMNI.



After 135 long years of competition, the Princeton Rugby Football Club finally has a place of their own to call home. On June 1, Princeton's Reunions Sunday, the tape was cut and the Haaga House became open for business. In the sweltering early-summer sun, the eponymous Paul Haaga (Class of 1970) made a speech dedicating the facility in front of university officials, national rugby representatives, and over 300 rugby alumni and friends. The speech preceded exhibition matches played by both the men's and women's undergraduate and alumni teams, the pioneer users of this hard-won development.

The construction of Haaga House took five months — a surprisingly short time considering the conditions.

Groundbreaking was on January 5, meaning the majority of work was done during the winter months in a part of the country where winters are notoriously harsh. Compound that with the devastation of Hurricane Sandy just months prior and the heavy rains of this spring, and the weather becomes a massive villain for construction. Yet, almost no time was lost, which, for Paul Haaga and his fellow rugby alumni and clubhouse cohort Tom Pirelli, must have come as a profound relief. This is because the original plan for the clubhouse, dreamed up by Pirelli, began in 1975, 38 years ago.

"I think it may be obvious, but I'll say it anyway," Haaga said in his dedication speech. "This is an idea whose time has come."

However, the final product is definitely not what Pirelli had originally envisioned, but perhaps that tuned out for the best.

"In '75 after touring England when we

saw the clubhouses there, my original vision was that we would have the main bar — this is back when the drinking age was 18 — on the top level overlooking the main field like the British teams, with other bars located throughout the facility," said Pirelli, laughing. "But things change. The drinking age is 21, and drinking and rugby did not become synonymous anymore, which is a good thing."

Haaga joked about this original vision in his speech, as well.

"We have a drawing of it somewhere, and it said on the bottom of it: 'The entire top floor will be the main bar.' It also said there will be six squash courts, and I'm still wondering about that." Haaga then gestured to the undergraduate players in attendance. "I know you guys do a lot of heavy off-season workouts, but it's nothing like our squash, let me promise you."

So there were some inevitable revisions to Pirelli's initial plans. Eventually, a second plan was drawn up, which Haaga also explained.

"We never priced it, but I recall it looked something like Yankee Stadium."

Needless to say there were several more iterations of the idea after that, but actually getting the go-ahead from the university was another story. Money wasn't necessarily an issue — the rugby alumni have been very generous and eager to give — but money isn't always enough. Princeton, clearly, is an academics-driven university. It isn't that the university doesn't value athletics, but academics are the priority, so building a rugby clubhouse and fields were not topping the university's to-do.

"University politics are worse than regular politics," Pirelli joked.

Haaga gives a lighthearted nod to the same challenges in his speech: "[I would never] suggest Princeton bureaucracy is as opaque, byzantine, and resistant to change as the federal government, even though at times during this thing it seemed like they were trying to be."

The rugby teams emulate the motto of the Athletics Department: Education through



PHOTOS: (opposite page) Stu Rickerson during the dedication. (above) Paul and Heather Haaga during the ribbon-cutting. (right) Alumni from the '95-'96 women's national championship team.

Athletics. As a club team, the players do most of the administrative work themselves, developing management skills that aren't taught in the classroom. With around 80 players, the combined men's and women's teams are the largest of any contact sport on campus. Yet, the players had no place to take cover in the event of inclement weather, no place to offer travelling teams to change, and no bathrooms. While manageable, the situation was certainly not ideal, especially when other, smaller teams on campus had these kinds of facilities. The Athletics Department realized the need here. And with their help, the rugby alumni knew they would be able to get this done. They just needed the opportunity to begin.

That opportunity came one day a few years back when Haaga got a call from the Senior Associate Athletics Director (Facilities), Jeff Graydon. Graydon said that the university mandated they build a lightning shelter for the athletes, so why not put some walls on it and call it a clubhouse? And so they began, Graydon as Project Manager with Haaga and Stu Rickerson ('71), rugby alum and leader of Princeton Rugby Friends for nearly 40 years, as the primary contacts to develop a concept and work out both a budget and fundraising committee.

So, with Pirelli's vision, Haaga and Rickerson's leadership and organization, and support from the University Athletics department,



“All for Princeton Rugby” Initiative Responding to the \$500,000 matching gift challenge presented by Sue and Ken Koranda in memoriam of their late, rugby- playing son, 100% of the players in the graduating class of 2013, Men’s and Women’s, have committed to giving to the Rugby Coaching Endowment for the next five years.



The Princeton men's and alumni teams on Reunions Sunday.

'12-'13, A GOOD YEAR

- Men's Rugby Club named #1 Men's Sports Club of the 2012-2013 academic year
- Women's Rugby Club named #1 Sports Club at Princeton for the year
- Women won the Ivy League Championship, Ivy League Sevens, placed 3rd in the nation at USA Rugby Collegiate Sevens
- Men won the Rickerson Cup/New Jersey State Inter-collegiate Championships and the Koranda Cup

PRINCETON ALUMNI RUGBY:

- Both alumni teams narrowly defeated student teams during the exhibition matches
- Record vs Students now stands at 21-21, with 2 ties
- Men's team, known as the "Flying Tigers," compete internationally, this year in Martinique

rugby alumni, and many more, the 38-year dream was finally realized. And the final product, designed by architect George Hibbs, is as good as anyone could have hoped, finished on-time and slightly under budget.

The facility sits astride the two rugby fields (so that men's and women's teams can play concurrent matches), which are now set up with irrigation systems. It is made up of two buildings with a porch-like open air viewing area in the center, covering 5,500 square feet overall. One building houses the men's and women's home team rooms as well as smaller changing rooms for visiting teams and a treatment area for trainers. The other includes bathrooms, two storage areas, an office, electrical control and maintenance utilities. It's fully Internet-connected and even has a huge wide-screen TV.

And what's more, it's a pretty good-looking building, too. Though building codes restricted anything too fancy, the building is elegant and even agrarian, settling in nicely into Princeton's bucolic setting.

Most importantly, it is functional, Rickerson says.

"What I'm happy about is that it provides everything that our coaches and students told us they needed, but

The facade of the Haaga House. (inset) The Princeton women's alumni team that defeated the undergrads during Reunions Sunday.



not things that would be unnecessary,” he said. “[It is a facility that] we hope will both serve the students that are playing for Princeton and also the visiting teams that will come through over the next decade.”

It came together, and it came together well. But it never would have been possible without the help of many people. Haaga mentioned many of these people, beginning with his wife, who he actually met in college playing rugby (she played for Vassar). Heather, who is a patron of the arts at Princeton, would only allow her husband to make the hefty donation to the rugby program on one condition — that he give an equal donation to the art museum.

Pirelli laughs, “The art museum is the biggest rugby fan on campus!”

Haaga would go on to thank many others that had a hand in the project, including the Athletics Department, other university officials, and all the donors. But he especially singles out his former teammates Pirelli and Rickerson as two people who really fought over the years to make this possible.

“Tom Pirelli really had alumni vision and alumni connection ... we’re a family because of [him]... Stu and Tom particularly have lived their lives for others ... Stu as many of you

know is in the 1% range of survivors of pancreatic cancer. He does nothing for himself ... if that’s the kind of person you can person you can grow up to be — do it.”

Being involved was an honor for Rickerson, too.

“It’s a great thrill to watch my former teammate, Paul Haaga, cut the ribbon with his wife, who I’ve also known since college, and to be able to finally fulfill Tom’s vision and make it a reality,” Rickerson said.

And Pirelli emphasizes what it meant to him to see that dream become real.

“It took a long time but they finally allowed us to do something for the kids that we always wanted to do.” Pirelli said. For him, this is a gift for his rugby family, given from the bottom of his heart.

“It’s [one of few sports] where you make lifelong friends. I met some of these people in college. ...now I’m 65 years old, and some guys I played with when I was 18 are my best friends to this day. And the older rugby players are still dedicated to helping younger rugby player...it took us 38 years to get that clubhouse! When I was there, we had nothing...and now that the kids have a home, it makes a big difference.”