

# Boys and Girls Together: A Prehistory of International Women's Sevens and how it may have led to rugby in the Olympics my perspective

Emil Signes: November 27, 2012

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**ALEX GOFF *RUGBY MAGAZINE* ARTICLE IN RED**  
**MY COMMENTS IN AQUA**

## Background: Alex Goff's 2009 article in *Rugby*

Alex Goff published a *Rugby Magazine* article back in October 2009, "Why Should we Thank This Man for Rugby Getting in the Olympics," in which he stated *"Rugby would not be an Olympic sport without the women, and women would not have an international 7s presence were it not for one man – Emil Signes."*

I'm honored and humbled by that statement and don't know if it's true, but I would like to at least document, as much as I can, everything I said to Alex that was reprinted in the article. And more. Document where I can, that is; some of these comments are based only on my notes at the time they happened.

Sadly, Alex's article is no longer "up" anywhere on the web; I have, however, saved it on my computer, and the text is included below.

The entire topic of rugby and the Olympics is obviously bigger than one person. From what I've done, heard and read, however, the steps that were taken in the development of women's sevens in the USA in the 1980s and in the initiation of international women's sevens in the 1990s, were at least partly based on my efforts, and it's nice to watch it all develop.

by Alex Goff



Picture of me from Goff article

Alex's article follows in red (with my quotes in italics); my documentation and/or comments are inserted in green (or is it blue? :)

In 2005 the IRB was chastened. Rugby did not receive what many felt was an automatic "Yes" vote to put the sport into the Olympics. What had happened.

IRB CEO Mike Miller spelled out the facts a few months later in a small press conference at the 2006 USA 7s. Rugby had not embraced the spirit of Olympism to the right degree. But most of all, rugby had ignored the women.

Did they have a 7s World Cup for women? No. Did they even mention women in their promotional materials? Not really. Miller and the IRB knew what they had to do. They had to get serious about women's international 7s. [I hadn't realized that the IRB really cared; I'm glad they did. Even if it was only because that's what they needed to do to get on the IOC's Olympic sport

radar.]

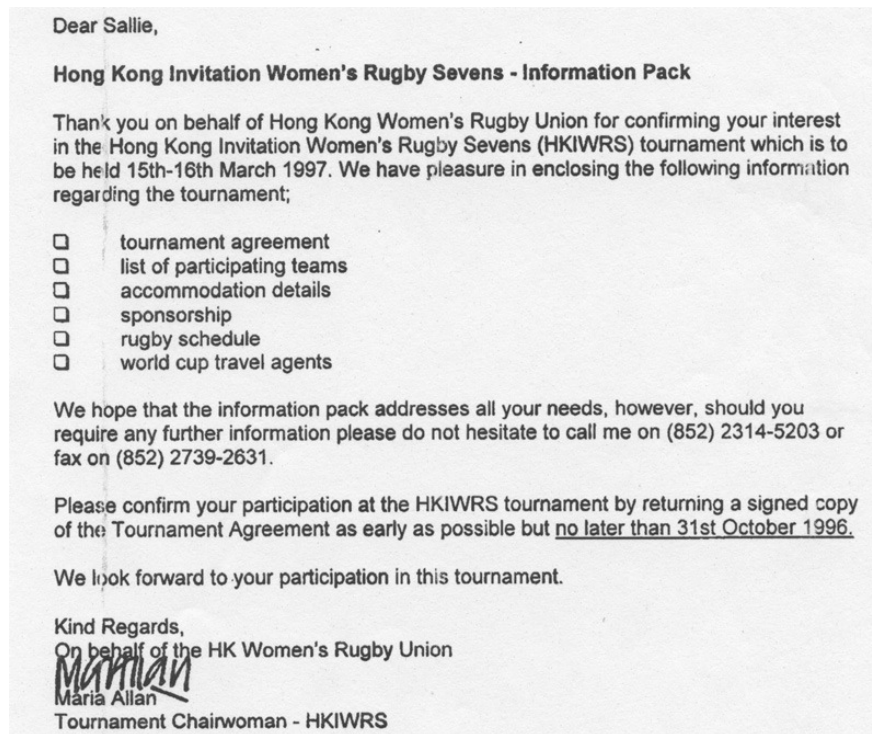
Now that rugby has been accepted into the Olympic Games, it's fair to say that the IRB's success is in part due to their support of the women's game. Rugby would not be an Olympic sport without the women, and women would not have an international 7s presence were it not for one man – Emil Signes.

Signes pushed for years to get an international women's 7s circuit and a 7s World Cup. It took longer than he hoped, but he was clearly proud to see the event take place in 2009. Not only take place, but be held alongside with the men.

Here (Signes's own words in italics) is how it all happened:

*On May 15, 1996, the US received an invitation to the 1997 Hong Kong Invitational Women's Rugby Sevens (HKIWRS), a tournament to which 16 national women's teams have been invited. Within a month we had accepted the invitation and I was appointed coach to the US national women's sevens team.*

Here is a follow-up to that invitation, dated 24th August 1996. It was addressed to Sallie Ahlert, USA Rugby Women's Coordinator. After I had put in place a format to select a national team a couple of years earlier, Sallie had been pushing me (more on this below) to find a place for a national sevens team to play: finally it was happening!



We now [I wrote in 1996] have put in place a program to select a national team, and are moving full speed ahead.

*The next step in providing international women's sevens venues happened so much by accident that it still cracks me up to think about it. I found out exactly when it happened only in late June, when I read a May 1, 1996 article in the Eastern Express, a Hong Kong newspaper. It quoted Hong Kong's Maria Allen, who said, "The United States team were in Dubai and were asking about an international fixture . . . and it was probably from that we thought we could maybe have our own tournament."*

*Well, that "United States team ... were asking" would be me ... and this is how it happened. The US representative at the men's Dubai Sevens in November 1995 was the invitational side Atlantis which I was coaching. We had to be at the airport at 6am on the day following the tournament, and were a bit the worse for wear. Next to us on the check-in lines were the Hong Kong Police women, who had won the women's bracket of the Dubai Sevens. They were in no better shape than we, maybe worse.*

*Having listened to USA women's sevens coordinator Sallie Ahlert badger me for three years about finding a venue for US women All Stars to play, and having been seven times, as either coach or manager to the men's Eagles, to the Hong Kong Sevens, where good sevens play is venerated, I put two and two together and realized that these Hong Kong women rugby players might represent an opportunity to expand the Hong Kong Sevens to women's teams.*

*I remember speaking to women's sevens chairperson Anne Marie O'Donoghue at the airport. I inquired about the possibility of the Hong Kong women driving an effort to use the success of the men's Hong Kong Sevens to provide a venue for international women's sevens play (I was actually trying to lead them to find an arrangement where the US women could be involved in some kind of*

*mini-tournament within "the" Hong Kong Sevens). I was amused to discover, via the Hong Kong press, that that was almost certainly the conversation that finally got the ball rolling.*

*A funny thing, coincidence.*

### 1996: our link to the Hong Kong Women's Sevens documented

Anne Marie O'Donoghue left Hong Kong not long after that meeting. Although hers was the only name I recorded, it turned out that the other Hong Kong woman with whom I spoke in that informal airport encounter was Ruth Mitchell. Ruth was one of Hong Kong's top players and also one of the leaders of the Hong Kong women's rugby community. Ruth remembers that conversation very well.

I remember in that conversation that Anne Marie expressed concern that the local women had been given a little time for demo games on Sunday morning and she didn't want to lose that; also she didn't know that they were ready for such a grandiose scheme. So we started with an invitational tournament that took place the day before the men's tournament. There were only 4 teams scheduled to take part, and the Atlantis women were one of them. In the end, there was a monster rain storm the night before the tournament and it was moved from a legitimate venue (Aberdeen Stadium) to an elementary school field with barely room for a sideline, and delayed by a couple of hours. We won the tournament easily, but it would have died there, I think, except for one small fact: BBC commentator Ian Robertson was there. More on this below.

Two articles from the Hong Kong paper, one from April 30 and the referenced one from May 1 are inserted below.

Article from April 30 Hong Kong Eastern Express:

**HONG KONG, TUESDAY, APRIL 30, 1996** **EASTERN EXPRESS** **PAGE 41**

# HK to host women's world sevens

## 'We're inviting the top teams in the northern and southern hemispheres'

**RUGBY UNION**  
Kevin Faux

**H**ong Kong will host the first women's world sevens tournament next year, one week before the men's World Cup Sevens.

The new tournament will be held on the weekend of March 15-16, at a venue still to be finalised, and will feature 16 nations.

"We've already got the best men's sevens tournament in the world and now we hope to have the best women's tournament - and it's not going to be a one-off," said Maria Allen, chairwoman of the tournament.

"Holding it just before the World Cup Sevens means we'll be gatecrashing the biggest sevens party ever but there's huge sevens interest in Hong Kong and no reason our tournament shouldn't go on and on.

"It'll be the first women's world sevens, but its title will be the Hong Kong Invitational Women's Rugby Sevens. There are 22 nations in the Women's Rugby Union and we're only inviting 16 of them, so we can't officially call it the women's world sevens.

"But we're inviting the top teams in the northern and southern hemispheres and there'll be teams from Asia - so it's practically a world sevens."

Teams will be divided into four pools of four for the preliminary rounds on the first day, with Cup, Plate and Bowl knockout competitions to follow on the second day. A venue has yet to be finalised.

"We're in talks about where to play but it won't be Hong Kong Stadium - we're not going to fill 40,000 places and, in any case, the stadium will be closed while they prepare the pitch for the men's event," Allen said.

Mong Kok Stadium, Hong Kong Football Club, King's Park and Shek Kip Mei are believed to be other stadiums they are considering.

"We know it is an ambitious undertaking, pretty huge, but we have a good administrative structure in place and rugby is the world's fastest developing women's team sport," Allen said.

"We've also got the full backing of the Hong Kong Football Rugby Union."

This was confirmed by Pieter Schats, executive director of the union.

"We're delighted the event is going ahead and that women's rugby is moving in this direction," Schats said.

Pippa Hector, marketing and press officer of the women's tournament, makes no bones about why the women have scheduled their event for the week before the Carlsberg 10s and the men's World Sevens.

"We're going to have nine days of rugby and we're hoping some of those people who come to Hong Kong for the 10s and the Sevens will come a little earlier to encompass our event," Hector said.

"We may have a long way to go but even the men's sevens had to start once and we're hoping ours will also run and run."

"We're obviously looking for sponsors but it shouldn't be too difficult to attract them because they'll benefit from the unique exposure our event is going to provide."

The Hong Kong Women's Rugby Union, who are full members of the men's union, first proposed the tournament in December.

Allen said: "They basically approved on the understanding that the women provide all the administration for it as they'll be very busy with the men's event."

While Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Fiji dominate the men's game, at 15s or sevens, it is northern hemisphere sides who will be favourites to win the women's tournament.

Allen said: "The top teams in the women's game are teams are the United States and England - England are the current world champions - but that's in 15s, there's never been a sevens."

"Holland are quite high up, too, and Spain won the 1995 European championship."

Hong Kong, however, will be making their international debut in the women's game.

Hector said: "This will be the first Hong Kong women's rugby team - so it'll be a big and important step in our development."

The territory's first women's league was set up five years ago with five teams, playing seven-a-side.

Allen said: "The league grew quickly and last year we developed 10s and set up two divisions. This year we'll hopefully develop 15s."

"Most of the major men's clubs now have women's teams and there's been demonstration games of women's rugby at the last three Sevens."

"We've got at least 200 girls, western and Chinese, playing regularly and the women's game is definitely coming on in leaps and bounds."

"Women can enjoy it at any age because it's a developing sport but what's good for the future is that it's getting younger and younger. Our Player of the Year was a 16-year-old schoolgirl."

"We take the game very seriously, too - we train twice a week and play every Saturday."

The First Division, which plays 10s, is made up of two teams from Valley, two from Police, two from Aberdeen and once each from Gai Wu and Kowloon.

The Second Division, which plays sevens, is played in schools.

**Women's Sevens tournament committee:** Maria Allen (chairwoman, tel 2314-5203), Pippa Hector (marketing, tel 2869-8663), Vicki Harris (grounds co-ordinator), Charlotte Culkin (treasurer), Neil Gladway (players liaison), Sue Slater (sponsorship) and Sue Pace (secretary).

This article provided the good news, but it was the next day's article that gave some insights as to how they had decided to hold it. From the May 1, 1996 Eastern Express:



# Sevens with a woman's touch

'The coverage we got was awful – the usual boobs and bums nonsense'

## RUGBY UNION

Kevin Faurie

There are few sporting spectacles more likely to bring out chauvinism, sexism and sheer silliness in men than the sight of women playing rugby.

That much was evident at the last Hong Kong Sevens, where Maria Allan starred in a women's demonstration game.

"There was a photographer trying to find me," she says. "But it turned out he just wanted to take some embarrassing

photos to put up in the office because he thought it was funny.

"We didn't get much coverage and what we got in one paper was awful – really detrimental, the usual boobs and bums nonsense."

Not that Allan was surprised. When she did a degree in journalism at Wolverhampton University in England a few years ago, her thesis was on the portrayal of sportswomen by the media.

"The conclusion was that it all comes down to newsworthiness," she says.

"Basically, women's sports were not seen as newsworthy

and didn't get objective coverage."

As far as Hong Kong is concerned, however, all that might be about to change.

The Women's Rugby Union are to hold the first Hong Kong Invitational Women's Rugby Sevens on March 15-16 next year (announced in yesterday's *Eastern Express*), a week before the World Cup Sevens.

"We're serious about our sport and we want to be taken seriously," says Allan, chairwoman of the new tournament's organising committee.

"If we can jump on the World Cup Sevens bandwagon, we can basically ensure women's

sevens is given a lot of respect.

"I think that if TV and the press decide to cover it in a detrimental way... well, I don't think they will be able to do that. We've got the backing of the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union and that gives us a lot of clout.

"And the fact that international teams are coming to Hong Kong for a sevens tournament, investing time and money, means the women's rugby will have to be taken seriously."

Allan has taken it seriously since her Wolverhampton days. "I was university captain in 1980," she says. "After I graduated, I played 15s rugby for Crawley."

"Three years ago, I came to Hong Kong, played a year with Police and the last two years I've played with Kowloon."

"The women's leagues used

to be seven-a-side, but the sport is growing fast and last year we started playing 10s."

That fast growth has been highlighted with Police winning the Women's Dubai Sevens for the past two years – triumphs which may have indirectly led to birth of next year's Hong Kong tournament.

"The United States team were in Dubai and were asking us about an international fixture," Allan says. "We've had a demonstration game at the last three Hong Kong Sevens, but that's always been between two Hong Kong teams."

"We started thinking about having an international future and it was probably from that we thought maybe we could have our own tournament."

"The union made us put up a proposal on what ideas we had. We put it to them in December and pointed out it was the

fastest-growing women's team sport, how we'd market the tournament and so on."

"England and the United States, who are the world's top two sides, had already verbally agreed to send a team if the tournament was going ahead."

"The union said no problem, they'd support us. We have a union rep on our committee to guide us, help us, and the person we've been given is their executive director Pieter Schaafs, which is great."

"The union have a lot of experience in running an international sevens event, but we're not going to be a burden on their World Cup Sevens committee. "We'll use the union for advice and to get what we want, but we want to do this tournament off our own backs."

"What, in terms of spectacle, though, can spectators expect to see next year?

"The standard of some of the continental teams is phenomenal," Allan says. "We had a small tournament the day before this year's Sevens, a man from the BBC came down and he was absolutely raving, the skill was so good."

"Anyone watching women play soon sees that they're very skilful – women have actually been taught how to play and tend to play more textbook rugby than the men. Their handling skills are often tremendous."

"It's the same at the demonstration games we've had at the Hong Kong Sevens. People see us and they are saying, like, 'wow, women play rugby, women play rugby quite well'."

"A lot of people say women play with more finesse than brute force. A Japanese team who came to our tournament were excellent, and at the Hong

Kong Sevens demonstration game two years ago our Most Valuable Player was Ivy, a tiny Chinese girl."

Allan hopes and expects Chinese players to be in the Hong Kong team at next year's women's sevens – something which will help ingrain the sport in the Hong Kong community after 1997 when many western players may have left.

"We're in the right place for this tournament to be set up," she says. "The World Cup moves around every four years, but the Hong Kong Sevens is here every year."

"We're going to start quite small, but once a women's international sevens gets credibility, it can grow, and we can get that credibility by having the tournament in Hong Kong."

"A week before the Sevens – you're on a winner."

There are a few key points in this article, which highlights a decision - to host international women's sevens - that will result in new-found respect for women's rugby in Hong Kong. Maria Allan comments: "all that [boobs and bums nonsense] might be about to change." In column 5 she references the meeting in Dubai mentioned in Alex's article; she also references, in the 7th column (second column from the right), "we had a small tournament the day before this year's Sevens, a man from the BBC came down and he was absolutely raving, the skill level was so good."

Well, as noted, that man was Ian Robertson from the BBC, a long-time commentator on the Hong Kong Sevens (and a former Scottish international and British Lion). I knew Ian from the years I coached and managed the US men's national team at the Hong Kong Sevens - he used to come to our practices to familiarize himself with the players. The team he was raving about was Atlantis (by the end of the day, we had emptied our bag of tricks, and they had all worked).

The tournament was tiny, on a poor field, poorly attended, and the competition was very weak. Not knowing that, we had practiced a lot of fancy crowd pleasing stuff at penalties, lineouts, everything. And though our "crowd" was basically one person (and a couple of parents and a friend or two), that one person was absolutely the right one. Ian told me later in the day how much he had enjoyed seeing us play. Had Ian not been there, I think this entire opportunity might have passed us by; the organizers were clearly affected by Ian's comments. It scares me sometimes to think how close we came to having this entire process delayed by - who knows how many years?

Note that there were a few things that still concerned the HK women. In the April 30 piece above, Maria Allan notes that the 1997 tournament will take place the week before the men's sevens, and "it won't be in Hong Kong Stadium - we're not going to fill 40,000 places and, in any case, the stadium will be closed while they prepare for the men's event." I'll discuss later in the piece how, despite these comments, the final ended up in the stadium in 1999.

Our 1996 team? Well this was just a club tournament, and we played as the invitational rugby club Atlantis. Our team, however, comprised mostly international players; our goal was to impress. Here is a team picture:



*Atlantis Women, Hong Kong Women's Rugby Club Tournament, March 1996*  
 Top, L to R: Emil Signes, Pam Irby, Nancy Fitz, MJ Mohl, Sallie Ahlert, Amy Westerman  
 Bottom, L to R: Janet Marshall, Tracy Moens, Candi Orsini, Patty Jervey, Kim Cyganik, Jos Bergmann, Suzanne Cobarruvias

### **Back to 1988: How the US prepared for Women's Sevens**

Before going on, I'd like to back up to 1988, because that's where the story takes wings. The first-ever Hong Kong [men's] Sevens took place in 1976, the US was first-invited in 1981, and it soon became apparent that we could compete against anyone in this game. I was named coach in 1986 and in 1988, when I was also a member of USARFU's Board of Directors, I was asked to chair a National Sevens Committee to spread the game of sevens throughout the US. One of the first things I did was to encourage all groups other than just senior men (there had been both a club and All-Star Sevens for the men since 1985) - i.e. senior women, collegiate, military, youth, etc. of both sexes - to organize their own sevens structure.

Donna Hylton of NOVA agreed to chair the women's effort, and although unsuccessful in generating immediate national interest, she did manage to establish a qualifying process and a club championship in the East, beginning in Norfolk in 1991.

In 1992, while I was assistant national coach to the US women's 15s team, I helped Tara Flanagan organize the first-ever women's Atlantis team, which participated in - and won - Spain's prestigious Benidorm Sevens. We fielded mostly Eagles, and in the Benidorm final beat a Saracens (London) team that started 6 England internationals.



*May 1992: Atlantis Women and Fiji men, Benidorm tournament champions*  
*Atlantis, standing: Chris Harju, Kathy Brown, Mary Beth Spirk, Julie Drustrup, Krista McFarren*  
*Atlantis, seated: Sheri Hunt, Tam Breckenridge, Tara Flanagan, Tracy Henderson (Moens), Elise Huffer*  
*Note Waisale Serevi, seated left*

The report of this tour got Oklahoma's Sallie Ahlert excited about the prospect of All-Star Sevens teams. When I told her I thought select-sides were pointless unless they had something to do, somewhere to go, she initiated a formal process to select an official West Women's Sevens side that not only existed in name, but also traveled -- to Cape Fear in 1994 (finalists), Toronto in 1995 (finalists), and Las Vegas 1996 (champions).

Sallie even organized an unofficial national women's club sevens competition in 1993 won by Southeast of Atlanta. (These unofficial championships continued for years until the first-ever *official* USA Rugby women's club sevens competition in 2011, won by the Berkeley All Blues. Women's All-Star Sevens began in 2001, when they were known as ITTs [Inter-territorial tournaments].)

Still, there was no place for a national women's team to go, which takes us back to my earlier comments about Sallie badgering me to find one. In retrospect, her pestering me was certainly on my mind when I approached the Hong Kong women at the Dubai airport in 1995 to urge them to start a Hong Kong Women's Sevens. (I use the words "badgering" and "pestering" because that's the way I saw it at the time; in the end she just did what she needed to do to get me to act; I am certainly grateful for her persistence.)

But back to Alex's article; again italics are quotes from me. He is writing about the 1997 Hong Kong Sevens, which took place the week before the men's Hong Kong Sevens.

#### **1997-1999: A Start, a Hiccup, and a Leap**

##### **[1997]: The First International Women's Sevens:**

*After a competitive first 10 minutes, in which New Zealand scored only on the first and last play, and a strong beginning to the second half, the US finally caved in to superior athleticism and the final score was not close. New Zealand averaged 2 points per minute or more in all its games, and they were worthy champions. Equally, we were clearly the second best team in the tournament, and our semifinal win over England was very exciting.*

Twelve teams participated in the tournament. New Zealand and the USA were 5-0 in their pools. England and Hong Kong 2nd at 4-1.

In the Cup Semifinals New Zealand defeated Hong Kong 39-7, while in the much-anticipated match between the USA and England, the Eagles won 17-5, on two tries by Lisa Rowe and a try by Sue Parker. [It was a very satisfying win, as England were the reigning 15s World Champions, having defeated the US in the final of the previous {15s} Women's World Cup.]

Dianne Apiti [later Kahura] scored 4 tries for New Zealand in the final and New Zealand were champions.

##### **International Women's Sevens at "the" Sevens.**

*When speaking with the Hong Kong women in 1995, I had hoped to get a women's event associated with "the" Sevens. In a 1996 repeat of that request, the word was that the women's time slot at the Sevens was for "Hong Kong women." While I was resigned to that fact this year, assistant coach and manager Al Caravelli was not, and he and New Zealand coach Darryl Suasua convinced those in charge that the Hong Kong Sevens represented a chance to market women's rugby to the masses, and that it was in everyone's best interest to put on an event showcasing the best that we could offer.*



*Most players had gone home [to repeat, this was a full week after the women's tourney], but there were quite a few good players remaining for the Sevens, and we put together a team of four New Zealanders (Anna Richards, Anna Rush, Maata Young and Monique Hiroranaa), three Americans (Anita Pease, Krista McFarren and Tracy Moens), one Australian (Libby Andrews), and Ruth Mitchell and Charlotte Cullen of Hong Kong to play in a "Hong Kong Women vs. the Rest of the World."*

*The game was played at 9 AM Saturday, two hours before the first men's match, but because of the queuing for seats, there were probably between 5,000 and 10,000 people already in the stands. The Rest of the World won handily, but that wasn't the point: the way had been paved for future, bigger and better, women's participation in the Hong Kong Sevens.*

*Still, this little made-up game was far from what we were looking for.*

*Post-script on this article: In this article I referenced a person I had convinced to help me with the program, Al Caravelli. Al came as assistant coach and manager and ended up helping me with all the programs with which I was associated, just as I now help him with the US men.*

*"Al," I wrote, "brings a wealth of experience, intelligence, intensity, compassion and puts everything he has into every venture he undertakes. He was a vital cog in getting women's rugby on the Hong Kong stadium turf in 1997."*



*First-ever USA Women's National Sevens Team*

*Standing: Anita Pease, Sheri Hunt, Janine Cochran, Tracy Moens, Lisa Rowe, Sue Parker, Keirsten Lawton, Jen Lucas, Krista McFarren, Nancy Fitz  
Kneeling: Emil Signes, Al Caravelli*

### **[1998]: A step backward ...**

*The Women's World Cup of 1998 dropped the number of teams available for an international sevens event in Hong Kong and to the great sadness of Signes and the USA team, the women's event was canceled.*

*This was quite a painful time. I knew the Women's World Cup (15s) was taking place in 1998 and I was worried that, given the importance of the World Cup and the novelty of the sevens, the sevens would be canceled. We had a selection camp scheduled and I didn't want to select a team that had nowhere to go.*

*But the Hong Kong Women assured me the tournament would go on. Here's an email I received from Hong Kong on the 27th of January.*

Dear Emil,

Thank you for your email dated Wed. 7 Jan 1998. I can appreciate your concerns of the organization of the HKIWS 1998 tournament. First of all I can assure you the March 20th-23rd Tournament "IS HAPPENING" and we are really looking forward to having a participating team from the USA! We Have confirmed the same sponsors as last year, Jardine Unit Trusts.

We area busy on our end in preparation to put off a great weekend of rugby for all the teams attending. We realise the cost is a lot and that Hong Kong is not the closest place to fly to. Please know that we have a lot of fun activities planned for you and hope you will enjoy your time with us. We do value your effort to participate in our tournament both on and off the pitch!

Here is a break down of the attending teams:

1. China
2. Fiji
3. Hong Kong
4. Japan
5. New Zealand
6. PLA
7. Singapore
8. USA
9. Thailand
10. Western Samoa \*\*
11. Arabian Gulf \*\*
12. Ireland \*\*

We originally wanted 16 teams but with World Cup the British teams pulled out. We do plan to go to 16 teams next year.

\*\* means we are still confirming these teams, purely because of financial difficulty.

*Email from Hong Kong Women telling us 1998 tournament "IS HAPPENING"*

Unfortunately, the tournament did not happen, something we did not know until after we had had our camp - which players attended on their own funds and into which they poured their hearts and souls - and picked our team. What this meant was that we had picked a national team with nowhere to go.

The fact that we, along with the Hong Kong tournament, were ground-breakers for international women's sevens meant that, with Hong Kong out of it, we really had no other suitable place to go. In the end we took the team to the Ontario Sevens in Toronto, an excellent and well-attended sevens tournament for both sexes. We won the tournament, but it was a disappointing turn of events.





**The US Women, winners of the 1998 Magnificent 7s: (FRONT, L-R) Eckert, Parker, Madden, Fitz, Wilson, Rodriguez, Jones. (BACK) White, Spirk, Caravelli, McCoy, Pease, Lucas, Signes, Tyler.**

*The women's team that didn't get to compete in Hong Kong in 1998: Toronto, July 1998*

*Standing: Dawn White, Mary Beth Spirk, Al Caravelli, Julie McCoy, Anita Pease, Jen Lucas, Kerry McCabe, Emil Signes, John Tyler  
Seated: TJ Eckert, Sue Parker, Meg Madden, Nancy Fitz, Shelley Wilson, Inés Rodríguez, Dee Jones*

*Some good came out of 1998, however: I attended the 1998 [Hong Kong] tournament as a journalist and had a long meeting with Dick Airth and Karen Robertson [of the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union] about the future of the tournament. I stressed that it would not only be in our interest but also in the interest of the tournament to have "some exposure" of the women to the fans at the Sevens. Maybe, I suggested, we could have the tournament the day before the men's tournament and have the semi-finals and finals, or at least the finals, take place in the Hong Kong Stadium during the men's tournament.*

*Following the 1999 event, in which we did just that, I was touched when Dick Airth specifically credited that conversation as the catalyst for the integration of the women's final with the men's tournament. [Dick mentioned this in a talk that he gave at the banquet following the women's tournament.] A summary of what I wrote at the time follows.*

### **1999. USA Sevens Women Make the Big Time**

*Hong Kong, Friday, March 26, 1999. Playing in Hong Kong stadium during "the" Sevens in front of more than 20,000 people should be every ambitious rugby player's dream. Very few, however, achieve this dream. Particularly women. That's because, until now, there has never been a significant women's game played at this venue.*

*1999, the 24th year of the Hong Kong Sevens, was the first year that an important women's match was contested in the hallowed ground of the Hong Kong Stadium.*

*Our primary goal was to get to that final. And, with a convincing victory over a strong England team in the semifinals, we did it! That semifinal, incidentally, may well have been the first international rugby game in which identical twins – Jane and Emma Mitchell – competed against each other (Jane for the US and Emma for England).*

*In the finals, the US women gave New Zealand everything they could handle in the first half, holding them scoreless for the first seven minutes, and trailing only 0-5 at half time of the 20-minute game. The US, in fact, was within 10 meters of the NZ goal for an extended period, and in the end it was our offense and not our D, that was to let us down.*

*On the sidelines as US team mascot was 6-year-old Kristina Caravelli.*

*The fans raved about the game, and our players were recognized, and complimented, by dozens of fans as they left the stadium at the end of the evening. Furthermore, during the course of the next two days, several coaches, players, committee members and members of the media spoke to me with great admiration for the standard of play. Even commentator David Campese, who two years earlier had said women shouldn't be playing rugby, spoke positively of the game, and talking with him made it obvious he had watched the whole thing.*

*A quick aside to elaborate on the David Campese comment: "Campo" was a legendary Australian winger in the 80s and early 90s; I knew him from our paths crossing many times; not only were we at the same events, but the US 7s team scrimmaged Australia on many occasions. When I told him I was coaching the US women, he grumbled something about the unsuitability of women playing rugby (Campo is nothing if not opinionated). This particular evening, though, we met back at the hotel, and he was describing some of the play in that game in great detail and in a very complimentary fashion; as I noted above, it made me*

realize that he'd not only watched it but paid a lot of attention to it. Funny guy, Campo.

Playing in the Hong Kong stadium in front of a huge crowd - and playing so well (both teams) - was super-important for women's rugby in general, and for the US women in particular (from our perspective, of course). Our credibility was at stake. The preliminary games were played just down the road at the Hong Kong Football Club and we had to beat England to get into the stadium. It was a phenomenal win - and with two identical twins playing against each other, there was a little additional drama as well.

Here's the US squad. This picture was taken following the final against New Zealand. The US lost the game, but the game won the future for women's sevens.



*US Women after Final - in "the" Hong Kong Stadium-, Hong Kong Women's Sevens 1999  
Standing: Al Caravelli, Inés Rodríguez, Jane Mitchell, Erina Queen, Nancy Fitz, Diane Schnapp, Anita Pease, Emil Signes  
Kneeling, players: Kim Cyganik, Michele Friel, Laura Cabrera, Lisa Rowe  
Kneeling, mascot: Kristina Caravelli*

So, as far as my influence on the process, with respect to the early Hong Kong Sevens I think I can fairly say something like "sine qua not yet." It's hard to imagine international women's sevens not starting eventually, but without the 1995 Dubai meeting and the 1996 mini-tourney it wouldn't have started in 1997. For what it's worth, Wikipedia, who has an extensive list of women's international sevens tournaments, lists the 1997 Hong Kong event as the first. And the second was in Hong Kong in 1999. And the third was in Hong Kong in 2000. (Well they list a couple of one-off sevens matches in the Caribbean in that time period, but my guess is that they played sevens because there weren't enough women playing there in those days for 15s.)

See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_women%27s\\_rugby\\_sevens\\_competitions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_women%27s_rugby_sevens_competitions)

## **2002: A BIG Announcement, and then ... another delay ...**

New Zealand won the next 3 years, and in 2002 the IRB's Jamie Scott attended the women's banquet and outlined a plan that saw the women's World Cup 7s in 2005. Scott turned out to be 4-years premature, but, said Signes, "the handwriting never left



the wall."

The following, from the Hong Kong Women's Sevens Program, was written by Jamie Scott, IRB Executive Council Representative, Asia. Jamie presented its contents to the women at our banquet following the tournament. It was exciting.



## Message from IRB & ARFU

I want to congratulate and thank Hong Kong Women's Rugby, through the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union, for their continuing drive and enthusiasm in undertaking, once again, to host this the 3rd Asian Zone Women's Rugby Sevens Championship.

This Tournament is a very significant and worthwhile event and an important link across the board in the International Rugby Board's regional development policy of Global Development Through Regional Tournaments - Mens, Youth and Women's Rugby.

That fact was recognized at the November 2001 International Rugby Board's Executive Council Meeting where, in a significant step forward for global women's rugby, the Board agreed that the staging, in 2005, of a Women's Rugby World Cup Sevens would greatly assist in the development of the Women's Game and was in line with the Board's stated aim of including both Mens and Women's rugby as a competition sport in the Olympic Games.

The Forward Plan timetable is -

- 2003 - Regional Women's Sevens Competitions in Asia, Oceania, Europe, Africa and the Americas
- 2004 - Regional Women's RWC Sevens 2005 Qualifying Rounds
- 2005 - Women's Rugby World Cup Sevens

Once again, Hong Kong Women's Rugby have shown the world the way. I wish all participants an enjoyable and successful Tournament.





**Jamie Scott**  
IRB Executive Council Representative, Asia



*Jamie Scott in 2002: Jamie's note indicates the importance of the Hong Kong Women's Sevens and the direct link between the Hong Kong Women's Sevens and the proposal to stage a Women's Rugby World Cup Sevens and have rugby included - as a 2-gender sport - in the Olympic Games*

### 2002/2009: Everyone's Work Pays Off

After that, the work kept getting done. Dubai held their tournament. The women's tournament in Hong Kong continued to grow,



and when the USA 7s was started in 2004, there was always a women's presence. The USA didn't always win at the USA 7s, but they kept putting their handwriting on that wall, bringing in Canada, China, South Africa, England, and the New Zealand Maori.

Following Hong Kong, other nations started to host women's sevens tournaments. New Zealand hosted an international tournament in Wellington in 2001 and in Whangarei from 2001 to 2003; Japan held an international women's tournament in 2001 in Yokohama, and Fiji in 2003 in Suva. The US attended all of them. Regional tournaments for national women's teams - in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America/Caribbean, and South America - began in the early 2000s and exploded with the 2006 announcement of a men AND women's Rugby World Cup Sevens in 2009, after rugby's 2005 bid for Olympic inclusion was turned down for lack of a suitable women's presence.

At the 2009 USA 7s the USA v. England game ended in a tie. The men's tournament schedule was almost sacrosanct and there was no time to play overtime. IRB Chairman Bernard Lapasset didn't hesitate. "Play overtime" he said. So they did. Women's 7s had to have enough meaning to crown a champion.

Signes:

*The rest, as they say, is history. I left the women's sevens position in 2005 (I had hoped to hang on till the first World Cup but 9 years was enough) and I'm now [2008] back with the US men's coaching staff as video analyst. Nevertheless the US, and now the world's, commitment to international women's sevens goes on. The World Cup Sevens for women was not held in 2005, but it will go on in March of 2009 in Dubai in conjunction with the men's Rugby World Cup Sevens at the same event. The dream of the US women's rugby community 20 years ago, my dream, Emilito's dream, will culminate in reality ... it should be a great event!*

*And I am thrilled to have sowed the seed that reaped such a bountiful harvest.*

*I have spent my entire rugby career trying to get the men and women of rugby to appreciate each other; hopefully this event takes us along the desired path.*

## Afterwords

While I've described a process in more or less chronological order, lots of things were happening in the background, some of which may be relevant to the final outcome, some of which are merely (but possibly interesting) footnotes. The first one discusses creating an ambiance for the integration of men and women's teams. The second presents articles representing 25 years of speculation about rugby in the Olympics and a quick note on one of my earliest experiences coaching women's sevens, followed by a very quick synopsis of the progression from teams like that to the Olympic games (my version, anyway).

### **1. Boys and Girls Together**

To my mind the 2009 Dubai Sevens World Cup, with men and women's games alternating on two fields (the main field in the stadium and a field behind the stadium with a nice hillside from which to watch) throughout the weekend - and 54,000 fans in the stadium - represented an event I'd been dreaming about for more than 20 years. There have been men and women's brackets at US sevens tournaments almost as long as there's been women's rugby in the US: the first such tournament I attended was the New York Sevens in 1975. The first time I was associated with sevens teams of both genders was our local Bethlehem tournament, in which I coached both the Bethlehem men and women's sevens (the Hooligans and Maulie Maguires) starting in 1982. We spent a lot of time training together, playing touch together, and it worked out better than one might have thought.

At the elite level, the first event I recall in which I was affiliated with sevens teams of both genders was the 1992 Benidorm Sevens. I attended in two functions: as manager of the US men's team - who competed in the men's international bracket - and coach of the women's Atlantis team - in the women's bracket. As at most of these events, at the start each was wary of the other, but by the end of the week the players were best friends. Based on Facebook comments, they continue to look at that week as a great event for both rugby and social interaction. The men got to the semifinals, losing to champion Fiji, and the women won the tournament over a Saracens team of mostly England internationals.

Ironically, when they returned to JFK airport they received news of two not-so-friendly dual-gender national 15s tournaments (men's All-Star and women's clubs) held at the same venue in MN. (From what I heard, "not so friendly" was putting it mildly.) In contrast this sevens tour in particular - and sevens in general - proved to be a great way for players of both genders to interact positively off the field as well as being fans for one another on the field.

In 1998 the situation was reversed. The US women's national sevens team participated in the Ontario Sevens; I coached this team and Mary Beth Spirk coached the Atlantis Collegiate men (Mary Beth, incidentally, is now among the nation's top 20 all-time winningest coaches in women's NCAA D-3 basketball [at Moravian College]). The two sexes got along fine, the women - one of whom was future national sevens coach Jules McCoy - acting as solicitous big sisters to the college boys.

Starting in the late 90s, there have also been a dozen joint men and women Atlantis tours: 7 to the Caribbean Sevens in Port of Spain, Trinidad (what a great venue!), 3 at Cape Fear, one to Brazil (a tour for the ages), one to Mexico, and most recently one to Cuba in 2011.



*July 2002, Niteroi (just across the bridge from Rio): our first night in Brazil  
Atlantis & Niteroi Men and Women celebrate after playing*

For many years both the men's collegiate All-Stars and the women's U-23 team competed in the All-Star Sevens. On a couple of occasions we got together for a joint barbecue before the event.



*Men's Collegiate and Women U-23 at All Star Sevens, Utah 2007*

*Standing on left in black shirt & white shorts is Nate Ebner, now a defensive back for the New England Patriots (he had just graduated high school)*

On one occasion – the 2011 CRC Sevens in Philadelphia – I was both coaching the Princeton women and helping to coach the Arizona men. We got together for a dinner prior to the tournament, at which a brief exchange took place that has made it into U of Arizona rugby lore: one of the Arizona players, making conversation, asked the Princeton co-captain who their biggest rival was. She paused for a moment and said, “You mean academically?”





*Arizona men and Princeton women share a meal in downtown Philadelphia at 2011 Collegiate Rugby [Sevens] Championships (CRC)*

At any rate, to get beyond these anecdotes, the Rugby World Cup Sevens of 2009 in Dubai has shown how successful these joint tournaments can be. 54,000 fans throughout the weekend loved every game, both men and women's.

At one point, I'm told, NBC, who televises the CRC Sevens, haughtily dismissed any notion of televising any of the women's games at the event: "Do they televise the NBA and WNBA games together?" was one of the ridiculous comments they apparently made. Well, no, but those games aren't less than 20 minutes long nor played in strings of several unrelated games at a time in packed stadiums. Most major sports have events that are 2 hours long, or longer. In sevens rugby we can fit 6 games into a 2 hour time period; why not mix men and women's games?

The IRB is in the process of putting together a mostly separate circuit for the women. Recognition of international women's sevens as an entity in its own right is a great thing; nevertheless I'm not crazy about that idea. In my view it's important – and eminently doable – that these be tournaments in which both sexes participate on an integrated basis. The proposal to hold separate events for the women has as its purpose equal treatment of the sexes, and it's also true that currently women are not given equal time in the main stadiums at IRB World Series events. Nevertheless, although it's easy to make the women's tournaments separate, making them equal will be more difficult than people imagine. I envision an event where 50,000 enthusiastic fans see the best rugby players in the world – of both sexes – on the same stage. We did it – and we did it well – in Dubai in 2009. We do it in track and field. For now at least, I'm convinced that "boys and girls together" is the way to go. We have a team sport that uniquely – by virtue of 15-minute games – lends itself to that treatment.

I could be wrong. But my heart tells me I'm right.



*October 2008: US Men and Women in the Bahamas for 2009 Rugby World Cup Sevens Qualifiers ... both qualified*

## **2. 1975-1994: Olympics Past and Potential ... then women's sevens in the 80s and where it led**

I have subscribed to *Rugby* (AKA Rugby Magazine) since its original January 1975 issue, when it was, albeit briefly, called *Scrumdown*, and kept virtually all the issues. It's interesting that at the inauguration of this magazine there had - as of January 1, 1975 - as yet been no national American rugby team - except those that represented the US in the 1920 and 1924 Olympics. More than 50 years later, the inaugural issue's cover picture was of the 1924 USA Olympic Champions. Looking both back into the past and forward into the future, the Olympics were always on our minds.



*Cover picture of first-ever issue - January 1975 - of Rugby (then Scrumdown)*

In 1984, *Rugby* again featured an article on the 1924 team, as told from the perspective of one of the last survivors, Norman Cleveland.



September 24, 1984 — RUGBY — Page 6

# A Player Recalls The 1924 Olympics

by Norman Cleaveland

The 1924 Olympics were the Eighth Olympiad and the fourth during which rugby was played. Rugby was first played as an Olympic sport in Paris during 1900. The French won. The Australians took the championship in the London Olympics of 1908. The Americans won at Antwerp in 1920 and successfully defended their championship in Paris during 1924. They have not been challenged since then.

## Substantial Gate Receipts

The only challenges during 1924 were from the French and the Roumanians. But even with so few teams entered in the rugby competition, only soccer produced greater gate receipts at the Paris Olympics. Obviously any future challenges would be very profitable financially for all concerned.

As a member of the 1924 American rugby team I can verify that we were very disappointed that there were so few challengers in Paris. We were eager to take on all comers, particularly the British, the New Zealanders, the Australians and the South Africans whom we had reason to believe knew a thing or two about rugby and no doubt would improve our play.

## France: One of the World's Top Sides

As it was, the French who took the other medals were not able

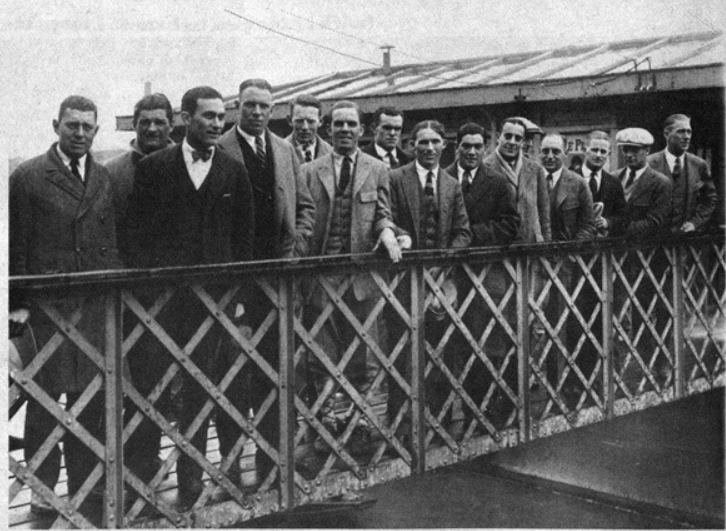
highly respected Welshman who refereed our game with France, assured us repeatedly after the game that our victory was certainly no fluke and that we should seek further worlds to conquer, as of course, we were eager to do.

## Americans: Big, Fast, and Tough

Fired up as we were in Paris, I remain confident we would have earned our gold medals regardless of the number of challengers. We were big, fast and relished the violent bodily contact we had learned from playing both rugby and American football. The urge to knock a grunt out of your fellow man may be commendable only in bodily contact sports.

Also we were adaptable and innovative, and probably contributed our share towards the elimination of that naughty boy around the scrum, the wing-forward. Also, I think we exposed some of the fallacies in the dribbling rush and the rule prohibiting substitutions.

The erstwhile wing-forward, who was then allowed to roam freely, must now tuck himself uncomfortably into the rear of the scrum. I have not seen the formerly popular dribbling rush practiced for years, and it was something at which the French were particularly adept. But they gave it up long before our game was finished. Also our game clearly demonstrated how



Members of the 1924 team overlooking the Seine. (L-R) Graff, Manelli, Turkington, Patrick, Clark, Cleaveland, Muldoon, O'Neil, Cunningham, Devereaux, Austin, Hunter, Dixon, Slater.

## 14 From San Francisco

All of the men we fielded, except Alan Valentine, a Rhodes Scholar from Swarthmore College, came from the San Francisco Bay Area. There, for a decade or more after 1906, rugby had been the major inter-

rugby. The rougher the going, the better Caesar enjoyed it.

Flanking him was a Santa Clara teammate, John O'Neill, who shared Caesar's enjoyment of rough going with a sparkling wit. His battle cry, "Only the game fish swim upstream,"

fray. Linn was a paratrooper with the British in the Near East; they somehow got the impression that Linn was ten years younger than he actually was.

Later he served on the staff of Brig. Fitzroy McLean in Yugoslavia, where Linn repeatedly

*Start of a long 1984 Rugby article by one of the US players recalling the 1924 Olympic victory*

This article appeared shortly after the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. *Rugby* then took the opportunity to move from the past to what it hoped would be the future. There were two other articles in the same issue. These articles were written not only nearly simultaneously with the Olympics but also as the IRB was about to announce the first Rugby World Cup ever, for 1987. Why not, David Bruck asked, go right on to an Olympic appearance in 1988 in Seoul? The quality of most sports, argued Nigel Starmer-Smith, was enhanced by their participation in the Olympics: why not rugby?

## GUEST EDITORIAL



by David Bruck

The world's sporting press gathered in Los Angeles to cover the Olympic Games, and Bill Gray, David Sitton and this author were there working for TV New Zealand. Dave Sitton was the voice feed to two thirds of the world's population on baseball, volleyball, and some field events. Bill Gray and I worked as attaches to the network. It was a great opportunity to be behind the scenes of the TV broadcasting operation at the Games and to meet some of the most influential men in the sporting press.

Naturally, the conversation got around to rugby. Aside from discussing the All Black tour of Australia, the bigger issues of World Cup and Olympic rugby were hot topics.

**World Cup**

Keith McKwen of TV New Zealand proposed a World Cup

to the IRB in 1977 and it is with some amusement that he received news of the IRB giving permission to N. Z. and Australia to pursue the idea 7 years later. Keith assured us that a format is in place along the following lines: 16 teams, 8 in each pool centered in Auckland and Sydney for 1986. Each team would have all expenses paid and be guaranteed a take home amount of at least \$100,000. South Africa's involvement is in question but it is McKwen's guess that the SARB is sensitive to the problems of their involvement in any competition and might very well decline any invitation to participate.

The prospects for a successful World Cup event are great, with or without full IRB country participation (i.e. England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales). Surely, New Zealand, Australia, the U.S. and Canada would love to participate. In addition, F.I.R.A. countries would seemingly favor such an event. A key would be France. Mons. Ferrasse could provide key leadership by entering France, Romania, Italy, and Spain would surely follow. Argentina, Fiji, Japan, and Korea would also be likely entrants. That leaves the question of the Home Countries and whether the men who control rugby there are going to act as stewards of the game or power brokers. The game would reach

new heights if the World Cup comes to pass, and that success could only further the game's interest in each country that participated.

**1988 Olympics**

The 1984 Olympic Games and their wide exposure to the viewing world led many to ask, "What about rugby in '88?" The Koreans are the current Asian plate holders and the reinstatement of the sport in Seoul would be a natural. The greatest beneficiaries of this would be the players who could compete for medals and enjoy the tremendous atmosphere of an Olympics.

Reinstatement of rugby would take a great deal of work. An Olympic committee needs to be formed and the Koreans need to be lobbied to include the game in '88. The rewards to rugby, and particularly American rugby, would be exposure at the greatest format in the world. USARFU needs to solicit interested workers on this project now if it is to come to reality.

Make no mistake. Rugby World Cups and Olympic Games rugby would bring the sport to the world like no other format; surely the U.S. and Canadian rugby teams would be its greatest beneficiaries.

Exciting prospects for the not so distant future.

by Nigel Starmer-Smith

There's just about every team game at the Olympics — but why not rugby football? And that's a question I was asked by quite a number of people in Los Angeles.

Obviously the answer is that the host nations of recent years have not regarded it as an option they would choose. But has there been a lobby for rugby football, and if not, why not?

It is 60 years since rugby last appeared as an Olympic sport — and not only would it provide an unsurpassable platform for the propagation of the game but also

a coming together of the world's rugby nations would produce the kind of improvement in standards, skills and methods that the Olympic Games has witnessed in just about every team sport, be it hockey, handball or water polo.

Can it be said that the quality of rugby world over is higher than, say, a decade ago? I doubt many would support that contention — but the strides taken in so many other sports, through the coming together in European, Asian, Pan American, Commonwealth, World, Olympic and other gatherings, is undeniable.

—reprinted from Rugby Post

**From The Loose**

(Continued from page 27)

June or July of 1985. Consideration is also being given to a tour of Spain, Italy and West Germany. I think the boys might be on target with this approach. Watkins also said that the preliminaries have been started concerning a Pan American Rugby Federation or Union similar to FIRA. With an ultimate goal of getting rugby into the Pan Am Games, USARFU appears to be heading in the right international direction. Now, if we could just get Bob some of those big cardboard checks.

**Just Weighting Around**

With several clubs owning clubhouses (and all the rest wish-

ing for one), wouldn't that be a logical place to install a small weight-training center? For those who abhor the drudgery of pumping iron, a session with teammates might lighten the load. The social aspects of the clubhouse are great, but "Body by Solollex" is probably preferable to "Belly by Budweiser."

**Fare Play**

With many airlines engaged in fare wars, cutting prices to the bone, the U.S. rugby community has never been closer together. However, one, three-hour delay, listening to the Muzak version of Culture Club while drinking 5,000-degree coffee from a soggy paper cup says a lot for home matches: even if you have to line the pitch in the rain. 'til next month. Adios.

1984 articles by David Bruck and Nigel Starmer-Smith.

Bruck, noting that a Rugby World Cup was about to be announced for 1987, says, regarding the Olympics, "What about rugby in '88?"

Starmer-Smith notes that Olympic participation makes sports stronger.

The next article I found in *Rugby* was an editorial by Ed Hagerty in the July 1994 issue and was titled "Sevens Rugby in the 2000 Olympics?" Obviously it didn't happen; there was an interesting comment in this article, however: IRB Secretary Keith Rowlands was interested in *recognition* but not Olympic *participation*. Why? England and Wales and Scotland wouldn't be allowed to play. Sigh.

This was the first time that I had seen **sevens** mentioned in print as a potential Olympic sport, and I salivated.

**EDITORIAL** 7/16/94



by Ed Hagerty

## Sevens Rugby In the 2000 Olympics?

Juan Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee, has indicated that he wants sevens rugby as a demonstration sport in the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Samaranch's one reservation, however, is that he will only deal with

FIRA, the European rugby organization controlled by the French, and not with the International Rugby Board.

Samaranch has correctly diagnosed what we have known for years, that the IRB's main priority is to serve the interests of the British rugby nation. When we spoke to IRB Secretary Keith Rowlands in Bermuda this past March, he indicated that the IRB was interested in Olympic **recognition** but not Olympic **participation**. One of the main reasons Rowlands gave for the IRB's lack of support for rugby's Olympic participation is that England, Scotland and Wales could not compete as separate countries, but would have to combine as Great Britain, as all other sports do. The fact that rugby's Olympic participation would be a boon to the other 50+ "members" of the IRB didn't seem to matter.

Samaranch's choice of sevens is a wise one because a competition of 24 or even 32 teams can easily be accommodated over a weekend. The U.S. is an associate member of FIRA and we should be in touch with them immediately to see how we can help push the prospect of Olympic Sevens ahead.

## Liability

*Rugby Magazine article in July 1994 issue: how about Olympic Rugby in Sydney? And on top of that, ... sevens!*

In December 1994, Juan Antonio Samaranch announced that rugby was back as an Olympic sport, but it would have to wait 10 years to appear. (That would have made it 2004.)



## NEWSBRIEFS

### Rugby Union Back in the Olympics

Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee, recently welcomed rugby back into the Olympic games but it will have to wait 10 years before it reappears on the Games program. Rugby has been absent from the Olympics since the 1924 games in Paris when the U.S. beat France in the final.

Samaranch stated, "This is the first step towards Olympic recognition, we hope to make the second and final steps at some future date." He then said that the sport represented "what we want in the Olympics."

Vernon Pugh, chairman of the International Rugby Board, said rugby would probably feature in 2004 as a demonstration sport, perhaps in seven or 10-a-side form.

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*December 1994: Yet another tease. It didn't happen in 2004 (but the word "sevens" was mentioned again).*

#### Forward to the Past - Early women's sevens: I was there

Now let's get back to the women.

Note that even though "sevens" was being mentioned as a potential Olympic format as early as 1994, not one article mentioned women's rugby - which as we've seen, turned out to be the final key factor in rugby's acceptance by the IOC - at all. I had already become slightly involved with women's rugby in the 1970s (shortly after it first began) and became more so with women's sevens by the early 1980s: through the 1980s and early 1990s I coached both the Bethlehem men (the Hooligans) and the Bethlehem women (the Maulie Maguires) in the art of sevens. Both won many tournaments. Here's a picture of the Maulies after they defeated Philadelphia to win the Schaefer Sevens in Bethlehem in 1983. Even though we were operating deep in the shadows of mainstream US (and world) rugby, some of us were quietly following what turned out to be the yet-undiscovered path to the future. For those that know them, both MA and MB (Sorensen and Spirk) are here: see caption. It's the earliest picture I have of any women's sevens team that I've coached.



*The Maulie Maguires go through the Philadelphia Women's tunnel after winning the Bethlehem Sevens in 1983.  
In front with the ball is MB Spirk, who now is among the top 20 winningest NCAA D-III basketball coaches (478 wins last I looked)  
To the left, with the pigtails, is future US XV's prop and anesthiologist Dr. MA Sorensen.*

This was my women's sevens world in the 1980s. It wasn't the only one in the US. At the same time, Florida State was beating up on everyone at Cape Fear; until, that is, they were upstaged by the upset-minded Maryland Stingers in 1986. More women's teams, it became apparent, were now taking sevens seriously.

**The process in a nutshell.** The upsurge in women's rugby through the 1980s led to the US women's community's positive response to my 1988 call for a women's sevens program (thanks, Donna Hylton; thanks, Sallie Ahlert). That program led to national championships, and what was basically a one-off international-level sevens match (Atlantis vs Saracens, Benidorm Sevens Final, 1992).

The Benidorm experience raised to fever pitch our desire for true international women's sevens. This search led to the 1995 encounter with the Hong Kong women at the Dubai airport, which was just a brief, but ultimately significant, conversation. This led to the Hong Kong Women's Club, then International, Sevens (1996 & 1997). The 1997 tournament is the first-ever documented women's international sevens. A conversation with Hong Kong Sevens organizers after a canceled event in 1998 led to the 1999 women's final being held in the Hong Kong Stadium during the men's tournament.

From 1999 forward, the skillful play of the Hong Kong Women's Sevens finalists in Hong Kong Stadium - always during the men's event - demonstrated to a rugby world longing for participation in the Olympics that the women were ready, willing, and able to make that possible. These performances plus an increase in the number of international women's sevens throughout the early years of the new millennium\*\* and the IOC's insistence that women be a part of Olympic rugby, led to the 2006 decision to make the 2009 Rugby World Cup Sevens in Dubai an event for both sexes; this World Cup plus the intrinsic beauty of sevens (and 54,000 enthusiastic spectators watching both the women and the men) wowed the IOC Board members in attendance, and ... voila: Olympic Rugby!!

\*\* By 2013 Wikipedia had listed more than 30 international women's sevens events in each of 2011 and 2012.

By the way, in the future, we won't have to preface the kind of rugby we play by saying "Um, it's rugby played with seven people instead of the usual 15," we won't have to explain why the halves are so short, etc ... we'll just be able to say what we're playing is "Olympic rugby."

It's been a blast!

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