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The PennStater

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THE GOLD STANDARD

MEET THE WOMEN WHO POWER A COLLEGE RUGBY DYNASTY



RARE AIR

Practicing a “line-out”—rugby’s version of a throw-in—Taylah Pipkin (left), Katie Mueller, and friends provide a fitting visual metaphor for a program that is head and shoulders above the competition.





OVERWHELMING

FORCE

THE MOST DOMINANT PROGRAM IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS offers no scholarships and competes in a sport most Americans don't really understand. None of which bothers the women of the nine-time national champion Penn State rugby team. They're too busy bulldozing all comers, and having a blast along the way.

BY RYAN JONES '95 COM PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARDONI

WHEN KYLA CHIPMAN LEFT HONG KONG FOR Happy Valley two years ago, she did so in part to follow in the path of her sporting hero. She did not foresee that hero one day planting her into the ground. “Kate Daley was my idol,” Chipman says. “I tried to be just like her. And in my first-ever Penn State rugby match, she rocked me so hard I couldn’t even place the ball.”

That encounter took place in the team’s annual alumni game pitting current and former players, and just so the implication is clear: Raised in China, Chipman chose to attend college 8,000 miles from home mostly so she could play a non-scholarship sport and emulate her role model, who, in their first meeting, tackled her with such ferocity in what was technically a non-competitive match that Chipman still remembers the impact that squeezed the breath from her lungs. She shares the memory proudly, because there is no shame in a young rugby player being walloped by a world-class veteran and living to tell the tale, and also because **Daley ’09 Bus**—her hero turned wrecking ball, and, now, her coach—is sitting just a few feet away.

Toughness, tradition, sisterhood, a sense of humor, and

an international reputation for excellence; this scene might just tell you everything you need to know about Penn State women’s rugby.

This spring marks the 25th year that collegiate women’s rugby teams have contested an organized national championship. Penn State has reached the title game in 18 of the previous 24 seasons, including the last 11 straight. And they don’t just get there: The Lions have won three consecutive national championships, seven of the last 11, and nine overall. In May, they’ll head to Kennesaw, Ga., for the 2015 tournament, where they’ll be heavily favored to claim their 10th national crown.

In a sport that edges closer all of the time to mainstream relevance, they are something close to a dynasty.

It wasn’t always so. Existing as a loosely organized club team in the ’70s and ’80s, the Penn State women’s rugby program stood dormant in the early ’90s before **Charlie Smith ’61 MS, ’68 PhD Bus**, a native South African who played on the men’s team during his grad-student days, agreed to reestablish it. Not that it was Smith’s idea: Then the head of the accounting department, he was approached one day by a pair of undergraduates, **Beth Baldwin Ashe ’93 H&HD** and **Su Blasi-Bombardieri ’92 Lib**, who pleaded with him to start a team. He agreed, and the program was officially resurrected in 1991; the team reached the club national title game in 1995, and in 1997, the Lady Ruggers beat Radcliffe College for the program’s first championship.

By then, Smith had handed the reins to Pete Steinberg, a Brit who came to Penn



ACTION PHOTO HERE AND PREVIOUS PAGE: STEVE MANUEL '84 LIB, '92 MA COM

Andrea Villanova



Danielle Ciocco



Corey Meanix



Beth Rose



Tess Feury



Kyla Chipman



GAME FACES Freshman Tess Feury (center), the MVP of the team's fall championship tournament, adds youth and skill to a squad dominated by talented vets. Noting that the team's only losses the previous three seasons have come against international club sides during spring break exhibition trips, longtime coach Pete Steinberg points out, "We have seniors who have never lost a game in the United States."

Elena Cantorna



Meya Bizer



Brie Barto





SISTERS IN ARMS Penn State's unprecedented rugby success relies on a combination of factors, including a level of university financial support most teams can only imagine, a small army of paid and volunteer coaches, and a roster of players—including, from left, Kyla Chipman, Beth Rose, Andrea Villanova, Danielle Ciocco, Hope Rogers, and Catie Benson—for whom the program's tradition provides constant motivation.

State in 1994 planning to pursue a Ph.D. in geochemistry and play club rugby in his spare time. He ended up doing neither: his career path veered toward business, and as he quickly learned, only undergraduates were allowed to come out for the team. Instead, at Smith's invitation, he joined the women's program as an assistant. When the time commitment became too much for Smith to balance with his academic duties, Steinberg took over. Those nine national titles over the past 20 years have come under his guidance.

Steinberg is modest about his impact on the program, citing the "amazing foundation" left by Smith, the appeal of Penn State's reputation as a "sports school," and gradual increases in university support. "I feel like I've gone along for the ride, not been the driver," he says. "I'm not going to say I haven't had an influence, but the people that have really built this program have been the players, and the legacy that each generation has left for the people who follow them."

Daley is emblematic of that legacy. She fell in love with the sport as a high schooler in Indiana, and came to Penn

State in 2004 specifically to play for Steinberg and Penn State; she left as a four-time All-American and two-time national champ. Last summer, she captained the U.S. women's team in the Rugby World Cup. Steinberg has coached the national team since 2011, and recently agreed to stay on with the Women's Eagles through at least 2017. When he announced he'd be taking a leave of absence from the Penn State job this season, Daley was the obvious choice for his interim replacement.

She's not far removed from her own collegiate playing days, but Daley knows how much the game has changed. The sport has expanded dramatically at the youth level, meaning more and more players come to Penn State actually knowing how to play. "This year's freshman class had 10 girls that had played in high school, which is a lot more than when I came through," Daley says. "It's really growing."

Most don't cross an ocean like Chipman did, but the steady flow of young women willing (and able) to pay out-of-state tuition for the chance to don those blue-and-white stripes plays a huge role in the program's continued success. Star senior Meya Bizer—the former small college



football player whose bone-jarring rugby hits have inspired YouTube highlight videos—came to State College from Texas, while freshman standout Tess Feury hails from New Jersey; the rest of the roster is dotted with players from Virginia, Colorado, Oklahoma, and New Mexico.

There's also plenty of talent closer to home. Hope Rogers twirled baton as a kid and threw shot and discus in high school before curiosity drew her to an informational session for a new club program near her home in Chambersburg, Pa. "I actually thought it was lacrosse at first," she says now. "I just hung around because I was shy." The coach talked her into giving it a shot, and Rogers was quickly hooked. "Ultimately, my entire college decision was based on rugby," she says. "Now, most of my friends, really everything I do is based around rugby."

Rogers was one of four current or former Lions—Bizer, **Deven Owsiany '12 H&HD**, and **Sadie Anderson '13** were the others—who suited up alongside Daley last summer on the World Cup squad. For the growing number of players who come to Penn State because of rugby, Steinberg's dual coaching roles and the established Penn State pipeline to the national team are a huge draw. For so many of the rest—the former high school soccer, lacrosse, or track standouts—it's the chance to challenge themselves, to try something new in college, and to be a part of a team known equally for excellence and fun. "It's like being on a team with 50 of your best friends," Chipman says.

Watch them in action on the turf fields on the west side of campus, and it's easy to see. The game is tough, but not brutal, something American rugby organizers are conscious of promoting to potential players and concerned parents. Tackles are made with arms and shoulders, not helmeted heads, and in between scrums, the action is free-flowing and dynamic. And for Penn State, at least, it looks like a lot of fun. The Lions smile and laugh constantly, and at times, the game action almost seems secondary to the fellowship. It's not that they don't take the games se-

riously; it's just that, executing at such a high level, they can't help but enjoy the lopsided results.

Results do matter, of course. Steinberg says he's "never coached a team to win," emphasizing instead accountability and a constant striving for excellence. The combination of Penn State's coaching and talent has been nearly unbeatable in recent years: in four games at the national tournament last spring, the Lions outscored their opponents by a combined 293-15, and in one home doubleheader earlier this season, they posted victories of 83-5 and 76-0. That those results are increasingly coming against varsity programs is all the more impressive, simply because Penn State's program isn't one. The Lions are classified by the university as a "team sport"—a notch below varsity status, and without the scholarships and NCAA oversight that come along with it—but a level above traditional "club" sports. The difference is vital, giving the team administrative support, access to athletic trainers, use of weight room and practice facilities, and funding for a coaching staff.

"We're competing more and more with programs that can offer financial aid," Daley says. "Our thing is, 'No, we're a great university with a lot of tradition. Come play with us.'"

With 14 programs across the country now holding full varsity status, there's no telling how long that pitch will trump financial reality. Steinberg calls the university's support "tremendous," but says, "eventually, if we want to remain one of the top programs, we're going to have to find a way to provide scholarships." The NCAA deemed women's rugby an "emerging sport" in 2002, and with club teams at every Big Ten school, Steinberg envisions a near-future when momentum forces the issue.

For now, all of that is secondary. This year's squad looks as strong as any in the program's history, with senior national team standouts like Bizer and Rogers complemented by a slew of young stars: Chipman, State College local Gabby Cantorna, and Wisconsin native Katie Mueller are teammates on the USA Rugby Junior All-American team, while Tess Feury, the nation's best high school player last year, was the MVP of the Lions' regional championship run last fall. Daley cringes at mention of the word "dynasty," but Penn State's unprecedented run of dominance seems to justify the term. Whatever you want to call it, this team's greatness is best appreciated while it lasts. ▀