



Angels with dirty knees: The American Barbarians' front row who reduce opponents to heavy breathing.

Rugger dolls no pushovers

GEOFFREY NICHOLSON on the growth of women's rugby.

CURIOUS that women should be taking up rugby just when so many men and boys seem to be abandoning the game, put off by its thin vein of brutalism, its cautious repetition, its social and political conservatism. Curious but undeniable; and there is a natural explanation.

On a dank Friday evening at the Wasps ground in north London, Wivern Women's RFC — the 'American Barbarians' — won the third match of their European tour with an attractive briskness and considerable style. Having already beaten a Yorkshire selection at York University and the Midlands at Loughborough, both by 44-0, they ran through five tries against the South without any audible reply except heavy breathing.

'That was the hardest game I've ever played,' said Tricia Moore, the South's captain,

tugging off her lock's headband and with it several strands of auburn hair. 'But at least we were holding them at the end.'

Today at the University College ground in Shenley there will be another show of strength, when the WRFU (again the W is for Women's not Welsh) put on their first 15-a-side day-long tournament, sponsored by Rugby Travel. Twenty-four teams will take part: two provided by the Americans, the rest from clubs and colleges all over the UK.

Women's rugby is in no way a parody of the men's game, despite the pints on the touchline and the cry of the American coach, (Mr) Pat Foley, 'Let's calm down out there, you guys.'

As any old buffer will tell you, the purest, most enjoyable rugby is played by well-coached schoolboy sides. It is

eager, fit and optimistic. It doesn't know that you're not supposed to be able to score direct from set-pieces. Physically undeveloped, it doesn't resort to physical coercion. And that is a more valid comparison with the women's game.

It has the complementary virtues of its vices. Since as a rule women don't trust their kicking (though that may come, and there were a few uncompromising boots to touch), they make their way by running the ball. Since they are not as strong as men, the scrums and mauls (there are scarcely any rucks) are only brief pauses in the flow of the game. The tackling is certainly not faint-hearted, but although one sending-off has been recorded, the play is notably clean.

In the United States women have been playing rugby for 10 years. 'It's much more of a

finesse game for us,' said their manager, Darilyn Million, a greenkeeper from Illinois. 'Even the men acknowledge that. They also have the advantage of having probably played basketball, and not having played American football, which the men have to unlearn.'

But what's the attraction of rugby, apart from the acknowledgement that women aren't all sugar and spice and also like to get their knees dirty. 'Oh, the first time I played it I just loved it; I never wanted to play anything else,' said Million, who coaches and referees. 'It's the sociability, the camaraderie. When one of us touches down the ball it's all 15 of us who scored that try.'

They need no longer feel like pioneers. Tomorrow Wivern move on to play two matches in France, where there are around 60 women's clubs. The game is

also played in Holland, Sweden, Spain, Italy and, it's rumoured, Russia.

In the UK it grew up in the universities only in the late Seventies, and the WRFU are little more than a year old. They play to the men's rules, but although they are recognised by the RFU — who checked their constitution, put them in touch with their insurance brokers, and provided the services of Don Rutherford and Alan Black for a coaching weekend — they have no plans to apply for affiliation.

There are some 35 clubs at universities or attached to male clubs like Wasps and Finchley and probably 700-800 regular players. Today nearly half of them will be at Shenley, playing 10 minutes each way for a cup or the plate, with the final at 3.20. But if you go there to patronise the little women you might find the smile wiped off your face.