



True Story Series: **Influential Men Who Pushed Women's Rugby**

Influential Men Who Pushed Women's Rugby

Kevin O'Brien



The Coach, The Leader

Kevin O'Brien has been at the forefront of women's rugby history since 1978. What started as helping out at a few Beantown practices quickly evolved into building a dynasty, winning four National Championships. As the wins mounted Kevin began coaching local and territorial select sides and reimagining the bar for the women's game. He was a consensus choice to coach the first Women's National side match in 1987, a 22-3 win over Canada. He was the US national team coach from 1987-1993, coaching 4, future Hall of Fame players. Kevin is best known as the coach to lead the US women to victory in the first Women's World Cup.

I had the great privilege of playing for Kevin for 10 years. He was the consummate teacher, he never yelled, he corrected us with kindness and humor. He instilled in us the importance of having pride in every aspect of our play. Post-game we'd gather around Kevin with pints of beer while he diagramed backrow plays with condiments. We were devoted to him and to one another – it was an extraordinary experience for which I am truly grateful. His devotion went beyond Beantown, his devotion was to the game. So, it was no surprise that in 2021 Kevin was chosen for the [USRF Rugby Hall of Fame](#). Kevin has the respect of the entire women's rugby community as well as our gratitude and love.

Podcast: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLHs43RUZkY>

Kevin in His Own Words

When did you first begin to work with a women's rugby team? How did that come about?

My first introduction to women's rugby was in 1978 in Boston. I came to the States from Wales with my younger brother for a fall season to play and coach men's rugby with Beacon Hill and Mystic River in Boston. KO Onufry asked me to come to a session with Beantown Women. My response "Women don't play rugby" went down like a lead balloon and KO quickly corrected the error of my ways. After watching a session I was impressed by the dedication, and work ethic combined with the athletic ability displayed by the players and began to assist at the practice sessions. This evolved into focusing more on the development of the women's game. I returned the next fall for the season. In spring 1980 Beantown asked me to help out again and I came back with the intention of staying for the season and then hitchhiking across the US and making my way back to Australia where I had lived for a while. 43 years later I still have my backpack hanging up in the garage. My wife, Robilee, who played for Beantown had a lot to do with the change of plans.



Kevin in His Own Words (continued)

What teams have you worked with over your career?

I have been fortunate to coach and play with many teams over my more than 50 years of coaching. In my younger days I hitchhiked and backpacked around a fair bit of the world with my boots in my pack.

As a teacher I coached school teams in London, South Africa, Cardiff, and the US. I qualified as an Australian Rugby Union coach in 1977 and as a Welsh Rugby Union coach in 1979.

Other qualifications I gained include USA Rugby Level 3 and USA/World Rugby Coach Educator. This has led to me coaching teams at many different levels in various countries. The highlight of that journey is coaching the USA Women National Team from its inception in 1987 to winning the World Cup in 1991.

Other highlights are coaching Beantown Women for several years with some notable National and New England Championship successes, working with outstanding players from many clubs representing the East in the Territorial Championships and starting a high school women's team for my daughter, Juliana, when she graduated from middle school in 2005. With regards to men's rugby I have coached Harvard as runners up in the finals of the 1982 National Colleges D1 Championships, Middlebury College 2009 National College D2 Championship Winners, and Burlington Men to the Final 4 and Final 8 of the D2 National Championships in 1994/95. I have also coached several college and high school teams in Vermont.

How many years have you been involved in Women's rugby?

I first became involved with Beantown in 1978. I am still involved with Middlebury Women who are coached by my great friend, KO Onufry. Over the years I have worked with National, Select, club, college and high school women's sides. 45 years in total.



Kevin in His Own Words (continued)

Notable moments? Games? Accomplishments?

In my coaching /playing career there are many moments and occasions that stand out. However, the obvious one is the 1991 World Cup with Chris Leach. People think that the Final against England was the epitome of the experience. However, for me it was the semi-final game against New Zealand that stands out to me. Chris and I were confident that if we could beat Black Ferns then the USA was in with a very good chance of winning in the Final. So it turned out to be. It was not only a confidence booster for the squad but also a validation of the player skills, attitude, camaraderie and passion.

Many of the Beantown games in Nationals are also noteworthy for the same reasons. In terms of accomplishments I am proud to have been inducted into the USA Rugby Foundation Hall of Fame. On the first occasion as a member of the 1991 squad, and on the second occasion for contributions towards the development of rugby in the US.

Notable disappointments? Unrealized goals?

There are no real disappointments but some regrets. This refers to the players I could have done more to help and develop as sometimes the drive to win took priority over the long term growth of individuals and teams. Another regret is that I was not able to continue with the US team after winning the World Cup. I understand the reasoning behind the decision but I believe that an opportunity was missed to focus on the long term development of women's rugby at that stage. Chris and I had long discussions on the future of the women's game and the importance of women coaching women at the highest levels. The continuity we envisaged could have led to women coaches being involved at international levels much sooner.

What do you believe you brought to the game that was missing?

Being brought up in Cardiff and District rugby and playing hard rugby in South Africa and other countries I think I brought a focused mindset particularly with reference to forward play and the connection between backs and forwards. When I first came to the US a lot of focus was on mauling. I emphasized good rucking, quick ball, intense scrummaging, support and good decision making. Fortunately with Beantown I had teams that were prepared to work incredibly hard to meet the goals that coaches and players agreed on. My expectations were higher for the women's teams than for the men's teams because they expected no less.

Kevin in His Own Words (continued)

How do you hope players and colleagues remember you?

I hope to be remembered as someone who bought their round, told a good story, listened and had a positive impact. When I depart this mortal coil I would like to be considered as a teacher who encouraged people to love the game as much as I do.



Tributes to Coach

Kevin O'Brien is synonymous with Women's Rugby.

We met Kevin in the late 70's, through his brothers who were on a previous rugby tour in the Boston area. We knew he was a certified coach in Wales, Australia, and South Africa. Beantown in those early days was always looking to expand our knowledge of a game that was still fairly new on our shores.

Getting to know Kevin, we asked him (and he is happy, although now a bit embarrassed, to confirm this story) if his sisters played rugby? To which Kevin replied, "My sisters are ladies!" We accepted the challenge and asked him to coach us; give us a few sessions and see what he thinks.

The rest is history. Kevin, as it turns out, is more interested in coaching rugby than anything else in this world. He had to return to Wales and would then be leaving for Australia. In our infinite wisdom, Beantown sent an emissary to Wales with a one-way ticket back to the Boston area. He accepted.

Kevin has spread his love of rugby worldwide. He has worked with players of all ages, all genders, all races. His impact on the Women's game started with Beantown and continued with New England/Eastern Rugby/Interterritorial select and took us all the way through to a World Cup.

His interest, respect, and support for all players, no matter their level or skill or experience, has made him a champion of women's rugby. His belief in the power, strength, and passion in women has inspired countless players to be the best they can be, striving to give back what Kevin has given to us.

Hearing his voice on the field or in the classroom has inspired us to be better; to go the extra mile, to accomplish our goals. His love of us and the game will always be with us as we "go forward and support"!

KO Onufry

Tributes to Coach

As a West Coast player, I didn't have occasion to meet or play for Kevin until the build-up to the 1991 World Cup and at the World Cup. In my first hours of meeting Kevin, I learned more than I'd learned my entire rugby career. I quickly realized- this man is a font of rugby knowledge- LISTEN to HIM! That of course presumes I could UNDERSTAND him- and his accent. At first, that was hard! But I learned.

I also learned some of the best swear words/phrases ever, from Kevin, which flowed melodically from him with his Welsh accent. I still employ some of those Welsh curses to this day.

One thing I admire about Kevin is not just his knowledge of rugby, but his absolute love of rugby, and how infectious that is. Kevin doesn't care if you're a woman, a man, a leopard with polka dots- if you show up and are willing to work hard and learn, he WILL teach you great rugby.

Later in my life, after my playing days ended, I had occasion to receive a very high honor. I asked Kevin to come speak on my behalf, which he graciously did - flying from Vermont all the way to California. There were over 500 people there, including supreme court justices, California elected officials, movers and shakers, rugby teammates and alums, and people from my community. After the event I overheard one of my colleagues, saying to another:

"that Coach could've been reading from the telephone book and I would've been mesmerized!!"

I recall a time when I thought Kevin was treated, somewhat unfairly, by the rugby community. The way he responded to that -with grace and dignity -is something I think of often. Just like a bad call in a rugby match, Kevin didn't make a fuss- he just pulled himself up and played on. Just like a bad call in a rugby match, Kevin didn't make a fuss- he just pulled himself up and played on.

Tara M. Flanagan
1991 WRWC Eagle, #5
Lock from Hell



FAVOURITES: USA women's rugby coach Kevin O'Brien, originally from Cardiff, is raised aloft by his team.

Welsh coach sees stars (and stripes)

RON WALDRON watch out — a Welshman is coaching a rugby team tipped as favourites.

But Mr Kevin O'Brien, from Cardiff, had to travel a long way to find the right team.

For Kevin is coach for the USA women's team visiting Wales to compete in the first ever Women's World Cup.

Special needs teacher Mr O'Brien left his South Wales home in 1980 to go to Australia.

He stopped off in the USA for a holiday and has stayed ever since.

He first became involved in men's rugby and was "flattered" to

REPORT by Mike Arnold

But he soon found he enjoyed coaching women: "They are more receptive to new ideas and are much better at picking things up. They do not have the macho impulses of the men and are better at co-operating and playing as a team."

He says women get exactly the same enjoyment from the sport as men — "A good physical workout, good mental exercise and the camaraderie."

"They are a tremendously dedicated lot. It has been a long hard

O'Brien, aged 44, who is staying with family in Coed-y-gores, Llanedeyrn.

"As women's rugby in the States is mainly college-based our team is made up largely of professional women — from doctors to computer operators.

Mr O'Brien says he's "not quite sure" how the USA team achieved favourite status — but Saturday's 7-0 win over the Netherlands at Pontypool Park goes some way to justify their reputation.

The USA team goes on to meet the USSR at Glamorgan Wanderers on Wednesday.

Influential Men Who Pushed Women's Rugby

Emil Signes



The Coach, The Visionary

I first met Emil in 2004 at the Ivy Championships. He was coaching the Princeton women and I was coaching the Brown women's team. Brown played well in our match to Princeton but fell to a superior team, a team that months later would play in the finals of the 2004 National Collegiate Championship. Emil and I would face each other many times over the next 10 years in the Ivy League and Brown and Princeton developed a healthy rivalry. I never told Emil, but his 2004 team served as an inspiration for Brown women's rugby. Every team Emil coached was creative and competitive - to me they epitomized the adage, look sharp, play sharp. Regardless of the level, players were proud of playing for Emil and worked to honor him with their play.

Emil is a transcendent coach and a brilliant man. As Lauren Rhodes reminded me, Emil has a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree from MIT, and a PhD from Rutgers University.

While Emil was a successful 15's coach for over 30 years he is synonymous with 7's, particularly women's 7's. In 1986 he founded Atlantis Rugby and began laying the foundation for international women's 7's. The extent of his 7's coaching is mind boggling. Between 1986 and mid-2014 Atlantis - men, women, boys, girls - has fielded 206 squads at 145 tournaments in 31 different countries. Between 7s and 15s, men and women, club and All-Star, his teams have won 14 national championships. (Wendy Young, 2014, Scrumhalf Connection)

All of rugby owes such a debt to Emil. As Alex Goff noted, 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. (Alex Goff, Rugby Magazine, 2009)



Tributes to Coach

While it's hard to choose from countless memories after playing for Emil for a decade (Princeton and Atlantis), I'll pick one that stands out:

In 2013, Emil dreamed up an Atlantis tour to Laos and I was lucky enough to join. While Emil has fielded 240+ squads in 30+ countries, Laos was unique. We arrived, ate sticky rice galore, and played in the Vientiane International Rugby Championship against national and club teams from across Southeast Asia. While this alone would've been unforgettable, what happened next was life-changing: Emil worked with Mags Dillon and Lao Rugby to arrange a journey up to Nonghet along the Lao-Vietnamese border, where we visited villages to run activities and games. Girls and boys walked for hours to join us. This is a region where kids carry heavy family duties so playtime is slim. ChildFund was working hard at the time to empower girls especially through sports. Space to play is limited due to ongoing danger from millions of unexploded bombs that the U.S. dropped on the region during the Vietnam War -- eye-opening for all of us. At the second village, I recall realizing that the girls were playing with us, and the boys were mostly standing around the perimeter of the small dirt clearing just watching us. I walked over with a translator to invite them to join, and the reply? "But rugby is a girls' sport!" That moment felt like a fitting tribute to Emil and all he has done for women's rugby.

Lauren Rhodes,
Former USWNT player
All Blues WPL team member

Emil Signes was incredibly influential in the development of women's rugby, not only in the US, but in the world. It is quite possible that rugby would not be in the Olympics, if not for Emil. I coached with him for over 20 years. We coached both men and women over that time. Emil was constantly asked, what's the difference between coaching men and women? His answer was that he did not see a difference, they were all just rugby players that wanted to get better and that he hoped he was up to the challenge of helping them along the way.

Chris Ryan,
Former US WNT Coach





Tributes to Coach

In 1991 the Air Force transferred me from DC to Texas to start my residency. I went there feeling empty, knowing no one and leaving behind my East coast rugby community. Emil though, had given me something to take. The first weekend there, a local rugby player called asking if I wanted to go to Austin for a tournament. It was there that I shared Emil's gift. The 7's game for women was new, but gaining interest. He had already coached my Maryland Stingers team in 7's techniques and structure. As we warmed up, I shared a cram course of those techniques and strategy with my weekend teammates. We were a rag-tag team of pickups who had to learn each other names-- yet we won that tournament. Best part-- I am still very good friends with many of those teammates, 30+ years later.

Emil's touch and wizardry had only just started. He essentially grew the women's 7's game worldwide and took USA Women's 7's team's all across the globe-- first becoming Champions internationally in Benidorm Spain (1992). Pretty much yearly after that Emil would ring me and say, " Hey, do you think we could get the women together to go to....." name the place (Hong Kong, Brazil, Ireland, Thailand, Borneo, Cuba, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago--just to name a few) . He would cajole (tournament organizers), inspire (players), organize (International tours), and coach (including both the USA Women's 7's AND 15's team). While he was always giving us a lesson -- thus nicknames like 'the Professor' and 'the Emperor', he was also listening. Every player that interacted with Emil felt truly valued and will forever remember their experience.

For USA Women's rugby, I think of the adage, "six degrees of Kevin Bacon," Emil is our Kevin. The role call of female players that he has impacted in the USA women's rugby community at the Club, camp, Collegiate, Select-Side and National levels is unparalleled.

Krista McFarren,
Hall of Fame Player,
Former World Cup and USWNT player
Former USWNT Assistant Coach



Links to Emil:

Emil in his own words 2009: <http://www.emilito.org/rugby/grandcoach/Emil%20Signes%20Grandcoach.html>

You Tube: Atlantis Camp 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG_4xl9Nx2Y

History of the Recent Inclusion in the Olympics: Emil in his own words: <http://www.emilito.org/rugby/olympicsandme/index.html>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160907134619/http://www.atlantisrugby.com:80/about-atlantis/emil-signes-coaching-career-summary>.

<http://www.richmondrugby.net/emil.html>

<https://scrumhalfconnection.com/2014/09/03/emil-signes-coaching-career-summary-atlantis-rugby/>

EASTERN RUGBY UNION, 1934 TO 1995, R.I.P.

LAST ERU TEAM EVER: EAST WOMEN'S XV



NATIONAL CHAMPIONS: NASHVILLE, DECEMBER 1995

Back: Joe Kelly, Amy Westerman, Brett Newton, Candi Orsini, Bronni Mackintosh, Nicole Carrier, Jos Bergmann, Emil Signes
Front: Kim Cyganik, Alex Williams, Kerry Kilander, Laurie Spicer, Jen Renne, MJ Mohl, LJ Stevenson, MA Sorensen, Carmita Signes

Influential Men Who Pushed Women's Rugby

Steve Cohen



The Referee, The Mentor

Steve Cohen has a little bit of Forrest Gump in him, as he's been in the middle of women's rugby history since 1972. He started playing in Schenectady in 1969. In 1972, Steve found himself advising the burgeoning Colorado State women's team, the first women's team in the country. Steve offered, 'I xeroxed every bit of info I had for them'. In 1976 Steve moved to Ann Arbor to play with University of Michigan and begin his refereeing career. By 1977 Steve was refereeing full time. He increasingly found himself refereeing women's matches and becoming a fan of women's rugby. When the Chicago Women launched the first women's national championship in 1978 the organizers approached Steve and asked if he'd be the head referee and recruit other referees 'friendly to women's rugby'. Steve stayed in the head referee role until 1982 endearing himself to the women's rugby community for his willingness to risk his own referee career to cross lines and referee women's games. Along the way Steve co-founded the University of Michigan Women's team and began mentoring a number of aspiring women referees, including Jennie Redner one of the first B level women referees. He organized numerous referee training clinics for the Midwest, Michigan, and East Penn Rugby Referee Societies, as well as the first-ever National Referees Seminar in 1982. He soon moved into referee administration and founded the D2 and D3 collegiate rugby championships. While he has earned the right to kick back, Steve has served as the President and CEO of NSCRO and more recently as the founder of NCR. A 2022 inductee in the [USRF Rugby Hall of Fame](#), Steve hopes others remember his work ethic and that his accomplishments were an inspiration to others to do whatever it takes to get their rugby job done and done right. I think that legacy is safe.

Links to Steve

<https://www.mrugby.com/2012/03/15/march-alumnus-of-the-month-steve-cohen/>

<https://www.michiganrugbyfoundation.org/hall-of-inspiration>



Steve in His Own Words

When did you first get involved in women's rugby? How did that come about?

I started playing rugby in the summer of 1969 with the Schenectady Rugby Club. Women's rugby was unheard of.

In December 1972 I met 2 young women who were students at Colorado State University. They apparently had started the first women's rugby team in the US. They were at first limited to just practice / scrimmaging with the men's team. They encouraged Colorado University to start a team. This got the ball rolling for more women's teams. Frankly I didn't think women were crazy like men to play rugby. They told me that women were crazier than the guys. I xeroxed every bit of info I had about rugby for them.

I moved from Schenectady to Ann Arbor in October 1976 and began playing with and refereeing for the University of Michigan. I had started refereeing in 1974 and became a full time referee in 1977. In February 1978 I was invited to referee at the Mardi Gras Tournament in Hammond, Louisiana. It was 12 fields full of mud from torrential rains. I refereed my first women's match – Houston Boars vs Texas A&M. Despite the field conditions everyone had fun. I enjoyed their attitude and especially camaraderie after the match. On Sunday, the Florida State Women challenged the Referees to a match. It was a blast with ruck piles and mud pies galore. See the group photo post-match.

I left the tournament with love for women's rugby.

In June 1978 I was invited to referee a women's 7s tournament at Michigan State University. Towards the end I was approached by Kathy Korse. She told me that her club – Chicago – was planning on hosting the First Women's National Rugby Classic for 8 teams during Labor Day weekend. She said I was well-liked by the teams at the tournament and asked if I would referee at their event and also be the head referee. She wanted me to find 4 other "women friendly" referees. She explained that most referees were not in favor of women playing and treated them in a condescending manner during the match. I agreed and found the right refs including Pat Prosser, David Mildner and Roger Mazzarella. I stayed in this role for the event through 1982. The last 2 years it was organized by the newly formed USA Women's Rugby Committee led by Jennie Redner.

In 1980 I responded to the need to train women to be referees and worked with the newly formed Midwest Women's RFU. From 1978 to 1984 I refereed many women's tournaments and had the opportunity to write articles for RUGBY Magazine promoting their participation in the sport based on my discussions with players. In 1980 a group of women at the University of Michigan wanted to start a team. Myself and teammate Greg Rose agreed to help. I had never coached before but was a very good organizer. In 1984 I moved to Southern New Jersey. I began refereeing for the East Penn RRS. I continued to referee many women's tournaments including as head referee for the Philadelphia Women's Pumpkinfest tournament. I was invited to referee women's tournaments out of the area including the Virginia Women's Invitational Tournament hosted by the University of Virginia.



Steve in His Own Words (continued)

From 1990 to 1998 I was training coordinator for the East Penn RRS and encouraged more women to learn to referee.

Founder and organizer of East Coast Division 2 Collegiate Rugby Championships in 1992 (Men and Women). In 1997, established National Division 2 Men's Collegiate Championship and facilitated USA Rugby's creation of a Division 2 National Collegiate Playoff System in 1998 (Men) and 1999 (Women).

Founder and organizer of East Coast Division 3 Collegiate Rugby Championships (2002 for Men and 2003 for Women) which led to the creation of NSCRO in 2007 to serve more than 300 small colleges. Rebranded in 2020 as NCR providing a full range of services to more than 600 Men's and Women's Colleges and their governing bodies. NSCRO operates independently from but with USA Rugby recognition and support. NSCRO provides numerous different men's and women's national playoff systems and All-Star Championships.

From 2001 to 2007 I was Chairperson of the Mid-Atlantic RFU Women's Collegiate Committee.

Currently I am active as a member of the Board of Directors for the Michigan Rugby Foundation that works with both the University of Michigan Men's and Women's Clubs in support of their growth and development.

Notable moments?

- 1978 – – Referees vs Florida State Women in the mud during the Mardi Gras tournament
- 1982 – – Being the 'center of attention' during a women's tournament party during the singing of the rugby version of 'Alouette'.
- 2008 – – Refereeing a British Women's All-Star match for the Wooden Spoon Charity IN Murrayfield Stadium, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Notable disappointments? Unrealized goals?

Watching how unfairly USA Rugby treated women.

What do you believe you brought to the game that was missing?

Treatment of women just as rugby players.

How do you hope players, referees, colleagues remember you?

By my work ethic and accomplishments that were an inspiration to them to do whatever it takes to get their rugby job done and done right.



Tributes

Steve Cohen, Referee, Early Supporter of Women's Rugby

By Jennie Redner 8/16/2023



Steve started refereeing in 1974, as many did while still a player, by playing the A game and refereeing the B game for the Schenectedy Reds, in upstate New York. In 1976, he moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan for work, and decided he could last longer as a referee, so began refereeing full time. He refereed his first women's match in 1977 at the legendary Mardi Gras Tournament at the Hammond, Louisiana airport, in a game between Texas A&M vs. Houston Boars. Steve described that game as "a slog through the mud and rain, such that neither team could score, so it went to kicking contest where we kept moving the kicking point closer and closer to the posts until somebody made one."

Steve was an early supporter of women's rugby, initially as Chair of the Michigan Referees Society, from 1977-1981, where he made sure the women's clubs were assigned referees too, as he said, "The women's teams paid Rugby Union dues just like the men's teams." When asked why he supported women's rugby, Steve replied, "It's the game, not the players." He also noted that, "The women's parties were more fun!" Steve set the example for the Midwest, along with a small cadre of other men who enjoyed refereeing and supporting the women's game. As Steve's skills as a superb administrator became more widely known, he moved up the ladder to become Chair of the Midwest Referees Society. As a result, during that tenure from 1980-1983, women's clubs across the Midwest received better referee support as well as encouragement to women to begin refereeing, providing assignments, advice, and evaluations.

Women's rugby, which played its first game in Colorado in 1972, began to coalesce at the national level in 1978, with the Women's National Classic, a tournament that later became the official National Championships. Steve served as head referee of the Chicago-based tournament for five years. As Steve explained, "I was refereeing the Michigan State Women's 7s Tournament in East Lansing in June 1978, when Kathy Korse (Chicago WRFC) approached me. She said that in addition to being a good referee it was clear that I treated women solely as rugby players. She said many referees did not support women playing rugby and treated them unfairly and in a condescending manner. Kathy asked if I would serve as the head referee for the 1st Women's National Rugby Classic, which Chicago was hosting that upcoming Labor Day weekend, and if I could also recruit other "women friendly" referees. I gladly agreed. I remained head referee for this event through 1982 including the years it was taken over by the USAWRC in 1981 and 1982 and became the USA Women's Rugby National Championships.

Steve recalled, "Beantown first competed in the event in 1981 finishing last (8th) and got the DFL trophy, but came back the following year and won the 1982 National Championships, where Steve refereed the final, in a 24-0 thrashing of Chicago, and beginning Beantown on its multi-year reign as a powerhouse women's club."

Influential Men Who Pushed Women's Rugby

Bryn Chivers



The Coach, The Artist

Trained as a sculptor, Bryn has a history of seeing what others miss. As he offers, “I like to make things of which I can be proud.” His work on behalf of women’s rugby is something beautiful.

Bryn began coaching the University of Michigan in 1982 and took Michigan to the finals for the first collegiate national championship in 1991. Shortly after, Bryn organized and coached the first Midwest U23 side and became a strong advocate for growing territorial U23 and U20 sides, ultimately his advocacy and work led to the establishment of a National U20 and U23 side. Not surprising, he coached the USA Rugby U20 Women's National Teams from 2005 to 2012. In his role as U20 national team coach he identified and coached some storied US players.

Bryn served as the NSCRO Director of Women's Rugby from 2014 to 2020. He’s won five USA Rugby national championships and one NSCRO national title. While he’s often identified with college and U20/U23 rugby, Bryn was a respected club coach as well, moving Chicago Northshore from a struggling side to a perennial WPL powerhouse. Bryn has devoted 41 years to women’s rugby and shows no sign of slowing down. He recently accepted a position at Wayne State University directing the men’s and women’s rugby program.

It’s time for the artist to make something beautiful.





Bryn in His Own Words

When did you first begin working with a women's rugby team? How did that come about?

I started coaching the University of Michigan women's team in the fall of 1982. I was playing for Michigan and before one of our games Michigan women played a game against Detroit. After the game one of the guys came up to me with two of the women's team, introduced me, and then proceeded to volunteer me to be their coach. I coached them (badly) for four or five years before taking a couple of years off. My good friend Erika Wolf convinced me to come back to the team and together we built a really competitive program. By the 1990/91 season we were the best college side in the Midwest and in the spring of 1991 we drove out to Alexandria, VA, to participate in the inaugural USA Women's Collegiate National Championships

What teams have you worked with over your career?

(These are women's teams unless stated otherwise)

Colleges:

- U of Michigan
- U of Illinois
- Loyola University
- Northwestern University
- Augustana College
- Northwestern College
- University of South Dakota.

Clubs:

- Chicago Women
- Chicago Northshore

Local select sides:

- CARFU U20 Select Side
- Great Plains Select Side
- Prairie States 7's Select Side

Territorial select sides:

- Midwest Collegiate Select Side
- Midwest U23 Select Side
- Midwest U19 Select Side

National teams:

- USA U20 Women's National Team
- Laos Men's 7's National Team

Notable moments? Games? Accomplishments?

As a coach I have so many moments. Taking Michigan to the first ever Collegiate National Championships in 1991. Starting the Chicago Northshore team and watching them grow from six players hoping a seventh would show up before Saturday, to now being a WPL team. The Midwest U23's winning the USA U23 NASC five years in a row. The U20 WNT wins over Canada in the semi final of both the 2009 and 2011 U20 Nations Cup. Taking a U20 WNT to play in South Africa. And so many more.



But mostly, having fifty eight (58) players pass through either the Midwest U23 or U20 WNT pathway on their way to a Senior 15's or 7's cap.

As an administrator I would say that working with folks who allowed me to build things before anyone could see the need. Creating the Midwest Collegiate Select Side in 1991 despite not having anyone to play. Creating the Midwest U23 Select Side in 1998..... despite not having anyone to play. Working with similar minded coaches (Pete, Danita, Jules, Ellen, et al) and building the U23 All Star events in 1999 and 2000 that preceded USA Rugby starting the U23 NASC in 2001.

Building a robust U20 WNT program with a very large player pool, running a thriving U19 NASC every November that fed the following years U20's, and annual fixtures for a U17 Developmental program.

I enjoyed working with Steve Cohen at NSCRO as he trusted my vision for women's small college rugby. When I came on board Steve had built an established 15's Nationals for small college women's sides. When I stepped away from NSCRO we had significantly improved the visibility of the 15's Nationals, added a 16 team 7's Nationals and developed a 7's pathway in small college conferences, created a 12 team 7's All Star Championship and provided resources to conferences to develop their All Star programs, created a fully funded NSCRO 7's Select Side program, and created an NSCRO 15's Select Side program that competed against the USA U20 WNT. If you've done any manual labor jobs then this is the point where you brush the dirt off your hands and throw the tools in the back of the truck.

Notable disappointments? Unrealized goals?

Disappointments are few, but having to leave the U20 WNT program just when it was really hitting its stride was difficult.

Unrealized goals are also few. Varsity coach? U20 WNT again?

What do you believe you brought to the game that was missing?

Due diligence? Actively seeking players for the representative level teams and not just relying on those who showed up for a camp. Following up and looking at every player who was ever referred to me as a prospect for the team I was coaching. Finding the players in the places that no one looks, and believing in them. When the

good team beats the poor team 60-10 it's easy just to see the very good player who is surrounded by other good players on the winning side, and not see the truly exceptional player on the poor team who was supported by no one.



How do you hope players, colleagues remember you?

The success of rugby in this country rests on the shoulders of a volunteer workforce without whom it would cease to exist. As an administrator I felt it important to involve as many people as possible in a project, and to treat everyone as a stakeholder who had an opportunity to contribute to the success of that project.

Coaching colleagues may have varying opinions of me based on which side of the field they were standing. I have a very non-linear brain, and this leads to a strange coaching style that may be off putting from afar. I think the coaches who worked with me knew where to board the bus but often had no clue where it might end up. I hope they all got some positives out of the experience, and I was always amazed when most of them came back the next year.

Some might see my game plans as simple, and I take this as a compliment. This is the role of the coach. To take complex concepts and to distill them down to a more pure form, to seek the elegant solutions that produce success, while also allowing the players to explore those complexities for themselves.

I would hope that players see me as incredibly passionate about the game and honest in my assessment of their skills (some might say too honest). I would like to think that every player knew what was expected of them when they pulled on the jersey.

I was trained as an artist; a sculptor and I like to make things of which I can be proud. I bring this to my coaching when I talk about aesthetics, balance, harmony, and the continuous flow of movement. I like to create open player-based frameworks that allow them to showcase their own skill sets, and not tight coach-based game plans that constrict a player's own creativity and flair. I want to give players the opportunity to produce something that transcends what they hoped they could achieve. I'm a difficult coach for the player looking to be told what to do, but I think most of the players liked the game I was asking them to play.

Tributes to Coach

Bryn was the first USA coach to scout me at age 14. I made my debut at 15 for U19s. I ended up playing for him for 6 years for both the U19 and the U20 teams.

My first game with the U19s was against England and he started me at outside center. I remember getting to our first set piece and looking across at this massive athlete and thinking I was going to die. I looked over at the sideline and made eye contact with Bryn and said "are you sure?" Bryn kept a smirk on his face and nodded. He knew I was going to have the hardest game of my life but also trusted that I was going to learn more from the beating than I ever would from a win. I was a cocky 15 year old that got a chance to learn from the best because of Bryn.

Throughout my career he's kept in touch. His whole heart will always be in the growth of his players.

Kathryn Johnson (kj)

2016 Olympian | USA 15s Player Representative | 15s & 7s World Cup participant | WPL League Operations & Development

Bryn Chivers played a crucial role in shaping my journey towards becoming an international rugby player. When I first saw him step onto the field in Wayne, Nebraska, his passion for the sport was evident and contagious. Although my interactions with Bryn were limited, I learned from other players who knew him that he possesses a unique talent for recognizing and nurturing potential. He also knows exactly when to guide players into the next phase of their careers.

It is thanks to Bryn's persistent efforts to track down my contact information and persuade me to play at a higher level that I have had the opportunity to earn multiple 7s caps, over thirty 15s caps, and participate in three Rugby World Cups. Bryn, your unwavering dedication to elevating American rugby at all levels is commendable. I want to express my gratitude not only for what you've done for me personally but also for your ongoing contributions to club rugby in America.

Kate Zackary

USA Women's XV Captain | Former USA 7s Eagle



Influential Men Who Pushed Women's Rugby

Karl Barth



The Coach, The Teacher

[Karl Barth](#) is first and foremost a teacher. He creates classrooms and lessons that impact players well beyond the pitch.

He began coaching the [Summit High School Girls team](#) in 1997, which is remarkable given how few girls high school teams there were in the country at that time. While Karl saw the potential for girls' high school rugby, he was clearly moved by the commitment of the Summit girls and their willingness to challenge gender norms. In his time at Summit, the girls have won fifteen state championships and numerous tournaments outside of Colorado. Eighty-four Summit players have received scholarships to play at NIRA, D1 Elite, D1 and D2 programs. Karl was on the forefront of a burgeoning youth movement in rugby and was selected to be the first Head Coach of the US U19 program and Defensive Coach for the U20 women. But wait! There's more! Karl's coaching resume includes coaching the ERRFU (Eastern Rockies) U23 women and U19 women, the U19 and 23 West Women, Tiger Rugby Women 7's, ARPTC 7's, APEX U18 (15/7's), Atlantis U19 Women, Hawkeye U16 Women, and the Stars & Stripes 7's. His 30-year commitment to youth rugby has changed the face of women's rugby in the US and he shows no signs of slowing down. In addition to leading the girl's rugby program at Summit, Karl is the head strength and conditioning coach, the coach of Alpine skiing (he recently won a state championship with the team) and the assistant track coach. As Wendy Young recently noted, *"Today, women's rugby in the United States stands stronger than ever, a testament to the collective efforts of individuals like Karl Barth and the Summit High School girls rugby program."*



2009: <https://www.summitdaily.com/news/barth-integral-to-summit-highs-rugby-success/>

2014: <https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/girls-rugby-a-dominant-culture-at-summit-high-school/>

2016: <https://therugbybreakdown.com/2016-05-25-summit-rewarded-in-trying-spring/>

2022: <https://www.aspentimes.com/sports/summit-girls-rugby-team-says-sacrifice-commitment-led-to-second-place-finish-at-national-tournament/>

Karl in His Own Words

When did you first begin working with a women's rugby team? How did that come about?

In 1994-95 I was asked to be the coach of the Johnson State College Women's team, I started because they needed a coach and I was coaching the men's team, it was for one year but very enjoyable and I was impressed with their passion and energy. I then moved to Summit and had two students, a young man and a young woman approach me about starting rugby. I coached both the boys and girls for the first two years and ended up focusing on the women as I really appreciated their commitment, coachability, and joy to break outside the norm expected of high school girls sports and traditional roles of the gender. During that time I also expanded into coaching the ERRFU (Eastern Rockies) Women (w/Mark Bullock who I had coached with Harlequins Men and USA HS All-Americans) and started the highly successful ERRFU U19 program (playing the top colleges (CU, Air Force, ect) in the region and against PNW and NorCal & SoCal annually).

What teams have you worked with over your career?

Johnson State, Summit High School, ERRFU (U19, 23,Women), West RFU (U19,23,Women), Tiger Rugby Women 7s, ARPTC 7s, APEX U18 (15/7s), Atlantis U19 Women, Hawkeye U16 Women, Stars & Stripes 7s, USA U19 (first Head Coach) and U20 (Defensive Coach)

How many years have you been involved with women's rugby?

Since 1994

Notable moments? Games? Accomplishments?

First USA U19 Test Matches vs Wales and Canada in Florida, Many West v Midwest U23 Finals, Summit HS Tour of New Zealand/Fiji and the San Diego Tour, the stopover in Iceland with USA U19 on the way to U19 Nations Cup, the annual trip to SoCal to play U19 Invitational (and going to in-n-out cranking we are the champions on arrival), too many trips and team events with the Summit High School Girls, 84 girls who got scholarships/played NIRA,D1 Elite, D1/D2 meaningful rugby and got a great education (many being 1st generation college), meeting my wife Suzanna and travelling the world to watch her play, and most recently coaching my daughter with a staff loaded with former players. I feel the biggest accomplishment we hang our hats on at Summit is a program that has a culture of helping create great young women who give back to their communities, leave a legacy, find their success in life, and all while producing amazing success on the pitch (81% - 15s, 90% - 7s over 27 years, 33 National Team Players, tons of collegiate student-athletes, and a super diverse group of almost 500 amazing young women) and in our community (HS varsity team, community service, and school/community point of pride). Also watching ex-young players performing on the biggest stages is pretty freaking cool!



Karl in his own Words (continued)

Notable disappointments? Unrealized goals?

Not understanding enough about what successful coaching was early on and missing opportunities to help players in the way they needed, the loss of 15s rugby in CO

What do you believe you brought to the game that was missing?

I think I was an advocate and a voice in wilderness at times, obviously being a part of bringing in the USA U19 (way to go Anne and others) was big, and in general being one of many who demanded more from administrators and help raise the standard of HS girls and women's rugby in the US.

How do you hope players, colleagues remember you?

I hope that they think that I helped them be a better version of themselves on and off the field, that I cared about them, and that it served them in their lives.



Tributes to Coach

Karl Barth has dedicated his adult life to girls and women's rugby. He's been head coach of the Summit High School Girl's Program since 1997, and has served Women's 7s and 15s at the regional and national levels.

I had the privilege of working with him as a head and as an assistant coach. He is technically efficient as a forward and defensive coach, and because of that, respected by his players.

One of my favorite memories of Karl is that he was just the right size to play hooker in practice scrums against his players...and had to often!

Karl is and always has been the perfect gentleman and custodian of the women's game, and I'm proud our coaching relationship continues to this day.

Julie McCoy,
Former Head Coach, US Women's National 7's Team
Founder and Director of ARPTC



Tributes to Coach

Words can't even begin to describe what Karl Barth has done for women's rugby. Karl started the girl's team at Summit High School from the ground up nearly 30 years ago and truly built something special that continues to prosper year after year. Karl's consistent winning record is certainly something to be celebrated, but even more so is the way he fosters team culture.

Karl creates an environment where players feel not just like teammates but like family. His contributions to our rugby community have been nothing short of exceptional, and his achievements will surely be remembered and honored for a lifetime.

Thank you, Karl, for your vision, determination, and unwavering dedication. You truly are the best of the best!

Ashley Smith,

Former Summit player, coach and 6th grade ELA teacher at Summit Middle School

Influential Men Who Pushed Women's Rugby

Pete Steinberg



The Coach, The Architect

Pete Steinberg won 11 National Collegiate Championships. *Eleven*. Ten D1 Championships with [Penn State](#) and one D2 Championship with Temple University. The Penn State women have been the National runner-up nine times. The PSU women have been to twenty finals in thirty years, most of those under Pete's tutelage – that's dominance. It must have been daunting to join a Penn State team during the 2000's; the level of coaching, the expectation and promise of playing for a National Championship; being a part of something extraordinary - a program built to reflect the best of women's rugby. Pete's years of success at the collegiate level and his unique player-centered coaching style soon brought the national team knocking, Pete took over the US Women's 15's team in 2011 and immediately began building toward [2014 World Cup](#) in Paris. In 2016 Pete was an assistant coach with the Women's Olympic 7's team. In the [2017 World Cup](#) he took the US women to the semifinals. While his coaching touch was gold, Pete should also be celebrated for his commitment to developing the Elite Coaching Development Program as part of the women's national team. The program brought coaches to national team camps for shadowing and assistant coaching opportunities opening up pathways for women coaches. It wasn't a big deal to Pete, he saw what needed to be done and took it upon himself to build it.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155702165428140>

Pete in His Own Words

When did you first begin working with a women's rugby team? How did that come about?

I had a US passport and was a very mediocre rugby player in the early 90s (before it went professional) and thought maybe I could play rugby for the US. I chose Penn State as my grad school because it had a good geology program and a good rugby program and I fully expected to play. When I arrived on campus I found out that graduate students could not play. I started to coach the men and women at the start and then ended focusing on the women.

Charlie Smith had retired, who was the founding coach for the women, and his replacement ended up having to move away for work so in the fall of 1995 the women's team came to me and asked if I would be the head coach and that was the start of my career coaching Penn State.



Pete in His Own Words (continued)



What teams have you worked with over your career?

- Penn State Men and Women
- Temple Women
- Keystone Women
- Atlantis Women
- MARFU Men and Women
- NERFU Women
- USA Hawks Men
- USA U23 Women
- USA U23 Women's 7s
- USA Women's Eagles
- USA Women's 7s
- & Probably some others too.

How many years have you been involved with women's rugby?

It was 22 years coaching women's rugby. Now I support with donations and advocacy (and watching my daughter play in the U8s)

Notable moments? Games? Accomplishments?

- 10 National Championships with Penn State
- 1 National Championship with Temple Women
- Going to 2 World Cups for the USA Women (semifinals in 2017)
- Asst Coach at the Rio Olympics

Beating Canada on Canada Day, in Canada was a highlight coaching the USA Women

Losing to Stanford in the Final in 2006 was one my most proud moments of my time at Penn State. Stanford hard appears untouchable for the last year 2 years and we almost pulled it off.

Creating the Elite Coach Development Program as part of the Women's Eagles. It was the first time USA Rugby had ever had a development program for coaches that wanted to coach at the top level and it was a great investment to give coaches hands on experience.

I think that the accomplishments are hopefully with the players and staff that I worked with and helping them be more successful in life because of their experience.

Notable disappointments? Unrealized goals?

Not making the podium in the 2016 Olympics. We lost to Fiji in the opening game, which mean we had NZ in the quarters. We were a try down and they had a player in the sin bin for the last 2 minutes but we could not convert.

I wish I could have helped Penn State go varsity while I was coaching. Lots of discussions but nothing happened.

I tried very hard when I was working at USA Rugby to get more equality for the women's 7s and 15s team but I am not sure I had much success. We ended up doing a lot of what the Union should have done which was good in the short term, but it actually ended up not highlighting the deficiencies.

What do you believe you brought to the game that was missing?

I am not sure I brought anything to the game that was missing. I followed and learned from some great coaches that came before me and I continued the journey.

I did not care that much about winning, but I cared about excellence. I brought a lot of my business experience to the rugby teams I coached - vision, strategy, culture development - that I think was my strength.

What do you believe you brought to the game that was missing?

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How do you hope players, colleagues remember you?

I hope that they feel like they were put in as good a position as possible to maximize their potential and that there were things that they learned that they still use or reflect on today.



Tributes to Coach



Being coached by Pete was different – no yelling, no telling you what you did wrong. But questions. So many questions. Which at first was strange. Many of us had experienced coaches that simply wanted to tell you how much they knew about the sport. Pete had an innate way of posing questions, driving us to think critically and adjusting drills on the fly to enable true learning and critical problem solving on the field. We learned to react, adapt and adjust over the course of the match with little to no input from a coach. What Pete did in coaching every team I played for him was to develop leadership and problem-solving capabilities that translated on and off the field.

Pete uniquely understood how important off-field developmental activities are to building a true team. We were “strongly encouraged” to not hang out with the same people (and by encouraged, I mean Pete would use his unique form of sarcasm to remind you that you were spending too much time with just a few teammates). The end result was spending time with those who you may not naturally gravitate toward and allowed us to build an incredibly strong bond. The night before major matches or on tour, each member of the team would share an impactful story based upon the prompt that Pete provided. These sessions once again enabled such a strong sense of who we were as a team and a deeper bond than I’ve ever felt on a team.

As I have progressed in my professional life I utilize so many of Pete’s lessons in my work. Developing women’s rugby for Pete was not just about winning championships. It was about developing strong, confident, empowered women who are a force on and off the field.

Devin Compo Keller (PSU, 2004 – 2006)

US National team 2011 – 2014

I’ve always appreciated Pete as a coach - we were a successful team that really enjoyed one another. We had fun on and off the field. Practice was creative and engaging. We traveled around the country (and Europe!) together making memories. We were encouraged to push ourselves to be the best we could be rather than focusing on our competition. But now as a retired athlete, professional, and mom, I realize how much more I learned during my time being coached by Pete Steinberg. He has always seen the bigger picture. Yes, he is an excellent rugby coach. Yes, rugby is the best and most fun sport in the world played by the best and most fun people. But Pete used rugby to prepare us for life. In an extremely subtle but effective way, he showed us that sports are not about wins and losses, because you only have so much control over the outcomes. He taught us that what you can control is your own growth. Through rugby we learned the importance of effort, how you react to the situation in front of you, how you show up for the people you care about, how to disagree with someone you care about and how to have those tough conversations, and how to challenge yourself to be the best version of yourself every day.

We were also always encouraged to leave the game better than we found it, and this sentiment was not limited to the starting 15. Playing for Pete was knowing that your contribution mattered regardless of whether or not your boots touched the pitch during an A-side match. I believe this environment squashed the imposter syndrome women are more likely to succumb to and directly resulted in dozens if not hundreds of PSU Women’s players finding their own way to contribute to elevating rugby in the US.

Kristin Miller,

President/Captain PSU Captain Spring 2009 and President from Spring 2005- Fall 2008