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Rainier Plateau offers rugby for local athletes

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Nathan Vangor-Emory got his first taste of rugby two years ago while vacationing in Scotland.

And found it sweet.

"I thought it looked cool and a lot of fun," said the Auburn Riverside senior. "And when I heard there was a team starting here, I was excited."

Last year, the Rainier Plateau Junior Rugby played its inaugural season, drawing players from Auburn, Enumclaw, Sumner, Bonney Lake and Buckley to compete with other local rugby teams.

Now the squad, under the guidance of head coach Andy Ramsay, who played for teams in Australia, New Zealand and Scotland, is in its second season and looking to spread the gospel of rugby to new adherents in the South Sound.

For Vangor-Emory, whose only previous organized sports experience came on cross-country courses, the chance to learn and play the sport was a godsend.

"I had been messing around with my buddies playing the sport, although we had no idea how to play the game," he said. "So it was a lot different. We were out there mangling each other without any idea about the rules of the sport. But it's not that hard to pick up, you can learn the basic rules pretty fast."

On the surface the game seems simple enough, almost a combination of soccer and American football.

Fifteen players per side line up and try to score by advancing an oval ball by running or kicking. Hand passes are allowed, but must be behind the player or lateral, not forward. Points are awarded when a team touches a ball in the opponent's end zone (called a 'try') or when the ball is kicked through the other team's uprights.

Like soccer, play in rugby is free flowing, with no downs or designated offensive or defensive teams. Stoppages occur when a player is tackled or an infraction is whistled.

Then, possession of the ball is determined through the scrum.

Like football, tackling is allowed to stop the advancement of the ball.

Unlike football, however, the players do not use pads, a fact that requires proper tackling procedures, one of the hardest things to teach new players, said Ramsay.

"I think when it comes to tackling, that is the biggest challenge," he said. "They're not used to tackling low and wrapping up,



Rainier Plateau Junior rugby players from left, Jake Christianson, Zane Hines, (with ball), David Connelly, and Dylan Waitman, practice their skills during a practice session.
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they're used to body slams. You have to tackle under control."

Last season the 30-member team played 10 contests with teams throughout the region. This year Ramsay said he hopes to attract even more players.

"We need to build the squad," he said. "We need a much bigger squad to last the whole season. We need a little depth. Last year we had a few positions that only a couple of kids could play, and that hurt us a couple of times. So we want to have a larger squad and be more versatile in the positions."

Ramsay added that one of the appealing aspects of the sport was that players do not need to be huge or fast, they just need to be willing to play and learn.

"There is a position for everyone," he said.

This season Ramsay said that he expected to be able to delve more into the nuts and bolts of the sport, taking more time to concentrate on the details rather than just trying to cobble together a squad.

"This year we're teaching more basic things," Ramsey said. "Last year we had to rush, so we had to just throw the primary things at them. This year, we're really focusing on the basics and getting them down, instead of just doing a high overview like last year. We're trying not to throw too much at them this year."

One advantage the squad has this year is the returning players, Ramsay added.

"The only challenge has been the amount of things that we have to teach before they can step on the field," he said. "We could probably throw some kids on the field but we don't want to do that. The biggest thing is just starting from scratch. But having the boys back from last year helps this year. They are able to take someone aside separately and teach them."

According to Vangor-Emory, he liked the sport so much that he recruited several friends to turn out, including Auburn Riverside senior Nic Batnic.

"I loved that it was a contact sport," Batnic said. "And I liked that it wasn't a school sport, because there are usually too many rules to play. With this it was just about playing."

To prepare, Batnic said he watched online rugby matches to bone up on the sport.

"I picked up on it really quickly," he said.

Although Batnic said he would be turning out for the team this year — he wants to concentrate on school — he plans to play in the near future.

"I definitely plan to play again," he said. "I'm moving to Germany, and I plan to play for a mens' club team there."

For Ramsay, just being able to share his love of a sport he's played his whole life has been his greatest reward.

"It has been great coaching them, just what I expected as far as rewards," Ramsay said. "Just the fact that so many of the kids have come back, that's the primary sense of achievement, that they're back playing again when there are so many choices of things to do.

"I just want to give back to the sport that has been my whole life," Ramsey said. "And also to see my son involved is a big thing. And the challenge of taking someone who knows absolutely nothing to the stage where they are a competent player. We did that last year. They still have a lot to learn though."

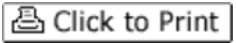
MORE ABOUT RUGBY

The Rainier Plateau Junior Rugby squad practices twice a week for one-and-a-half hours at Bonney Lake High School. Cost to join the team is \$200 and covers uniforms. For more information, call Andy Ramsay at 253-891-8364 or visit the team's Web site at www.rainierjuniorrugby.com. For more information on the sport of rugby, visit the U.S. Rugby Football Union Web site at www.usarugby.com

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