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I Ruck, Therefore I Am

Rugby and the gay male body

Christopher Stahl

Tuesday, June 15th 2004

This last half-hour is agony. My coach calls them zigzags: a crosscut combination of jogs and sprints up the length of a 100-by-70 meter playing field. "I can't make up for your lack of experience," he says, "but I can make you fitter. Faster. More focused." I do four zigzags per practice, if my knee holds out.

In rugby, this field is called a pitch. On Randall's Island, where my team practices, it's a rectangle of dirt, rocks, and broken glass. After a tackle, my arms and legs are covered with scrapes. It's all part of learning to take a hit. My team, the Gotham Knights, is training for the 2004 Bingham Cup, the world championship for gay rugby. I joined the team nearly a year ago. Within a few weeks, I had cleats, shorts, socks, a mouth guard, a jersey. (Protective cups are not allowed.) Within another month, I was in physical therapy for a ligament torn by a bad tackle. By February, I was relearning how to run, doing zigzags, getting tackled again.

To put yourself repeatedly in harm's way is to risk being labeled self-destructive. Some might even call it macho. Yet I'm drawn to this grueling, often bloody contact sport because its raw physicality allows me to channel a kind of masculinity that, while it may seem similar to straight-male jockitude, actually transforms it in subtle ways. Recovering from my injury, I rack up small victories in practice: first time jumping on one leg, first successful tackle, first zigzag. Second. Third. It takes almost the entire spring season before I can do all four. Call it masculinity by trial. My body is changing. Who I am has changed.

Among gay men, rugby has seen a surge in popularity. The number of teams worldwide has more than tripled in the past two years, mostly in the United

photo: Dennis Kleiman



Gotham Knights at rest: For gay bodies, rugby rituals seem both ironic and real.

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States. After Mark Bingham, an openly gay businessman and collegiate rugby champion from San Francisco, helped overpower the terrorists who hijacked Flight 93 on 9-11, more than a dozen new gay teams formed, many in Texas and on the West Coast.

Part of this popularity is a tribute to Bingham and a chance for gay men to emulate someone whose heroism was acknowledged on a national stage that's usually hostile to rough queer bodies. With 590 athletes from nine countries, the 2004 Bingham Cup, which took place in London in May, was the largest amateur rugby tournament in the world. This diversity suggests that more than hero worship is in play.

The rucker is an unlikely sex symbol—a hybrid of jock, bear, and the guy who might have beaten you up in high school. Porn sites like ScrumDown and ruckerbugger trade on the eroticism of the sport by posting naked shots from professional games and straight amateur clubs. Members of London's Kings Cross Steelers, the first gay rugby team (founded in 1995), recently posed shirtless in a gay rag, and this month several members of my team appeared in *Out* as part of a fall fashion spread. Turning the rugby player into a lust object enshrines the sexy violence in the sport—members of my team are always showing each other their bruises—but I think gay men find ruckers desirable for other reasons.

Gay men have a strained relationship with their bodies. We are taught so often that our desires are wrong, that we never will be butch enough, and that we never were. Team sports raise the threat of exposure and incompetence before other boys. We train ourselves to look too critically at ourselves lest we fail to perform the correct rituals of manliness. You can't be self-conscious in rugby. To hesitate is to lose the ball or to miss the tackle. You have to act even if the action is wrong.

When I was growing up in suburban Ohio, football was second only to Protestantism as an organized religion. In high school, football players were treated as divine beings, but I never wanted to be like them. Rugby is a blank slate for me: Similar to football in its outlines, it lacks the cultural baggage that comes with being the American sport. I can be tough without feeling like I'm part of a predetermined narrative about American manhood.

Rugby first exploded on American college campuses in the 1960s, and one reason why, argues Timothy Chandler of Kent State University, is that its free-form rugged playing style offered an alternative to football. The intense bonding among players, the public nudity on the pitch, and the bawdy, blasphemous, sometimes sexist drinking songs made rugby disliked by college administrators but popular among young men attracted to its anti-authoritarian vibe. Even today, football doesn't seem to offer gay men the same opportunities for unconventional fellowship and mayhem. For gay bodies, rugby rituals seem both ironic and real. It's small wonder that Oscar Wilde called it "a good game for rough girls, but not for delicate boys."

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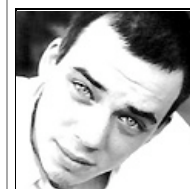
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Football is too traditional, relying on individual players assigned specialized tasks. Rugby is communal. Tackled, I go down and a ruck—a sudden mass of shoving bodies—forms over me. Several of my teammates try to push several of their teammates back and win possession of the ball. Cleated boots strike the ground around me like hard leather rain. It's a thrilling place to be.

London. To my right, a dozen burly Irishmen clap their arms around each other's shoulders. Kicking their legs as self-proclaimed "international drag terrorist" Rose Garden belts show tunes from the stage, the members of the Emerald Warriors—Ireland's first gay rugby team—personify the high spirits of the room. The carnival tone had already been set by a Queen Elizabeth II look-alike. "I thought I would be meeting with heads of state," Her Faux Majesty had twittered as she looked at the throng of ruggers, "since my advisers told me that a load of queens were visiting London. All I see is a jolly good bunch of boys." Welcome to the 2004 Bingham Cup.

Facing other gay teams, our playing feels different. We engage in the game's smashmouth violence without feeling the usual pressure to dominate or to judge. What we begin to realize is that, for this weekend, we can take the hyper-masculine elements of the sport and live them differently. In the end, the San Francisco Fog won the tournament, but we made the quarter-finals—and that was fine. It's not that we are athletically gifted, but rugby allows us to be gay and tough. And it allows us to forge a brotherhood based on mutual risk and sacrifice.

Since most gay teams are geographically scattered, we join straight leagues (or unions) where we are met initially with curiosity or hostility. On the eve of our first match last fall, someone on the

photo: Dennis Kleiman



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opposing team sent a warning to his club's message board that we would hit on them during the game. One of his teammates tersely replied that perhaps he ought to just worry about being hit, period.

Such toughness causes straight ruggers to reassess what they consider manly. Initial perceptions of the Knights as weak shifted after the first few league games. "Other captains would tell us their teams would lose it when they were down a few tries. To see us come back and lay it on the line with the crazy scores we had was inspiring," notes our club's president, Adam Josephs. "We got their respect as ruggers and men." We learn how to get hit and to fall. We learn to hit back, to live in those moments of intense play, and we all go out drinking and singing afterward.

In our last game of the fall season, I witness rugby-playing gay men create a world where these rough practices are transformed into something wonderful and unexpected. Sideline by my injury, I feel out of place watching my teammates hurl themselves again and again at their opponents, a straight team from Long Island. Suddenly, a Knight sees an opening, and charges through. He's tackled, but another is there to take the ball from him. Then we are all in the pack of men rucking near the goal line. The referee's flag goes up. A whistle splits the air. After a stunned silence, we erupt in shouts. One teammate has tears streaming down his face. We have scored our first goal (or try) against a straight team, and now the world is different.

"Who did it? Who did it?" we whisper to one another. But it doesn't matter, because in that moment we all have done it. We are divine. It is who I want to be.

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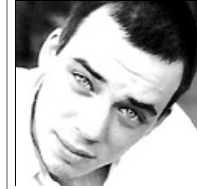
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