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These Rugby ‘Old Boys’ Will Take To The Fields For Fort Lauderdale Ruggerfest In February

by Gary Greenberg (/author/Gary Greenberg)

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This month, dozens of “Old Boys” will grab their cleats and take to the fields for the 40th annual Fort Lauderdale Ruggerfest. Writer and player Gary Greenberg takes us inside the rugby fraternity.

“Old Boys” may sound like a contradiction of terms—that is until you see a bunch of balding, gray-haired men lace up their rugby boots, pull jerseys over their thickening paunches and trot onto the field to play a game that's been described as “elegant violence.”

Truthfully, there's not much elegance in Old Boys rugby. And the violence has been tempered by fading speed, power and endurance. Still, the game conjures up a bit of magic. Muscles stiffened by age loosen up from the mere act of movement, and adrenaline lubricates rusty joints. Suddenly, the AARP-eligible codgers are running around like kids, tackling and grappling as they fight to win a battle against both their opponents and Father Time.

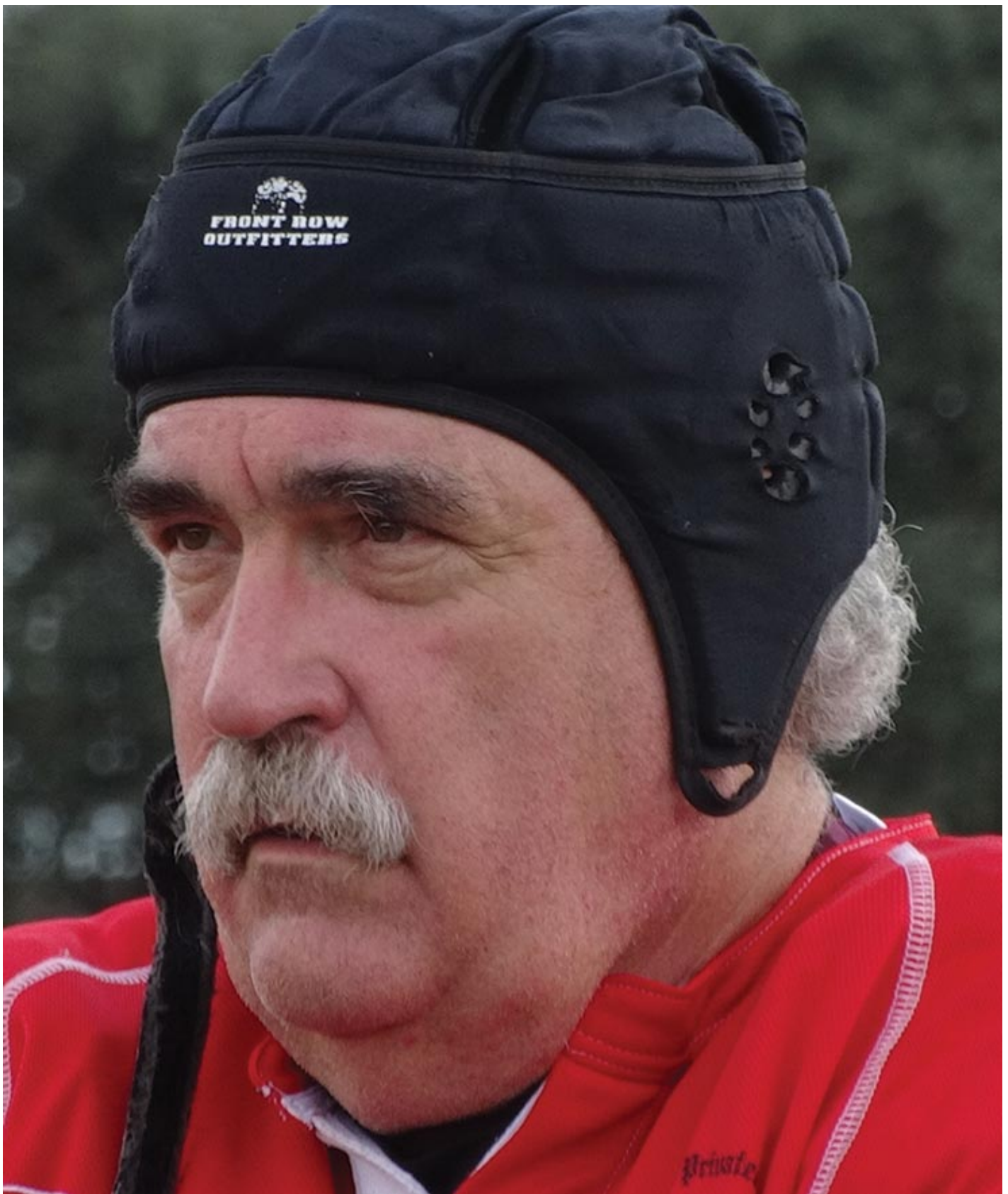
In South Florida, Old Boys rugby is flourishing as a growing number of baby boomers refuse to hang up their cleats. And on the weekend of Feb. 20-21, they'll be out in force for the 40th Annual Fort Lauderdale Ruggerfest, where the competition includes a division for those 55 and over. While the seasoned veterans may lack the strength and fitness of their younger counterparts, their enthusiasm for the sport burns as brightly as ever.



(“Give blood, play rugby.” Marc Samet lives the catchphrase found on T-shirts and bumper stickers following an over-55 game in the 2015 Fort Lauderdale Ruggerfest.)



(Boca Raton podiatrist Dennis Frisch collides with a Freeport player during the ORBS tour to the Bahamas.)



(Dennis Frisch)

“Rugby keeps me young,” says Dennis Frisch, a 60-year-old podiatrist from Boca Raton. “After a game, I have a feeling of accomplishment when I wake up sore on Sunday.” He adds with a laugh, “...and now on Monday, and Tuesday.”

Pain is just part of the game, but these guys are used to it.

“I went to a chiropractor and told him I hurt my back playing rugby,” recalls Marc Samet, a 66-year-old financial strategist. “He said he could fix my back but what I really needed was to have my head examined.”

Samet quit playing rugby at age 32 but says he took it up again with Fort Lauderdale's Silver Knights when he experienced a mid-life crisis at 55.

“It was either buy a sports car or start playing Old Boys,” he notes. “Actually, I did both. You know what they say, ‘When you're bored with life, risk it.’”

Rugby has been likened to football without pads. Two big differences are that there are no forward passes, and it's a free-flowing game in which possession of the ball is fought over in exotic-sounding formations called rucks, mauls and scrums.

Wildly popular worldwide, rugby is one of the fastest growing sports in the U.S. with more than 100,000 participants. Anyone older than 35 is considered an Old Boy. But the brackets have crept up through the years to include 45-and-over, then 50, then 55. And with games in the older age groups scarce, the seniors often wind up competing against guys 20 or 30 years younger than them.



(Mike “Littleman” Resta sits on the sidelines at a recent game in an effort to save his knees for the upcoming Ruggerfest.)



(A ruck forms during a November 2015 match between the Silver Knights and Weston's Okapi Wanderers.)

No one embodies Old Boys rugby more than Mike “Littleman” Resta, a feisty 5-foot-6 member of the Fort Lauderdale Knights Hall of Fame. He joined the team in its first year, 1977, and promptly separated a shoulder. But nearly four decades later, he's still playing at age 66 and serves as a unifying force for the Old Boys community through his chatty, creatively punctuated newsletter. It reaches some 300 email addresses around the globe and offers local game summaries, details about rugby-related social events and various other tidbits, including updates on his chronically sore knee. He also spreads the word about opportunities to travel to far-flung lands as part of touring teams.

Several South Florida players join the ORBS (Old Renegade Boys Side) from Atlanta for a trip to play the Freeport team in the Bahamas every Memorial Day weekend. Come September, the FOBs (Florida Old Boys) regularly send a team to the Ruggerfest in Aspen, Colorado. And there are Golden Oldies Rugby Festivals in different countries every few years.

Frisch figures that between the tours, tournaments and local action, he tallies a dozen or more full-contact games a year. He's traveled to Argentina, the Bahamas, Caymans, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Costa Rica on rugby tours.

“I haven't found anything to replace the feeling I get when I play rugby,” he says. “And I love the camaraderie, how we shake hands at the end of a game and get to know each other over a few beers.”

After beating each other up on the field, the players gather for the traditional rugby party hosted by the home team. Feuds that erupted during the game are quickly forgotten as beer flows freely and ruggers from both teams join together to sing ribald songs. The men of the match are named, with each required to chug a beer. In days past, the brew was often consumed out of a sweaty, muddy rugby boot as everyone chanted: “Shoot the boot...shoot the boot!” These days, plastic cups are more commonly used—and chugging beer is one element of the sport in which the Old Boys seem to have no problem keeping up with the youngsters.

The Fort Lauderdale Knights and Frisch's Boca Raton Buccaneers have been bitter rivals through the years, but as Old Boys they often play together—typically under the banner of the Silver Knights—along with ruggers from other clubs stretching from Miami to Vero Beach.

In February, they'll no doubt be terrorizing opponents during the Ruggerfest. South Florida's premier rugby event, the tournament features 40 teams in men's, women's, Old Boys and youth divisions. It's been going on since the club's first year, when founder Norman Thompson and then coach Keith “Captain Bligh” Lawrence were tossing back a few beers in a local watering hole after practice and just decided to have a tournament. It took place at Fort Lauderdale's Holiday Park and drew eight teams, including one from Iowa.

Deemed a success, the club tried again the following year. But a crisis erupted when Thompson got distracted by more pressing matters and no one did much of anything until about three weeks before the event. Littleman was interim president at the time and rallied the troops to pull it off.

“You can't have an annual tournament and skip the second year,” he says, still sounding a bit exasperated.



(An Okapi Wanderer is tackled by two Silver Knights.)



(Devoted rugby wives cheer on their guys in Freeport.)

The tournament survived and soon became affiliated with Easter Seals, reportedly after one of the players met a woman who worked for the charity and wanted to impress her. The name morphed into the Fort Lauderdale Easter Seals Invitational, and for donating about \$1,000 of its tournament proceeds to the cause each year, the club attracted some new sponsors and good publicity, including a memorable appearance on a local Easter Seals telethon.

Around the same time, the Knights were taking on college teams that flocked to Fort Lauderdale for spring break. That meant playing 20 or more games in a month and hosting the traditional beer-guzzling rugby party after each one. Fearing for their health in general, and liver function in particular, the boys decided to organize a running tournament pitting the college teams against each other, and they called it the Ruggerfest.

In the late-1980s, the collegiate Ruggerfest fizzled out when city officials decided to kill spring break. But the name was revived for the club's annual tournament and is still used today. Seeing how this year is a milestone anniversary, a host of Fort Lauderdale Knights legends will be returning to South Florida. And in a fitting life-cycle quirk, the late Captain Bligh's son, Toby Lawrence, is now the director of the tournament his father co-founded.

“It's nice to continue something that your dad started 40 years ago,” says Lawrence, 35, who markets business software. “There's not only a high level of competition in the tournament, but we're also helping to promote the youth game. And it's pretty much the Old Boys who got it to this point.”

Any Old Boy will tell you that rugby is more than a game. It's a lifestyle and global fraternity. For guys like Littleman, the sport is a passion bordering addiction. As the Ruggerfest approaches, he's been feverishly working to rehab his “good” knee—which he injured while doing yard work, of all things—so that he can join his mates for a game or two in the over-55 bracket.

“Rugby is like a life-long adventure,” he says. “There's no reason for it to stop.”
