



A Short History of Youth Rugby in the US and Rhode Island

The first recorded American rugby match was between Harvard and McGill universities in 1874. For the next 50 years, rugby and “gridiron” football competed for popularity, and although the US won the Gold Medal for rugby in the 1920 and 1924 Summer Olympics, American Football won the popularity contest. Rugby football then fell into relative obscurity. The 1960s and 1970s brought a revival to the sport and most local and college clubs were founded about this time (Providence and Newport RFCs are both celebrating their golden anniversaries).

USA Rugby, the sport’s national governing body, was not formed until 1975, and the US returned to international play in 1976. It took USA Rugby more than a decade to fully develop its jurisdiction over American rugby. Unfortunately by this time, rugby had gained a reputation as rough, injurious sport with undisciplined players (much of it deserved). Recognizing that the cause of most injuries was poor coach and player training, USA Rugby attacked this problem first with changes to the rules. Some of aspects of play in which inexperienced players get hurt were more restrained and more closely monitored by referees. The second remedy was the institution of a multi-level coaching certification focused foremost on techniques for safe play. Every youth team in the US must have a coach certified by USA Rugby to coach the sport safely (a “Level 200” certification). There are at least two in-residence coaching courses conducted in RI each year, and there are currently more than fifty coaches in the Ocean State certified to coach youth rugby safely. The results of this effort have borne fruit: rugby injuries now occur at only one-fifth the level of American Football injuries.

With national governance came structure. Mirroring the European model, clubs and college sides are organized in geographic “unions” that predated USA Rugby and persist today with national guidance. Youth rugby organization, however, was instituted by USA Rugby and consists of Youth Rugby Regions that run State-based Youth Rugby Organizations (SROs). There are now 47 SROs (Rugby Rhode Island, formed in 2019, was the 47th, and is governed by the Northeast Region, headquartered in Boston). Every youth program (players up to age 18) must play under USA Rugby regulations, as administered by Rugby Rhode Island.

Aside from some short-lived youth and high school programs in Providence, Newport and Barrington, youth rugby in the Ocean State was for two decades limited to Bishop Hendricken HS and Island Rugby (a Newport-based community program). Both have enjoyed success, Hendricken as two-time Massachusetts Champions and one-time New England Champion, and Island as host to a very popular summer seven-a-side tournament. Meanwhile, rugby has flourished with our neighbors to the north and west. Massachusetts high school rugby is now fully interscholastic in the MIAA and has a vibrant community club league, while Connecticut boasts one of the best high school leagues in the nation, even winning some national championships. With its sights on similar success, Rhode Island high school rugby began competitive play in Spring 2019, with teams of Hendricken, LaSalle and Pilgrim students playing for the state’s first high school rugby championship (won by Hendricken).

The Official USA Rugby State-Based Youth Rugby Organization for the Ocean State
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