



## hardcore

### Local athletes get down and dirty on the rugby field.



much to the consternation of friends and family who say they should know better than to continue punishing their bodies like they do.

"We don't do anything to foster that image," says Allen Kipp, a member of the Birmingham Vulcans Rugby Club and, somewhat ironically, the health and safety administrator for the American Red Cross in Birmingham.

Kipp began playing rugby at the University of Alabama after listening to a fellow player try, unsuccessfully, to convince his roommate to come out for the team. Even though he didn't know anything about rugby, Kipp says it sounded like fun and he decided to give it a shot.

"My roommate wouldn't go but I thought, 'Wait a minute, oblong ball, tackling, cleats, I'll do it.' Fifteen years later I'm still doing it," Kipp says. "I love the contact and the aggressiveness of rugby, and there is always the element of other people looking on and thinking, 'They're crazy.'"

Image aside, rugby isn't nearly as violent and dangerous as its reputation would suggest. In fact, says fellow Birmingham Vulcan James Smith, rugby is really a game for gentlemen, with a definite code of sportsmanship and fellowship, factors that make rugby so addictive to those who enjoy the sport.

"It's very much a gentlemen's sport. You play a game for 80 minutes and you're beating up and working hard against each other," Smith says. "But, when that final whistle goes, you drink a beer with the guys you were just playing against and laugh about things that happened during the game. Once the game is over, you're on the same team and part of the same fraternity."

Smith, the de-facto coach and captain of the Birmingham Vulcans, is a native of South Africa, where rugby is front-and-center in the nation's sports culture. He began playing when he was six years old and played for a few years while living in Europe before moving to Birmingham, where he was surprised to find a pretty good team already in existence.

"I've been in Birmingham for 12 years. I played rugby in Europe for about five years and met my wife there, who is from Birmingham. My only stipulation on where we were going to live was there had to be a rugby team," Smith admits.

"My first practice out here I was amazed that the guys are actually very talented rugby players. They know what they're doing, they have very good ball skills, they're very fast and very fit," Smith adds. "You can take the Birmingham Rugby club anywhere in the world and be competitive."

What do you get when you combine the sports of football and soccer, the attitude of, say, a 1970s-era Hollywood stunt man, and the gentlemanliness of a proper English chap? The answer is, of course, rugby.

For those unfamiliar with the sport, rugby is the direct precursor to American football—a game played with a large, oblong ball by a pair of teams trying to advance the ball across each other's goal line. There are some significant differences, however. For instance, forward passes are not allowed in rugby, players don't wear helmets or pads, and games are played in two 40-minute halves.

Popular in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa—three countries that have traditionally displayed the most intense passion for the sport—rugby has a large following in Europe as well. But over the past 15 to 20 years, rugby has begun to gain a foothold in America, particularly on college campuses where the living embodiment of the hard-partying, rabble-raising rugby player is alive and well. Many college players continue to play long after graduation,

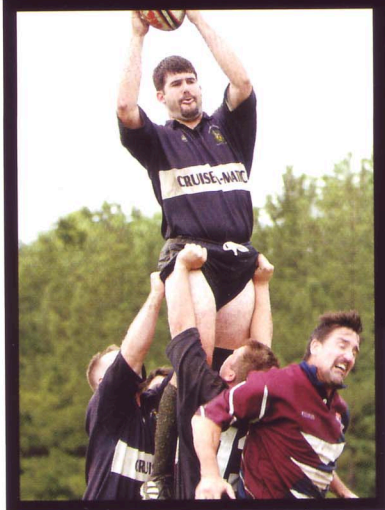
BY LOYD MCINTOSH  
PHOTOS BY JASON WALLIS

**"Rugby is very much a gentleman's sport."**



Birmingham native Michael Laney, a project administrator with BellSouth, had just the opposite experience than Smith. Laney recently had a chance to travel to New Zealand to see the Bledisloe Cup, a two-game match between New Zealand and Australia. Laney's fiancée Paula Chandler—a New Zealand native and also a rugby player for the Birmingham Vulcan women's team—arranged for Michael to participate with her brother's team during a semi-final match. Even though he didn't get to play that day, Michael says the experience was a great thrill and a perfect illustration of the brotherhood that exists among fellow rugby players.

"I practiced with them, suited up with them, did the weigh-in. They were so nice to me and didn't worry about the fact that I was from the U.S. and supposedly didn't know rugby as well as they did," Laney said. "They were just great people." ●



Learn more about the Birmingham Vulcans by contacting them at [www.birmimghamrugby.org](http://www.birmimghamrugby.org)



#### Rugby Facts and Figures

- Different rugby leagues and unions play with different numbers of players on the field. In the league in which the Birmingham Vulcans participate in—Division II of the Deep South Rugby Union—each team has 15 players on the field during the game.
- A touchdown is worth five points and a conversion kick is worth two points. Two players score a touchdown—more commonly referred to as a try—a player must touch the ball to the ground after crossing the goal line.
- There are no forward passes in rugby, only lateral passes. There is also no blocking as in American football.
- A match is divided into two 40-minute halves with no timeouts. The clock runs continuously, only stopping for injuries.
- Players play both offense and defense during a game.
- According to the U. S. Rugby Association, 75 percent of amateur rugby players earn more than \$50,000 per year. Over 90 percent have at least a Bachelor's degree.
- The U.S. Rugby Association expects membership to grow to over 60,000 by the end of 2004.
- The Birmingham Vulcans practice and play at Ramsay Park off of Montclair Road in Mountain Brook. Their primary season is in the spring; however, they also play in the summer and fall.