

in Canada. (The U.S. team beat Poland, Brazil, and Uruguay before losing to Austria in the quarterfinals, 2-1.) There also looms the possibility of turning professional before his college career is over. But Akpan and his family value his education highly, and it would have to be something "very special" to lure him away from Ohiri Field (named for Chris Ohiri '64, the Harvard soccer and track star who, like Ak-

pan's father, immigrated to the United States from Nigeria to attend university).

Akpan's personal highlights for the season? Winning the Ivy League title, of course, plus his two goals against Yale and the game-winner against Binghamton. As he remembers it, "There was a cross, and the ball was headed out, and Chey passed it in to me in the right side of the box. I took it in too far, but I shot it 'far post' and it went

in off the post. I guess it was more of a prayer shot than anything else. I just kind of got lucky." Perhaps not: with great scorers, prayer shots have a sublime way of coming to a peaceful rest in the back of the net.

~DAVID UPDIKE

David Updike '79, who played soccer at Harvard from 1975 to 1977, teaches English at Roxbury Community College in Boston.

Rugger Mothers

The muddy, bloody, glorious origins of rugby at Radcliffe

I WAS A HOOKER at Harvard. It wasn't what I expected from college, but I fell in with a crowd of foul-mouthed girls who spent Saturdays brawling and trying to score. In September 2002, I joined the Radcliffe Rugby Football Club, playing prop, flanker, and finally, hooker—the player who taps the ball to her team's side of the scrum. It was an opportunity I owed to the 1982 Radcliffe team.

This year, Radcliffe rugby celebrates its silver anniversary, which encouraged me to look up some of its founding mothers. The idea was actually conceived on the sidelines of a men's game in 1981. "I got frustrated that women couldn't play, because it looked like such a fun game," says Ingrid Jacobson Pinter '83. "I was moaning on the sidelines to a friend, and he said, 'Since when did you take no for an answer?'"

The friend was tutor Paul Erickson,

Ph.D. '84, a graduate student in English and a rugby player. Jacobson Pinter, soon to be Radcliffe Rugby's first president, drafted Erickson as faculty sponsor and then posterized the campus with flyers promising free beer to interested athletes. Louy Meacham '85 recalls, "Word was out on the street that they were looking for people who had one or two screws loose." Meacham says they drew "people who were a little off the beaten track, but with an incredibly fierce competitive instinct." Merry Ann Moore '84 recalls, "People were interested in women's athletics, and stretching the limits of what women's athletics meant." Funded in part by Radcliffe and eager not to be seen as (in Jacobson Pinter's words) the "Ladies Auxiliary of the men's team," they wore Radcliffe red and black.

Most had never touched a rugby ball. Mindy Fener of the local Beantown club

became the coach and assigned positions, designating a "pack" of contact-hungry forwards and a "line" of speedy, evasive backs. In rugby, forwards attempt to win possession by forming a "ruck" and driving opponents off the ball, or by securing the ball in a knot of players called a "maul." The "scrumhalf" directs traffic in the pack and sends the ball out to the back line. The backs then try to gain territory by "skipping" the ball out wide, "crashing" back inside, changing direction with switches, and faking their defenders with dummy passes. It is often said that the forwards decide who wins, while the backs decide by how much.

Jeanne Demers '83, who grew up playing full-contact games like "murderball" with her brothers, was eager to play a tackle sport. "Some women didn't know how strong they could be," she says. While the backs practiced dummies and switches, long "skip" passes and on-the-run pop kicks, forwards fine-tuned their scrum, a formation in which opposing packs "bind" (hold tightly to teammates in order to hit and push as a unit), crouch, and hit one another to win a clean ball. With spring thaw, the team took the pitch, and on April 17, 1982, Radcliffe was surprised to win its first match, defeating MIT 10 to 6.

Louy Meacham credits coach Fener with the winning "try" (score) versus Tufts the following week. "We had no idea what we were doing, but we were faking it pretty well," Meacham recalls. "Mindy was reffing. We were all the way down, practically in the try zone. The pack was rucking the ball, basically moving it right up to the line. Mindy was staring at me, and I realized she was saying something out of the corner of her

Fall Preview

Women's Soccer

New head coach Ray Leone, who came to Harvard from Arizona State, leads the women booters into their fall season; he is the third head coach in three years, with predecessors Stephanie Erickson leaving after one season and Erica Walsh departing after a single, dreadful, 3-13-1 campaign last fall. But Walsh left Leone some gifted young players, including the Ivy League Rookie of the Year, Lauren Mann '10, a goalkeeper, and Lizzy

Nichols '10, an all-Ivy defender who can also shoot. The Crimson also boasts perhaps the best crop of new recruits in the Ivies.

Football

Despite the departure of record-breaking running back Clifton Dawson '07, the footballers remain sturdy. Much of last year's stingy defense returns, including all-Ivy cornerbacks Steven Williams '08 and Andrew Berry '09. The *College Sporting News* service has named Berry a preseason all-America candidate.

mouth.” For a football touch-down, the ball need only break the plane of the goal line; a rugby try requires that a player actually touch the ball down. As scrumhalf, Meacham was handling the ball when the forwards drove over. “Just touch it down,” Fener was whispering to her clueless scrumhalf, “Just touch it down!” Meacham, so caught up in the still-novel game that she’d forgotten that basic rule, at last got the point and, as the ball rolled over the line, scored her first try.

The women improved, and despite some memorable losses—in one thrashing, Radcliffe underestimated their manicured, mascara-wearing Bridgewater opponents—chalked up several wins their first season, and enjoyed doing so. (Radcliffe has since qualified five times for the collegiate national tournament, and won the national championship in 1998.) “My God, it’s so freeing for a young woman to have an opportunity to run and tackle and breathe that kind of aggression and release and exuberance,” Meacham says. “To me, rugby is such an exuberant sport.”

“It was exhilarating and it was terrifying,” recalls Jacobson Pinter, who played flanker—a position for a quick, ruthless tackler. “It’s something you can do at 1,000 percent,” adds eight-man Sheryl Wilkins Pardo ’84. “And tackling, for women, when you’d never been allowed to tackle—it was just a blast for me.” Rugby remains the sole team contact sport in collegiate women’s athletics—and unlike hockey or lacrosse, men’s and women’s rugby share the same rulebook.

The physicality breeds a particular intensity of teamwork. Like soccer, rugby is played continuously, without downs, so the ball is live after a tackle. This demands both improvisation and communication, and means that a ball-carrier must trust her teammates to run “in support,” ready to receive a pass, or ruck if she gets tackled. Furthermore, club-status independence brought the Radcliffe team closer. “The piratical, not-in-the-varsity-



harness feeling was certainly something that a lot of us enjoyed about the experience initially,” says Meacham. “It was nice to be captains of our own leaky and scary ship.”

Rugby is a sport of traditions, of post-match socials and songs, so Radcliffe needed a team culture. Bruised and muddy, they adapted men’s rugby’s chauvinist lyrics while hanging around the sideline keg of beer. Radcliffe began every drink-up with a chant called “We’re All Bastards.” That song would later be replaced by “I Don’t Wanna Be a Housewife,” an anthem that rejected dishwashing and child-rearing in favor of the world’s oldest profession. Although some team members objected, Pardo considered singing a chance to appropriate some “not okay” concepts. “It was a chance to say, ‘Screw it, I’m just going to not be good.’”

Merry Ann Moore directed debauchery as social chair. “We were big into rituals and chants,” she says. “We were constantly making *hachimakis* [Japanese headbands] out of toilet paper.” Moore organized a lobster boil to rival the rugby men’s pig roast and held fundraisers at the Piccadilly Filly, in Harvard Square, which allowed Radcliffe to host beer-drinking contests at the bar and peeing contests in the ladies’ room.

Not everyone approved. Historian Bar-

bara Tuchman ’33 wrote this magazine, in response to a piece about the new women’s club, “Is this imitation of the foolish physical violence of men’s team sports what young women come to Radcliffe to learn? To find this activity to be the mood of Radcliffe today at a time said to represent the supposed ‘liberation’ of women is a development that leaves me as an alumna of Radcliffe very unhappy.” For the most part, however, the first Radcliffe ruggers found remarkable acceptance and support. “[Tuchman] completely missed why we were attracted to it, the team aspect,” says Pardo. “It creates a cohesive, supportive community.”

None of the founding mothers still plays, though Jacobson Pinter recently taught her 12-year-old son to tackle, and Meacham cheers her 9-year-old boy, a scrumhalf like his mother. She’s proud “to see that fire in his eyes and to see the joy in his being as he makes a tackle—and to think, ‘I know exactly how you’re feeling.’”

The future? “We have plans for the Radcliffe Rugby retirement home,” Meacham assures me, “with on-site masseuses and rocking chairs.” I tell her I can’t wait.

~JENNY DAVIS

Jenny Davis ’06 is a freelance writer and club rugby player who lives in Manhattan.