

STARTING A CLUB

Starting a rugby team can be one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have. Anyone can do it, even if you have zero experience playing or even watching rugby. You don't have to be an experienced rugby player or a star-athlete to start a rugby team. But it does take setting goals, following through on your commitment and equal parts patience and persistence. You can do it! Don't re-invent the wheel, though. Learn here from the past experiences of existing gay rugby teams. We'll give you all the dirt...

The whole start-up process in a minute or less

In a nutshell, the process goes something like this:

1. Take a half-hour or so and sort out how you see yourself contributing to the team. Are you ready to commit the time and energy necessary to do this? Who else you will need to help you out? Get the word out that you are looking for folks to help you start a gay rugby team. The section [Are You Ready?](#) will guide you through this process.
2. You need to do some homework. Find out if there is a strong pool of gay athletes you can recruit from in your area. Is there a strong rugby community as well? What's the local rugby union like? It should only take a few phone calls here and there to find out this information. The section [Is a gay rugby club feasible?](#) will direct you on what to do.
3. Next, you need to gather up some potential players and hold an information session. There, you can answer common questions newcomers have about the game, and help folks make up their mind. This should take you about two – three weeks, with most of the time spent on finding potential players. The section [Milestone I: The Information Session](#) has loads on how to recruit players and what you need to do to conduct an effective information session.
4. Hold your first practice within one or two weeks of the info session. You can start practices whether or not you have a coach in place. The section [Milestone II: The First Practices](#) will be a great help here.
5. Once you've started practicing you'll want to decide on how the team will be coached, and join your local rugby union. The sections [Milestone III: Choose a Coaching Structure](#) and [Milestone IV: Joining the Union](#) will be a great aid to you when your team is ready to take on on these challenges.

That's it! From first idea to first practice, your new team can be up and running in about four to six weeks.

CHECKLIST FOR STARTING A GAY RUGBY TEAM

ARE YOU READY?

- Play it smart and enlist a couple of other folks to help start the team. Spread responsibility and delegate authority.
- Know your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to leading people. Try to find folks who possess personality traits that compliment yours.
- Try to have someone handle administrative stuff, another handle promoting the team (marketing/recruiting), and a seasoned rugby player or interim rugby coach who will handle the first practices once they start.
- Recognize that there is no right way to start a rugby team. Forget about doing it absolutely perfectly. Forget that you may be unsuccessful. Take the bull by the horns and commit to just do it!

IS A GAY RUGBY CLUB FEASIBLE?

- Decide “how gay” your gay rugby team will be.
- Look at the pool of gay athletes in your area. Is it big enough to recruit from?
- Research your rugby community and the local union. Judging from how the women’s rugby teams are treated, how receptive you think the union would be receptive to a team for gay men? Who are the teams you will play?

MILESTONE I: THE INFORMATION SESSION

- Gather as many interest folks as you can for an information session. Recruit, recruit, recruit!
- Establish an email group to facilitate communication with those you come in contact with.
- Plan for your information session. Allow enough time to find a suitable space and recruit enough potential players.
- Conduct the information session

MILESTONE II: THE FIRST PRACTICES

- Start practicing as soon as it is practical*, but absolutely within two weeks of the information session. Sooner is better.
- Secure your practice pitch (field space).
- Get the equipment you’ll need for your first practices.
- Hold your first practices
- Have a social after every practice.

MILESTONE III: CHOOSE A COACHING MODEL

- Choose the coaching model best suited for your team’s unique situation.

MILESTONE IV: JOINING THE UNION

- Join your local union, at the very least, as a provisional member, as soon as your team is ready to take that step.

ARE YOU READY?

- The Three Main Roles for a Team Just Starting Out
- Commit to action
- There is no one right approach to starting a gay rugby team.
- How much time is this going to take?

Checklist for this step

- ❑ Play it smart and enlist a couple of other folks to help start the team. Spread responsibility and delegate authority.
- ❑ Know your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to leading people. Try to find folks who possess personality traits that compliment yours.
- ❑ Try to have someone handle administrative stuff, another handle promoting the team (marketing/recruiting), and a seasoned rugby player or interim rugby coach who will handle the first practices once they start.
- ❑ Recognize that there is no right way to start a rugby team. Forget about doing it absolutely perfectly. Forget that you may be unsuccessful. Take the bull by the horns and commit to just do it!

Starting a gay rugby team feels a lot like stepping into a gay bar for the first time. The idea is equally as seductive as it is scary. Many exciting things could happen. You could meet cool (and sexy) people. But to meet those cool people you'll have to wade through a lot of people who are not interested. You aren't entirely sure what to do, or even if things will work out for you. But you do know that good times are just waiting to be had if you just take the plunge.

The work of putting together a team is easier if you have help. If you don't have a team in place from the start, don't panic. Start getting the word out to the gay athletic community in your area that you're starting a rugby team. Usually by the time you hold the information session (or right after) several guys will volunteer to help out (see [Milestone I – The Information Session](#)).

Either way, you want to have a core leadership team in place by the first practice. A rugby team is not a one-person operation. **Spread responsibility and delegate authority.**

Looking at the histories of current teams, there are two common threads among them at the very beginning of their clubs:

- There were one or two *drivers* who consistently pushed and guided the team along, especially during those first few months of inertia
- There usually were also one or more *co-founders* who assisted the driver(s). These co-founders had skills that complimented and augmented those of the driver(s).

We assume that if you are reading this with the intent of starting a rugby team, you probably fall into one or the other category (probably the "driver" category). Regardless of which category you fall in, the members of your leadership team should know each other's leadership styles and should respect each other's styles. Most importantly, each member should learn how to work with those styles. Often, just being aware of how the others think or the perspective from which they view the world helps to facilitate decision-making and team leadership. Acknowledge and respect differing styles, but also be aware of weaknesses of those styles when making team decisions.

The Three Main Roles for a Team Just Starting Out

Your leadership team is the group of folks who is going to help you realize your dream of creating a gay rugby team. There are three administrative roles that will ensure that the team gets started off on the right foot. Ideally, the team will consist of

- Someone who is a good *administrator*, with good attention to detail, follow-through skills, and a willingness to manage the finances initially.
- Someone who is a good *promoter*, with a strong ability to recruit players and market the team.
- Someone who is a *seasoned rugby player (2-5 years) or an interim rugby coach*, who has good coaching skills and an ability to teach rookies the game. This person will be the person who organizes practices until you decide on a coaching model.

You may be all three of these, but if you try to take on all three roles, you will go insane. Running a rugby team by yourself is too much work for one person—just ask those of us who have tried to do just that! Do yourself a favor and learn the art of delegation early.

Take a closer look at yourself. If you are a natural administrator (even if there are things you'd have to learn, such as how to incorporate the team), pick the administrator role, and find two other people who can take on the other two roles to fill out your leadership team.

However, if you know that your attention to detail or your ability to follow through has never been your forte (you are a "big ideas" kinda of guy), don't take on the administrator's role. Pick one of the other roles, and find two other people to fill the remaining roles.

These three roles should *ideally* be covered by the time practices start. That may be a month away or several months away. You may have a couple of guys willing to help out now. Or, initially, it may be just you. You may have to search around to find the rest of your leadership team. If our experience is any indication, those people who first express interest in playing on a gay rugby team will also be eager to help you run the team, *if you ask*. Remember, a closed mouth never gets fed.

Commit to action

There is one absolutely crucial bit of advice that will guide you through the start-up process no matter what: *Make a commitment to yourself to "just do it."* You can agonize for months about whether or not you should be the one starting the team or whether anyone will be interested. But you will never really know until you try, right?

Do whatever you can to conquer your fears about starting the club. Don't listen to anyone (including the voices in your head) who says it can't be done. Trust us, with enough effort and time, it can be done—it has been done! If you have fears, it's because you know you are about to attempt something meaningful and courageous. Without fear, there is no courage. Just do it!

There is no one right approach to starting a gay rugby team.

Each of the existing teams has followed its own way. However, each has done it using some variation of the following series of "go/ no go" decisions:

- Are you and your co-founders committed to founding a team and aware of your personal strengths and weaknesses when it comes to leading people and getting things done? (Yes? Then start getting the word out that a gay rugby team is starting.)
- Do you think there is enough interest from gay athletes in the community to talk about starting a gay rugby team? (Yes? Then conduct the information session)
- Is there enough interested gay athletes to get folks to actually join a rugby team and come to practice? (Yes? Then, start your first practices)
- Can you find/create a coaching situation that allows the club to continue in the long run?
- Is your club ready to be accepted by the union?

As you can see, the process is pretty simple. The hesitation to commit to starting the team is mostly a fear of failing. If, in the end, starting a rugby team in your area is not feasible, you'll know well before you start practicing. We also know that sheer will, determination and patience can start a gay rugby team in the most unlikely places. (Auckland, New Zealand isn't exactly a

gay mecca, but one of the earliest gay rugby teams was started there and continues to thrive.)
Acknowledge your fear, put it aside and JUST DO IT.

How much time is this going to take?

Typically 4-5 hours per week, sometimes more, most times less. See, that was painless, wasn't it?

IS A GAY RUGBY CLUB FEASIBLE?

- Philosophies of what is a “gay rugby club”
- Where will the players come from?
- Is there a rugby community?
- How receptive would the union be to gay team?
- Who would you play?

Checklist for this step

- Decide “how gay” your gay rugby team will be.
- Look at the pool of gay athletes in your area. Is it big enough to recruit from?
- Research your rugby community and the local union. Judging from how the women’s rugby teams are treated, how receptive you think the union would be receptive to a team for gay men? Who are the teams you will play?

In this section we want to help you look at your local “rugby environment” in which the potential club will belong. Unlike many gay sports teams, where gay athletes play other gay athletes in gay leagues, gay rugby clubs belong to the local rugby union where the teams are mostly straight (well, except for the women’s teams!). Gay rugby teams have to travel to play other gay rugby teams. It is worth investigating what the climate will be like for a gay rugby team in the straight club environment you will play most of your games in before you start the club in earnest.

Philosophies of what is a “gay” rugby club

Strictly speaking, the existing “gay” rugby clubs are more accurately called “predominantly gay.” Almost all of them have straight players on their teams. It may surprise you that straight guys would want to play on a gay team. Usually, these are guys come with years of experience, too. Theories abound as to why straight guys join gay teams (“big fish in a little pond,” “gay guys are cooler” etc.). For the most part, straight guys are positive additions to the team.

The point of bringing this up now is for you to think about the reality of your team’s situation and “how gay” it will be. Politics aside, it is highly unlikely that a “gay team” will form in the Yukon. But a team “inclusive of all people” might.

So far this seems to be mostly an American concern. Both the Manchester and London clubs unambiguously state that these are teams for gay and bisexual men. They attract straight guys to their teams nevertheless. The first American clubs adopted phrases like “multicultural players” and “traditionally underrepresented players” to more clearly position themselves as being open to participation by players who are not gay or bisexual.

You may want to create a team where equal numbers of straight and gay work side-by-side on the pitch. Or you may want a team that is almost exclusively gay, which is certainly possible in large cities like London, New York, Los Angeles or Toronto, but probably not so easily done in smaller cities with smaller gay populations. Start thinking about this now, as it will certainly be asked about when you start to get the word out about your team.

You will be often asked (mostly by straight rugby players), “Why create a gay rugby club? Why not just join the existing clubs?” “Because!” may be an honest answer, but hardly an articulate one. Here are some better-thought-out responses:

- To create a rugby team where men feel comfortable regardless of sexual orientation or other differences.
- To attract a new population of players (gay men) to the sport of rugby, increasing the diversity of the sport. (You are adding to the pool of new players, not siphoning off players from existing teams.)
- To refute negative stereotypes about gay men, men of color, etc.

- To create a welcoming and encouraging learning environment for ruggers with zero experience who would feel insecure and less confident in their skills playing on more established teams.

Where will the players come from?

A similar question to the “how gay” will the gay rugby team be, is where can you recruit gay ruggers. Well, gay ruggers are hard to come by, even in England. It’s better to take one step back and look at the gay athletic community as your principal source of players.

Because of the success of the Gay Games, many cities have gay athletic associations, like Team Seattle and Team New York, who serve as umbrella organizations for many sports. These organizations are usually recruiting gold mines because they are brimming with gay men who are already athletically inclined, and often looking for a new sport to explore. Gay softball teams are especially good places to recruit from in the United States. Also, in the US and Canada, the bear and leather communities are fertile recruiting grounds (see [Recruitment and Retention](#) for more details).

You can quickly find out the relative size of the gay athletic community in your area by calling your local gay info lines or getting on the Internet. If there are lots of gay sports teams and lots of gay athletes, it’s a good sign that recruiting should be relatively easy. If there are few gay sports teams or few gay athletes, you may have a more difficult time recruiting players.

Is there a rugby community?

Your local rugby union will set the tone of the environment in which your team plays rugby. Regions with strong rugby cultures tend to have strong unions. The opposite is true as well: weak rugby cultures produce weak unions.

Strong unions tend to advocate development of rugby players and expansion of the sport. There are a healthy number of youth rugby teams. Thus they tend to be more inclusive and supportive of all kinds of people playing rugby. They generally don’t feel threatened if a gay rugby group comes along. In fact, they will likely welcome a team that brings more people into the sport.

Weak rugby unions operate like an “old boys club.” They do not emphasize development or expansion. Rugby is seen as a game to play with people like themselves.

Take a closer look at your local rugby teams and the local rugby union. How well run is the union? How big is it? What’s the reputation of the teams, particularly in the lower divisions? Do the teams like each other?

How do you find out this information? You’ll have to do some digging, but your national union’s website should have information that will lead you to how to contact teams your local union. Since ruggers love to gossip about other teams, getting them to speak up about another team is really easy. The women’s teams are especially good resources for getting information on the “state of the union.”

Here are some Internet resources that will help you find teams in your area

Australia	Union info can be found at www.rugby.com.au . Click on “Club Rugby” link to go to the site for information about club rugby teams.
Canada	Union info can be found at www.rugbycanada.ca . Click on “Rugby Links” to get to links to provincial rugby unions
England	Club information can be found at http://www.rfu.com/clubs/index.cfm .

New Zealand	Club information can be found at http://www.nzrugby.net.com/NZRFU/Clubs/Clubs+Map.htm .
Ireland	Union info can be found at www.irishrugby.ie . Click on "Club Pages" to find local clubs.
United States	Territorial and local union information can be found at http://www.usarugby.org/about/tu.html

How receptive would the union be to gay male team?

A good indication of the degree to which the union will be receptive to a gay rugby team is the degree to which members from the local women's teams have been integrated into the local union's leadership structure. Why? Because most women's rugby teams have long been havens for lesbian and bisexual ruggers.

It is often overlooked that the lesbians and bisexual women have forced straight male ruggers to deal with issues around differing sexualities long before it became hip to have a gay male friend (well, at least in San Francisco and New York). Lesbian and bisexual women ruggers led a slow, quiet, revolution that has helped to open the minds of ruggers over the last thirty or so years.

Because most women's rugby teams have a number of lesbian and bisexual women players, they are more likely to know who is cool and who is not cool around gay issues and gay people. They can also be your biggest allies. Especially on local union boards.

Who would you play?

A final consideration would be figuring out whom you would play. Most unions divide up recreational clubs into divisions, typically Divisions I, II and III. Division I is where the top clubs play. These are large clubs (70 –120 members) with at least three teams each ("sides" in rugby speak): an A-side (highly skilled and experienced), a B-side (intermediate skills and experience), and a C-side (rookies). In Division II play, the clubs are slightly less competitive. The clubs, however, are only large enough to seed two sides (A-side and B-side). Division III is usually reserved for teams just starting out or teams from a small city or town who do not have enough of a population base to field more than one side. In addition, the local union may have a pub and old boys leagues (teams composed of guys over 35), where informal teams of players (who do not practice regularly) play for their local pub.

Most gay rugby teams start off in the lowest division in the union. For some gay rugby teams, the only available Division III rugby teams they can play are in distant cities or towns 4, 6, 8 even 10 hours away by car—the dreaded "geography problem." This is especially true of teams whose local unions cover a large geographic area. Playing such faraway teams can add to the individual expense of playing rugby for your team members (hotel, transportation, food). This can impact your ability to field a team, especially if key players can't make the trip. (Then again, few things bond a team like a crazy road trip...)

Teams with a "geography problem" often have to be creative about getting local matches. For example, they will scrimmage against the B- or C-sides of local Division I or II teams. Or they will scrimmage against a local pub team or a university graduate school team (law school, business school or medical school team).

Ask your union who you would likely play. Get an idea of how hard you'll have to work to get matches, and factor that into your decision-making.

Okay, you've done your homework, and you have a clear picture of yourself and your environment. You are ready for your first big step: holding the information session.

MILESTONE I: THE INFORMATION SESSION

- Gathering potential players
- Conducting the information session

Checklist for this step

- Gather as many interest folks as you can for an information session. Recruit, recruit, recruit!
- Establish an email group to facilitate communication with those you come in contact with.
- Plan for your information session. Allow enough time to find a suitable space and recruit enough potential players.
- Conduct the information session

The information session is a crucial point in the evolution of a start-up rugby team. In many ways it is the “test drive” of the rugby team. It is at the information session that you’ll get an idea of the effectiveness of your recruiting efforts. But most importantly, the information session builds momentum and excitement. The rugby team stops being an idea and becomes more of a reality.

Gathering potential players

The techniques you’ll use to gather players for the information session are not much different than those you will use to recruit players once the team gets going. (See [Recruitment and Retention](#) for more detailed explanations of techniques.) Some general tips:

- You are looking to gather as many people as you can who are merely *interested*. Even if a guy does not look like he would last five seconds on the pitch, he may have a friend who can. And sometime those scrawny guys are scrappier than they look.
- Allow yourself two to four weeks to gather information session participants.
- Keep the people you find “warm.” As you gather more and more people, keep in touch with the folks you found first. Getting them on an email list is a good idea (see below). Contact them at least once a week with an email or a phone call. This lets them know you haven’t forgotten them.
- As you contact people, some people will want to know the very information you’ll give them at the information session. Resist the temptation to go into lengthy conversations by giving them a brief answer. Don’t be afraid to say, “We’ll cover that in more detail at the information session.”
- As you contact people, get an idea of what general times they could make an information session (Wednesday night? Saturday morning?) This will help you plan when to hold the meeting.
- Have a set of recruiting cards made up so that you can hand them out when you meet someone face-to-face. You can get some cheap ones made up at most office supply stores, usually under \$15. Or you can make them yourself.
- ALWAYS ask every contact (even if they aren’t interested) if they know of anyone who may be interested in playing rugby. This can lead to finding experienced rugby players.
- There is a natural tendency to only approach those people who look like you or those whom you find attractive. While it may be more comfortable to approach these folks, remember this is a rugby team, not a dating service. The success of your team lies not in how physically attractive your team is to you, but in how serious you are about recruiting for athletic talent. The most successful gay rugby teams are also incredibly diverse across ethnic, race and class lines. If your team ends up looking like you, you will have missed whole groups of athletically talented people who would have played on your team if only they had been asked.

To help facilitate communication among interested players, almost all of the existing clubs set up an Internet email group. Almost everyone has an email account these days. Setting up an email group will make keeping folks in the loop a breeze. At Yahoo! (groups.yahoo.com) it’s easy set up such a group. It also comes with other useful communications tools. Best of all, it’s free.

Conducting the information session

Holding the information session is the easy part.

- Secure a proper space to hold a meeting. In general, try to avoid restaurants and bars if you can. They are noisy and have many distractions that compete with the attention of your participants. However, if the restaurant or bar has a private room that you can use, go for that. Community centers, schools, churches and community colleges, even someone's living room (if it's large enough) are good places to hold meetings.
- A suggested format for the session would be
 - (a) a welcome, introducing yourself
 - (b) going around the room and asking everyone to introduce themselves, talk about their rugby playing experience, and disclose a fun fact about themselves
 - (c) give a presentation on how you see the club and the information you have found out so far. (A sample presentation can be found [here](#).)
 - (d) open up the forum for questions from the participants
 - (e) close the meeting by talking about next steps (usually a date for the first practice)
- Try to have snacks and beverages around. Food encourages intermingling, and you definitely want your participants to meet their future teammates.
- The information session is the perfect time to ask people to help out. You will always find two or three people who are eager to volunteer to help out with anything from doing the team website to designing the team logo to finding a practice pitch.
- The information session is the best time to have people fill out a short club form with contact information. [Here](#) is an example.
- Ideally, you will have an idea of when to hold the meeting from the contacts you have made when you were gathering players. In general, weekends are good.

Remember, the main purpose of the information session is to get people as fired up as you are about the team. The simple act of gathering guys who are interested in playing rugby (or at least in the *idea* of playing rugby) can create excitement. Chances are you are helping these guys meet the kind of guys they rarely meet in the bars and clubs or online. Don't underestimate the power of that first meeting.

Don't be disappointed by a low turn out either. Again, the number of people who show up to the information session will be a direct reflection of your recruiting efforts. You may have six or seven people show up for the first meeting. That's a fine start! If this is the case, you may decide to hold another information session before you have your first practice. Get the guys that did show up for the first session to go out and recruit more guys. Active recruiting techniques (like approaching guys one-on-one and chatting them up) is ten times more effective than passive recruiting (poster, ads, Internet postings).

One last thing: be sure to personally call each and every person on your phone list within a day or two of the information session. Follow up with them and try to ascertain if they will be coming to the first practice or not.

Ready to hold your first practices? Read on...

MILESTONE II: THE FIRST PRACTICES

- Start practices NOW!
- Securing pitch space
- Resources you will need for your first practices
- Practice structure
- Socials

Checklist for this step

- Start practicing as soon as it is practical*, but absolutely within two weeks of the information session. Sooner is better.
- Secure your practice pitch (field space).
- Get the equipment you'll need for your first practices.
- Hold your first practices
- Have a social after every practice.

Start practices NOW!

The momentum gained from the information session will fizzle out quickly if a practice is not held within two weeks of that meeting. Holding your first practice within one week of the information session is better. The more time you wait to start practicing, the more likely you are to lose interested players.

How many players do you need to start practices? Ideally, ten or more. But even if you only have two, you can throw the ball around. If you don't have enough folks at the first few practices, then it's obvious what you need to do: recruit, recruit, recruit. However, starting practices has the great side benefit of motivating those that show up to practice to recruit more players.

We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to start practicing as soon as you realistically can. Even if your numbers are very small at first, the numbers will grow over time. Teams that start off with six at their first practices quickly grew to thirty within a few of months. Rugby offers an incredible mix of camaraderie and brotherhood so many gay men find missing in their lives. Once players have had a taste of practicing and socializing together, the magic that is a "rugby team" begins. They can't stop talking to their friends about it. If you delay and delay the first practice until things are "just right" you are preventing that magic from happening. Trust us on this one: if you build it, they will come. Guaranteed.

Start out with one practice per week for the first couple of months, unless you have a compelling reason to practice more than once (i.e., you have a goal to enter union play within less than nine months). Late Saturday mornings (10:00am or 11:00am) are usually better than other days and times, but Sunday afternoons work well too. Plan on 1.5-2 hour practices.

Secure pitch space

The first step in getting practices started is finding a practice pitch. (A pitch is "rugby speak" for a field.) In many large cities, particularly in America, this can be a difficult and sometimes unpleasant task as many teams from different sports compete for limited green space.

The first place to start is your local Parks and Recreation department. These are the folks who you will know whether or not you can even legally play rugby on city park fields. (Some cities have bans on using city fields for contact sports or groundsports where cleats are required.) Don't wait until the last minute. There is often a reservation process that must be followed weeks in advance. If it is not prohibitively costly, it's a smart thing to reserve your fields. Field disputes over who has the field reserved happen more often than you would think.

Local Park and Recreation departments sometimes ask for proof of liability insurance. For American teams, liability insurance is one of the major perks of membership with USA Rugby. A team is automatically covered when you register fifteen or more players with USA Rugby. If you aren't there yet with the numbers, contact your local rugby union and ask them to try to help you out.

If you can make arrangements with a local school (private schools tend to be better) or college, you may find yourself in a better, more flexible position. Corporate parks with big lawns could also be an option.

A more serendipitous way to find a pitch is to drive around your city. As you find patches of green area, try to find out who owns or operates it and how you can contact that person.

Call other local rugby teams. They've been around the block many times and may have some helpful suggestions. They may even have a home pitch that they'll let you use for your practices on days on which they do not practice.

If you are bootstrapping (running the club with little money available), you may have to resort to squatting. When squatting, discretion is key because you always risk getting kicked off the field. Squatting usually works the first couple of times, but folks will catch on eventually. If you are going to squat, try to find three or four places you can squat and alternate your practices among these spots. That way it looks like you're only there once or twice a month instead of every week. Think of finding places where there are lots of trees and shrubbery, where your activities are unlikely to be noticed by someone passing by. If you can get away with it, you'll save a ton of money (the cost of reserving space adds up quickly, especially if you practice more than once a week). The downside, of course, is that you risk your practice being disrupted if you get caught.

When looking for a space, the space should (hopefully) be flat and grassy, have some degree of moisture in the soil and be at least somewhere around fifty meters by fifty meters (about fifty-five yards by fifty-five yards). Pitches with lots of lumps and gopher holes are pregnant with opportunities to twist ankles. Pitches with significant patches of bald spots are equally bad (you may as well be playing on concrete). Pitches that are hard do not take a cleat. Avoid areas with picnic tables, playgrounds or other permanent structures that are close to the area in which you will practice. They pose too much of a risk for accidental injury.

Resources you will need for your first practices

The team will need these things for your first practices:

- Six to ten rugby balls. If you can, don't skimp. Choose a high-quality rugby ball (USD\$35 - USD\$70 range). The grip on cheap balls wears out quickly. Stick with the big brands. Gilbert and Kooga balls rarely disappoint. Most times cheap ball inflate irregularly (they have pointy instead of round ends.) If you are bootstrapping, require everyone on the team to buy their own ball, mark their name on it with a permanent marker, and bring it to every practice.
- Cones, preferably bright orange. Set of 20 flat, and 20 small upright ones.
- Medical kit (see section on [Medical Supplies](#)) and someone trained in first aid procedures

For players, you should communicate to them that they may not need to have proper kit for the first couple of practices, but after the first practice they should invest in a good pair of rugby boots, at the very least.

Structuring practices

In a perfect world, you would have found a rugby coach before you even had the information session. If this is your case, you are quite lucky. Rugby coaches are hard to find. Rugby coaches willing to coach a gay team are even harder to find.

During its first few months, a new team can survive without a coach. An experienced player with solid skills can teach the eight basic skills of rugby (handling, passing, running, kicking, tackling, managing contact, rucking and mauling). When the team is composed of mostly rookies (as most gay men's rugby teams usually are at the start), concentrating on the basics for the first few months is what you need to do anyway.

Here is an example of how a practice *could* be structured:

- Warm-up and stretch (10-15 minutes) – Take a lap or two around the field (together, as a team), then circle up around one person who leads the group in stretching.
- Auckland Grids (a.k.a. Four Corners) (10 - 15 minutes) – A ten meter by ten meter square is created by putting cones at each corner and one cone in the middle. The team is divided up into four groups of equal numbers of players, and line up single-file behind each cone at each corner. The guys at the front of each line facing each other and each have a ball. Various handling and passing drills can be done from this formation.
- Lines (10 minutes) – The team divides up into parallel lines of four to five people. In each line, the players are spaced about two meters apart. As the line runs together to the opposite side of the field, the ball is passed from person to person. Emphasis is on passing flat, running onto the ball, being to a position to support the player with the ball.
- Whole Team Drill 1 (10 minutes) – Drills for the whole team. Usually covers tackling, rucking, mauling.
- Whole Team Drill 2 (10 minutes)
- Specialized practice (20-30 minutes) – Team splits into backs and forwards to work on specialized skills for players' positions.
- Unopposed 15s (20 minutes) – Team comes together and works on coordinating multiple-phase play. OR In-practice scrum match (20 minutes) – Team divides up into teams of equal skills and play each other. Coach referees.
- Cool down (10 –15 minutes) – Light jog around the field followed by stretching.

It is important that certain essential skills (handling, passing, tackling, rucking and mauling) are practiced at every practice.

It is equally important that good practice habits start from the beginning. There is a strong tendency for experienced players who are not in a coaching role to offer unsolicited advice. This often confuses rookies. Work out who is going to coach and let him coach! There is also a tendency not to hustle from drill to drill. Nip this poor attitude in the bud from the beginning. Encourage a culture of eagerness and willingness.

Finally, encourage competitiveness early. A lot of clubs play a light game of touch rugby before practice starts. It's a game that encourages good handling, passing, support and defensive skills and it is a fun way to start practice. In-practice scrummages are also a way to cultivate competitive spirit.

Socials

Socials offer a team, especially a start-up team, the opportunity to bond. **Socials are an essential part of the team's formation. They are an integral part of the game. Don't dismiss them.** It is where the true friendships among team members form. Rugby teams live and die by their degree of cohesion.

Many team members will also see socials as the reward for working hard in practice. After getting banged up and working hard on the pitch, it's nice to relax afterwards with a pint of beer and the company of your mates. It would be a mistake to not have a social after every practice.

Socials are usually nothing more than getting together to get a bite to eat or a pint after practice. It usually takes no more planning than coming to a consensus about where to go. It helps

tremendously if you have a pub and/or restaurant close to the practice pitch or a favorite of the majority of the team. It also helps to have a point-person responsible for coordinating socials.

MILESTONE III: CHOOSE A COACHING MODEL

- Model 1: Find a rugby coach <hyperlink to section below>
- Model 2: Affiliate with a team (the Manchester Model) <hyperlink to section below>
- Model 3: Grow your own <hyperlink to section below>

Checklist for this step

- Choose the coaching model best suited for your team's unique situation.

Aside from finding money, finding a rugby coach is probably the most difficult task of all. A good rugby coach is hard to find for any team. Finding one who wants to coach a gay men's rugby team adds to the difficulty. Yet coaches for gay men's rugby teams have been found. All you need is a bit of patience, tenacity, persistence—and knowledge of where to look.

What follows are three common coaching models. Explore each option and be open to choosing the path that best fits your team's circumstances.

Model 1: Find a rugby coach

This model is the most popular approach, as it is the most traditional. Rugby coaches usually come with some degree of experience and accreditation (Level I, Level II, Level III). Coaches, however, are rare in rugby because the vast majority of rugby players do not go on to coaching.

How do you go about finding a coach? Here are some suggestions:

- Approach your local union. Tell them to get the word out that you are a new team looking for a coach.
- Approach individual teams. Let them know that if any of their former players are looking for a coaching opportunity, you have one.
- Approach other team's coaches. The coaches' network can be strong. Other coaches are often the best source for finding out who may be looking for another opportunity.
- Approach your local referee's society. They may know of someone looking for a coaching opportunity, too.
- Seek out a woman as a coach. Women's teams often have players and former players who are credentialed but have had few opportunities to flex their coaching muscles. Chances are good that if she's a rugger, she's family too. And even if she's not family, the chance are good she's been around other LGBT folks.
- If there are communities of immigrants in your area who come from countries with strong rugby traditions (i.e. Australians, New Zealanders, Fijians, Samoan, Tongan, South Africans, British, Irish) be sure to get the word out to them. Consulates and cultural centers as well as bars where people from those communities hang out are good places to advertise that you are looking for a coach.
- Use the Internet. Advertise your search on rugby sites. Use search engines to try to find coaches in your area.
- Import your coach. If you have the means to sponsor a coach (to set up him up with housing and an job, and to help the coach navigate the visa process), this is an excellent and often very successful approach. It is difficult to pull off, financially and legally, though. However, many of the top American clubs do this.

It is important that you be up front and honest about the nature of the team to the potential coach. Resist the urge to "bait and switch" by hiding that you are a gay team from him or her until the last minute. Be prepared for lots of rejections and a long search over several months.

Because the coach is such a pivotal but difficult role to fill, it is sometimes difficult for a team to part with a coach that is not working out. Not everyone who is an experienced, credentialed rugby coach is a good one. Many times a rugby coach who has superior rugby knowledge is not a good personality fit for the team. This can cause serious morale problems on the team if you keep him or her around. In such cases, the team is better off without a coach.

Similarly, a team can outgrow a coach. He may have been fine for the first year or two, but the team may need new coaching leadership to move to the next level.

Both of these situations illustrate the necessity to view a coach as *an employee of the club*. Whether he draws a salary or not, you must keep in mind that he (or she) can be replaced. It is usually best to draw up a contract every year with your coach, like this [one](#). You should never think of your team as stuck with any coach.

Model 2: Affiliate with a team (the Manchester Model)

Another model is to affiliate with an established team, with the aim of becoming an independent, self-supporting club within a few years. This approach has been successfully employed by the Manchester Village Spartans (Manchester, England) and the Ponsonby Heroes (Auckland, New Zealand).

The advantages are significant. By affiliating with an existing team, you have more options available to you, most importantly access to coaching and equipment resources and field space you do not have in place. If you are strapped for cash this is an excellent alternative.

Also, it gives your club the chance to slowly build up its number of quality players over time. New players will get exposed to a higher level of rugby from the start, so those players who honestly are not suited for rugby will quickly weed themselves out. Those without the right work ethics and attitudes will quickly find their experience unpleasant under this model. Experienced players will improve more quickly and will be less bored than under other models. From a purely developmental view, it is the best and quickest model to create a quality rugby team.

The disadvantages are just as significant. The biggest one is the loss of a truly independent identity. Usually, the only time you will play independently as a “gay team” is when you play other gay teams. Cohesion becomes a major issue. The members of your club technically will be members of the club with which you affiliate, and the affiliated club will always want to pluck your team’s best players for their matches. The arrangement can become so comfortable that the team loses sight of its own identity and becomes a bunch of gay guys who play for another team.

These types of arrangements are not as uncommon as you might think. Clubs merge, fold and create alliances in creative ways. In the United States, many Division III clubs wish to maintain their own identity but do not wish to continue being bothered with the administrative aspects of running a team. They will often affiliate with a Division II team (who are usually required to field two sides per match) and offer to play their “B” side matches during the regular season.

The key to making an affiliation work is choosing the right partner. Choose your affiliating team carefully. You want to find a team that is supportive of your efforts to eventually be a mostly gay team in your own right. The biggest challenge, of course, is actually finding a team in your area that would be in a position to take on a new team.

Model 3: Grow your own

A third approach that is also fairly common is to “grow your own” coach. Usually this means selecting a player (or two) who has playing experience and turning him in to a coach. The selected player can continue to play, but this can make coaching very difficult. Most times this person has to choose coaching over playing.

The selection of a player should be done with some care. The skills one needs to be a good coach are not the same as those needed to be a good player. A player who is mediocre but who can clearly and effectively explain the mechanics of rugby skills well as well as motivate all kinds of different people can make an excellent coach.

One of the most difficult things you may have to do is to move on when a player/coach isn't working out, or when the team has grown beyond their skills. As with a traditional coaching structure, it is best to be clear about expectations from the start, so that if the player/coach is not meeting expectations, it is easier to address what's going wrong. Generally speaking, the player-becomes-coach model is best employed as an temporary measure.

Another approach to "growing your own" is to select someone one who has extensive coaching experience in a continuous-play or contact team sport (i.e., football, basketball or soccer) and developing him into a rugby coach. This situation works best when the coach is partnered with someone who can demonstrate skills and help the coach teach strategy as s/he climbs the learning curve.

A coach needs to be able to inspire as well as lead. A coach is part educator, part mentor, part motivational speaker, and part disciplinarian. The more technical aspects of rugby can be taught, but charismatic leadership cannot.

Section 7.0

MILESTONE IV: JOINING THE UNION

- Why join? <hyperlink to section below>
- When to join <hyperlink to section below>
- How to join <hyperlink to section below>
- Loose ends <hyperlink to section below>

Checklist for this step

- ❑ Join your local union, at the very least, as a provisional member, as soon as your team is ready to take that step.

The last big step in establishing a rugby team is joining the union. If you have decided to affiliate with another team, this will be necessary only when you become an independent team.

Why join?

There are a number of benefits to joining your local union.

- It is often required in order to play against other union teams. At least in theory. Unions usually prohibit teams from playing teams who are not part of the union. This prohibition is normally used to prevent teams from playing that have been kicked out of the union due to disciplinary problems. It also encourages teams to be an active part of the union. However, many unions are lax about enforcing these rules. Non-union teams just starting out often play union teams anyway, even though they are not supposed to.
- Union membership facilitates match arrangements. Being part of the union makes it much easier to arrange matches because teams are required to play each other in divisional play (or forfeit the match).
- Union membership is permanent. Once you become a permanent member, you cannot be kicked out of the union unless you misbehave.

When to join

The point at which a team joins the union is really up to the team, but the team must be ready to start playing matches. Generally, it is a good idea to join the union as a provisional member as quickly as you can. Many unions require you to spend a year as a provisional member before you can join the union as a permanent member.

The question of when to join the union is actually two questions:

- (1) Do you feel you have the numbers to field a team? (at least 22 players)
- (2) Do you feel the team has had enough rugby experience playing together to take on an experienced team?

A common pattern for the established gay men's rugby teams has been to join the union immediately as a provisional member, but spend the next year or so building up the team's basic rugby skills. They'll play five to ten "friendly" matches during those first couple of years to get the team used to playing against an opponent. Friendly matches—basically scrimmages against other teams—don't count towards any divisional standings or overall win-loss record.

Being a "friendlies-only" team your first year or two is a good way to build up the team's confidence, especially if you concentrate on playing other "friendlies-only" teams. Old-boys teams (teams composed of players over 35), pub league teams and university graduate, law school or business school teams usually fall in this category. Lower division teams with poor winning records are also good teams to start off playing friendlies with.

Some of the more recently established teams have jumped into the fray immediately, getting involved in divisional play very quickly after forming. Knowing that you've got eight divisional matches that count in six months can be strong motivation for your team to take practices seriously and to recruit like mad.

Bottomline: only your team can decide when it is ready to join the union. And it should be a team vote. If the team's not ready to do it as a team, you're setting yourself up for diaster.

How to join

Each union has its own procedures for joining. You may be required to submit a club constitution, by-laws, a recruitment plan, a fundraising plan, a list of registered players and other stuff. It's best to consult your union about the joining process, and what you will need to present in your application to the union.

Application?? Generally speaking, you are asked to present an application to the union stating who you are, why you formed, what are aims are in joining the union and supplying the union with information that convinces them that you are a sustainable organization (list of members, dues, etc.). The application is presented to the union's Executive Committee or at the Annual General Meeting of all the clubs in the union. Your application is then voted on.

If your union requires you to join provisionally at first, the union's Executive Committee usually approves the provisional membership application. Permanent membership application is presented later to the general union membership for all of the team in the union to vote on.

Unions vary with the details of the application process. Again, the best source for the procedure for joining your union is your union.

Loose Ends

A couple of miscellaneous points:

- Be sure to cultivate a strong mentoring relationship with the women's teams in your union. Besides being great folks to hang out with, they can be your biggest allies in the union. They can be a big help in navigating the joining process.
- Prejudice in the form of fear catching HIV may rear its ugly head. There always seems to be one team that brings this up. Fortunately no less than the International Rugby Board (the IRB, rugby's ultimate authority) has issued guidelines that state that
 - (a) the likelihood of transmitting HIV or other bloodborne pathogens is very, very small. In fact there has been no known case of HIV transmission while playing rugby. (Keep in mind that South Africa, a major rugby playing country, has an estimated 25% of its population infected with HIV. Nobody seems to be worried about catching HIV when they play South African teams.)
 - (b) as long as the standard procedures regarding blood are followed, the likelihood of the transmission of bloodborne pathogens will be minimal.

An adaptation of guidelines issued by the IRB can be found here
(http://www.texasrugbyunion.com/images/tmp/safe_rugby.pdf.pdf)

BEST PRACTICES RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

- Where to find players
- Recruiting tactics
- “Selling” the club
- Common objections
- Planning for recruitment
- Think “Yeilds”
- Retention Issues

Perhaps the most common questions every gay rugby team asks are:

- “Where can we find new players?”
- “How can we recruit better?” and
- “How do we keep the players we have?”

Here are our collective thoughts on the matter.

Where to Find Players

Some of our favorite places to find players are:

- *Other gay sports teams.* Lots of gay guys are tired of playing softball. A lot of gay softball players and athletes are former football, hockey, or basketball players looking for a sport a little higher up on the macho scale. Soccer players are an excellent source for kickers.
- *Bear bars, country/western gay bars and leather/levi bars.* Folks in these types of bars often are looking to find other guys who are tough (or tough-looking), masculine, yet friendly, laid-back and fun to be around. They often say these bars offer a comraderie and welcoming, attitude-free environment they don't find in find in the more popular gay bars. A gay rugby team is often an easy sell in these places because a gay rugby team offers the very type of atmosphere these guys seek out.
- *The Internet.* From AOL chat rooms to gay-oriented websites, finding gay people interested in playing rugby has never been easier. Search gay chat room profiles and gay-oriented websites (like Gay.com, Planetout.com, Gaydar.co.uk, Bigmuscles.com, and Bigmusclebear.com) for folks in your area who mention their interest in rugby in their profiles.
- *Street fairs, parades, etc.* These offer excellent opportunities to meet tons and tons of gay folks face-to-face. Plan ahead to secure a booth. Bring lots of recruiting cards and literature folks can take with them.

A word of caution: it is generally considered bad form to poach players off of another rugby team. It's fine if they come to you on their own accord, but don't go seeking them from other teams. If word gets back to the union—and it will—your poaching will not endear you to the other teams in the union.

Recruiting tactics

There are basically two recruiting tactics:

- (1) Passive recruiting
- (2) Active Recruiting.

Passive recruiting tactics include what most people think of as recruiting. Here are the most common three:

- *Canvassing Posters and Flyers.* Just like it sounds like, this is going around and posting posters or handing out flyers on the street. You can also leave postcards-sized posters at bars, near where folks order drinks.

- *Advertising.* Post an ad in the local gay rag can be a good way to get the word out. See if you can't negotiate a reduced rate, or even donated space in the paper. Posting ads on message boards seen by lots of gay people (such as www.craigslist.org) is good, too.
- *Websites.* Creating a website is also a good way to advertise that you are looking for players. It can also be a good source of information for prospective players.

These are tried and true strategies, and to an extent they do work. However passive recruiting strategies have their limits. For one, you have to catch the potential recruits attention. Amidst all of the other posters and ads, yours has to stand out. For two, you give up the chance to interact and convince a skeptic to give rugby a try. Basically, you are relying on them being already pre-disposed to being interested in playing rugby.

The problem with rugby is that it is perceived as something only those with a death wish would do. As the old rugby saying goes, "You don't have to be crazy to play rugby. We'll teach you." As much as we revel in the macho aspects of the sport, it becomes a real hindrance when it comes to recruiting. Many, many guys (gay and straight) that could physically handle the demands of rugby get scared off because they think it is "unsafe."

Active recruiting strategies work better for recruiting rugby players because they allow you the opportunity answer questions and handle objections immediately. Let's take a look at some of these techniques in detail:

- *"Prop Hunting"* – By far the best tactic. Despite the colorful name, you aren't just looking for props (although good ones are notoriously hard to find). You are looking for any kind of rugby player. Here's how it works: a small group of you goes out together and recruit folks face-to-face. Find a series of bars you'd like to go to and start chatting folks up. This is incredibly effective, especially if you have business cards pre-printed with info on how a prospective recruit can find out more info (website, email address they can write to, etc.). Have a space on the business card where players can pencil in their own phone numbers so that the prospective player can follow up individually if he wants.

Everyone on the team needs to do this kind of recruiting work. Prop hunting works best as a team effort. Folks who are shy should work in a team with another person who is not. And it is a good idea for folks who are one type of physical build to approach those who are of similar build. Its hard for a 6'3" lock to convince a 5'8" potential scrumhalf that he won't get hurt—but someone who is 5'6" could.

Some friendly advice about prop hunting: it is easy to only go recruiting in places you feel socially comfortable in. Some places (such as a bear bars and leather bars) naturally lend themselves to folks who are more likely to play rugby. Do not fall into the trap of only recruiting from the places at which you are most familiar or comfortable or most successful. The best rugby teams (gay and straight) exemplify the diversity of the communities they represent. A rugby team has to be diverse: it needs as many tall, big guys as it needs smaller, fast guys. You make a big mistake if you don't recruit from a myriad of places and create a team that appears unwelcoming of all different kinds of folks. In fact, you could turn-off straight players from joining your team. (Straight players often look for visible signs of diversity on the team to let them know that they are welcomed on the team.) Also, if you keep going back to the same places over and over, you will eventually tap your source. Do yourself a favor: aim for a diverse team by recruiting from diverse places.

Also, *always* give out a recruiting card, even if the guy says he's not interested. He may have a friend who is. He may even mull it over later and decide to give rugby a shot.

People often think that gyms would be a great place to do this kind of face-to-face recruiting. While you may have some success in recruiting guys at gyms, folks who have concentrated on building muscle (as opposed to *using* muscle) tend not to last long the pitch. This is doubly true of guys who are juiced-up on steroids. (They tend to not have the ligament strength that comes from building muscle more slowly, and tend to rip or tear muscles quickly.) Don't write off recruiting at the gyms (they are great for finding guys with the discipline to do cardio work), but don't rely on it either.

- *Word of Mouth.* Another excellent tactic is building word of mouth. Basically, all you're doing is telling all of your friends and acquaintances, and asking them to tell all of their friends. Seems simple enough, but you will be amazed at how effective it is.

The key thing with word-of-mouth advertising is that you have to keep talking the team up. Every chance you get, talk up the team. Whenever you meet a new person, talk up the team. Keep giving them updates on how the team is doing. Eventually, folks will start making the connection with you and rugby—"Oh you thought about playing rugby? I have a friend you should talk to!" The referrals will roll in.

- *Internet Chat Rooms.* Make a point of periodically going into chat rooms and bringing up rugby as topic. Mention in your profile that you are playing rugby and you are looking for other rugby players—to play rugby, of course.
- *Strategic community partnerships.* Plan win-win partnerships with community organizations to work on community or charitable projects. Charity work is also awesome for teambuilding off the pitch (you win) and they get able and willing volunteers (they win). This helps to build a positive, community-minded reputation for the team. It also helps to accelerate word-of-mouth about the club.
- *Touch rugby.* Touch rugby is a great recruiting tool. The off-season is a great time to introduce guys to non-contact rugby. Touch has the added benefits of being a fun way to keep the team in shape in the off-season, while teaching and reinforcing the basic principles of rugby (moving forward, support, positioning, defensive alignment). A team can easily gain five or six players who will continue on to play full-contact union rugby in the fall.
- *Rugby Boot Camp.* Have a major recruitment drive with the goal of gathering enough folks together for a "boot camp" aimed squarely at absolute beginners. This works for teams just starting out as well as teams that are more established. The idea is to give them a full idea of the game of rugby and its social traditions, too. The goal of the camp is to create a four-, six- or eight-hour program where a handful of coaches or experienced players introduce all of the basic skills of rugby. Each skill is demonstrated, and then tried out by the participants. Cap off the day with a friendly game of touch or (if you're daring) full contact rugby. Follow up with a social at a friendly pub where you can sing rugby songs, and perhaps even hold a Kangaroo Court.

"Selling" the club

Regardless of tactic used, you should have a unified message that the club presents. You want to make sure that the messages you use to "sell" the club to prospective players is the same.

The message you want to sell should be consistent with the kind of club you are trying to build. Each club is unique in how it wishes to approach playing rugby. Some see themselves as primarily a social club, looking to recruit those who are laid back and just into having a good time, win or lose. Others see themselves as a more competitive club, looking to recruit somewhat serious and dedicated athletes. Still other clubs are just looking for anyone to come out and play—they need numbers! Whatever you do, accurately represent the aims and the nature of the club.

You will want to develop a pitch ahead of time that you can easily adapt to different kinds of recruiting situations. Some guys can pull off a flirtatious “You’re cute! Wanna play rugby?” and actually get the guy to come out and play rugby. Most of us will say something more like, “We’re forming a rugby team here and we’ve already got great bunch of guys coming out. Most of them are absolute beginners. You should come and join us, and see if rugby is something you might want to do!”

In general, it’s best to avoid flirtatious behavior altogether. People read all kinds of things in to flirtatious behavior. You may inadvertently give the impression that the so-called “rugby” club is a sex club. No one wants a guy to show up to practice asking, “Hey, where’s the showers?”

Be enthusiastic about the team when you chat up folks! Who wants to join a team that you yourself aren’t excited to be a part of?

Common objections

Here are some common objections and how to handle them:

- Rugby is too dangerous.
ANSWER: Rugby is actually a relatively safe game, especially compared to American football. We’ll teach you how to safely tackle and handle contact situations with the strong parts of your body. Plus the rules of the game emphasize safe play. Because we don’t play with all those pads, people are much less likely to go all out when they hit each other.
- I don’t know anything about rugby.
ANSWER: Neither did most of us when we started! A lot of guys that play the game start out playing as adults. Don’t worry, we’ll teach you how to play.
- I’m no good at sports
ANSWER: Hey, neither were we! You don’t know if you’d be good a rugby until you try, right?
- I’m not big/fast/strong enough to play a sport like rugby.
ANSWER: Sure you are! The great thing about rugby is that, with 15 positions on the field at any one time, there’s a place for every type of guy. All types of guys—short, tall, big, skinny, slow, fast—are successful at playing rugby.
- I’m sooo out of shape.
ANSWER. Rugby is a fun way to motivate yourself to get in shape and stay in shape. Guys come to us with all kinds of fitness levels. If you come out to play with us, we’ll help you get back in shape.
- I’m too old to play rugby!
ANSWER: Folks of all ages play rugby, and play well into their fifties and sixties. This is a game that values skills and decision-making more than ability. Sometimes, the older guys on the field are the most wily and cunning players, because they know how to think about the game, and outsmart the younger and faster folks. If you’re willing to put in the effort to learn the game, and keep your fitness up, your age shouldn’t be a problem at all.
- Can I come and just watch?
ANSWER: Definitely! Come out to a practice and see if rugby is something you might want to do. And bring a friend!
- Do I have to be gay?

ANSWER: Nope. While we are a team aimed at getting gay folks in to playing rugby, we're accepting of anyone regardless of their orientation, ethnic background or race. Inclusiveness is the whole point of our team.

Often times, the best way to counter an objection is to encourage the prospective recruit to come out and just observe a practice. This often clears up any doubts in a prospective recruit's mind about whether or not rugby is for them.

Planning for recruitment

In rugby clubs (and in life in general), when you are lacking a plan, you are planning to lack. Without a recruiting plan, you may find yourself with gaping holes in your personnel. If you leave your recruiting up to chance, you should not be surprised that the team isn't quite what you thought it would be a year later.

A recruiting plan is a tremendous aid in helping to direct recruiting efforts. The plan is nothing more than a brief statement (half a page to three pages) that lays out:

- the club's recruiting philosophy (who is the club for, and why)
- identified personnel needs (i.e, we need a flyhalf, we need a bigger forward pack)
- the principle sources where the club sees itself recruiting for these types of persons
- how the clubs sees itself conducting its recruiting efforts (recruiting techniques such as prop hunting, word-of-mouth, info sessions, boot camps, community partnerships) to meet identified personnel needs.
- what resources the club will use to aid in recruitment (cards, website, advertising etc.)
- what short-term retention plans the club has or will have in place to keep players with the team once they have started playing (see [Retention Issues](#), below)
- what long-term actions the club will undertake to ensure the club remains viable (development squad, partnership with a youth rugby club, etc.)

Think "Yields"

When you evaluate recruiting techniques in terms of what works for your club and what does not, it is helpful to think in terms of yields. The ratio of the number of people you approach to the number that actually come to a practice isn't any where near 1:1, or even 1:3. What's the ratio, anyway?

About 1:15. Let's do some quick math. Say you went up to 30 guys at a bar one night. Consider this:

- Generally speaking, 70% of the guys you approach won't even consider playing rugby. This is typical—remember you aren't looking for the typical type of gay guy.
- Of the 30% remaining (nine guys), about half of them will be interested in playing rugby and will talk to you about it.
- Only 50% of that half (2-3 guys) will actually come to practice.

Remember for every dark cloud there's a silver lining. The "dark cloud" is that *for every 15 or so guys you speak to, only one of them will actually come to a practice*. The "silver lining": guys that come to a team practice, and participate, stay with the team about 90% of time.

The point here is that in your recruiting, you should always focus on improving your yields. Yields vary according to technique, which is why it is important to use as many recruiting techniques as is practical. Develop three or four core recruiting techniques that, in your experience, yield the most players. Don't be afraid to experiment with new techniques, too.

Retention Issues

The flip side of recruiting is retention. Once you got 'em, you need to keep 'em. It takes about three years to train a complete novice rugby player into a rugby player that has a large mastery of the game (learning support and positioning skills being the hardest part). In terms of team resources, that's a huge investment. If a team finds itself only keeping players for one or two

years, it will find itself stuck in a rut of essentially having a brand-new team every three years. This can stall the long-term development of the team.

It is helpful to categorize retention issues as either short-term, medium-term or long-term retention issues.

Short-Term Retention Issues

The main issues for keeping folks around in the short-term are (1) integration of the new player into the team, and (2) learning the game.

Once you've got a new player on-board, do your best to make him feel welcomed. Make it a point to introduce new players at every practice (for example, while the team is stretching together). Encourage everyone to at least say "Hello" anytime a new player comes on board. The culture of the club must be welcoming.

Some clubs have a "buddy system" where new players are assigned to more veteran players. It is the veteran's job to show the rookie the ropes, introduce him to folks, and to follow up with him if he doesn't show up to practice. The buddy system works best when the buddies have something else besides rugby in common. This helps to facilitate creating a true friendship, rather than one that feels contrived or unnatural.

The other major short-term retention issue is learning the game. Rugby is a sophisticated and intricate game. The logic behind strategic aspects of the game (like kicking for touch when you are deep in your own territory) is often counter-intuitive. New players are often frustrated at how much they don't understand the game, even weeks after starting. The better teams do things to help new players climb the learning curve as quickly as possible:

- They have ample educational materials available for players to read on their own (guides for beginners, handouts on skills and rugby books).
- They have video libraries, both of skills-oriented videos and of televised rugby matches.
- They have video sessions where the team watches rugby matches and explain the flow of the game as it is happening on screen.
- They videotape their games and hold "chalk-talks" that explain what the team did well and what the team didn't do well. (Chalk-talks are a good way to handle a practice that has been cancelled due to weather.)
- Most importantly, they realistically set new player's expectations of what they should know at certain points in time. They remind new players that it takes *years* to master this game and to not be discouraged or frustrated if the progress is slow.

Medium-Term Retention Issues

Issues for players with one or two years under their belt usually focus on personal progress vis-à-vis team progress, and discouragement in losing matches most of the time.

Personal progress vis-à-vis team progress. Some of the better players on the team may start to feel that the lower overall skill level of the team is hindering their own improvement progress as a player. The better players feel they cannot improve with this team because the team brings in more rookies than it has veteran players.

There is no one best way to handle retention issues like this. Some teams create alliances with another, more experienced team. This allows the better players to play on both the gay team and another, more experienced team. Some teams, if they are big enough, decide to divide the team into an "A side" and a "developmental" side, holding practices at the same times, with the A side practicing on one side of the field and the developmental side on the other. Some teams give the better players opportunities to coach developing players, which is a great way for the team to acknowledge the skills of the better player.

A variant of this problem is the “I can’t improve, if I don’t get the ball” player. This is usually a problem with guys who have very limited experience playing rugby, but may have played another sport, like American football, where those with the ball get all the glory. In this case, the player feels that if he had his hands on the ball more, he’d get more attention from the coaching staff. Or, he might feel that getting his hands on the ball more will give him more of a chance to show how much of the game he’s mastered—a twisted psychological way of assuring himself that he’s making progress and improving as a player.

In either case, the player is being a prima donna, and needs to be convinced that rugby is about 15 men, not one. He also needs to be convinced that the actions of those who do not have the ball are just as important as the actions of the one with ball. In other words, he needs to be convinced of the worthiness of seeing rugby as principally a game of possession and support.

Discouragement in losing matches. A seemingly inevitable downside of creating a new team of mostly rookie players is that it will lose most of its matches in its first three to five years. Nothing succeeds like success; unfortunately, most new gay rugby teams don’t see a lot of it, in terms of games won. This may prove discouraging for players, and over time you may risk losing the better players who want to play for winning teams.

There are three strategies for dealing with the “losing period”

- (a) Reframe what it means to win. Truly championship-quality teams never focus on whether they win or lose. They focus on their overall progress as a team. They see even a win as meaningless if they fail to improve on the standard and quality of their game.

In other words, teams should focus on **incremental progress**, not on a win-loss record. Was rucking better or worse than the last game? How about open-field tackling? Was our support game on? What about our fitness? Were the loose forwards quick to make the second breakdown? Are the backs’ rucking/mauling improving? **Focus on how team skills have improved from game to game, not on how many points were scored.** It helps to have a non-player who keeps stats on the team (such as lineouts won/loss, rucks won/lost, etc.).

- (b) Chose your opponents with care. During the first few years, it is important that the team play teams that have comparable skill levels. A lot of learning takes place in the process of playing matches. A nascent team can only learn a limited amount from a experienced team that blows them away 110-0.

Entering divisional play at the lowest level is the way most new teams find comparably skilled teams to play. However, even at the lowest divisions, there are teams that are highly skilled or are composed mostly of “retired” upper division players. If you do enter into a strong division early in the team’s development, be sure to balance those games with friendlies against relatively weaker teams that your new team will at least have a chance to beat.

- (c) Nip bitching in the bud. Strongly discourage bitching on the pitch. This is different from constructive criticism. Bitching is statements like:
 - “Why can’t you fucking tackle?!”
 - “Our backs are pathetic.”
 - “Damn forwards have hands like dolphins.”

Constructive criticism, on the other hand (1) states what the player did right along with statements of what the player did wrong, and (2) gives input on what the player can immediately do to improve the deficient skill. (“Hey, good hands there, but next time keep your hand out and in front of your chest.”) Teach all of your players how to give constructive criticism. It’s not helpful to only point out

what was done wrong—chances are the player already knows it. Constructive criticism helps to propel the overall improvement and competitiveness of the team. Tell your guys that if they can't give constructive criticism, then shut the fuck up.

Long-Term retention Issues.

Rugby burnout, time commitment, and work-life balance are typically the issues a team faces in terms of long-term retention.

Time commitment and work-life balance issues are mostly out of the club's control. Life happens. Priorities and interests change. Clubs should offer some degree of support by keeping the player's options open to play with the team in the future, should circumstances change. Encourage the player to at least maintain social ties with the club by becoming a social member.

Rugby burnout is a real problem. Rugby can easily be made a year-round sport with pre-season games, an active and full in-season schedule and summer sevens. Add to that practices up to twice a week and games on Saturdays, plus the socializing you do with your rugby buddies away from organized practice times, and you've got a recipe for burnout.

Always encourage players to take a break from rugby in the off-season months and during summer sevens season. Use the off-season to concentrate on fundraising and socializing. The off-season is a great time to play a fun, friendly against another gay rugby team that may be some distance away. Encourage players to cultivate their other interests and take advantage of the off-season to travel and re-connect with their partners.

Folks with a variety of cultivated interests don't get burned out as much. Clubs can help prevent burnout by sticking to a consistent schedule of practice and play that players can plan other interests and activities in their life around. Most rugby union teams stick to a Tuesday practice/Thursday practice /Saturday game schedule during the in-season, and a Thursday practice/Saturday practice schedule during the pre-season. During the off-season, they hold optional pick-up touch rugby games either Tuesday night, Thursday night, or Saturday morning.