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## Sports

# The Rugged Women of Gravelly Point XML

Under a single bank of lights on a borrowed field, dozens of women gather twice a week to enjoy each other's company, share experiences and tackle each other to the ground. Covered in dirt and grass stains, the members of the Northern Virginia Women's Rugby Football Club set the standard for the growing sport of women's rugby in America.

Founded twenty-five years ago as a social club, NOVA has transformed into a powerhouse program competing against rival clubs from across the country. With membership nearing sixty, NOVA represents the largest such club in the nation, and the only one with up to three sides playing matches in weekend tournaments. As the majority of clubs claim about twenty members, NOVA enters each match with a decided edge in depth and skill. "There is competition for every position which makes everyone better and gives us an edge with substitutions," says 25-year-old flyhalf Caitlin MacAlpine. Like many of the players, MacAlpine first played rugby in college, in her case at George Washington University.

Yet NOVA is not an exclusive club by any means. There is recruiting from college squads at tournaments in the area, but the majority of members bring themselves into the fold. "Anyone who comes out to NOVA is going to play. The coaches select who will play on what level based on performance in practice," says 23-year-old flyhalf Jill Chen. A graduate of Duke University and a four-year member of their rugby program, Chen says that the level of competitiveness and play with NOVA far exceeded her experience in the college

Michael Orr



Pet of the week

Photo Gallery

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game. "There is such a long learning curve, up to five years, that coaching is very important," adds MacAlpine. Players credit the arrival of coach Dave Lett in the late 1990s as the turning point for the club. Lett and his assistants provide individual instruction, despite the large numbers, giving even the least experienced players a leg up on the competition.

Also important in the learning process are pub nights, where the women meet at a designated bar and watch professional or international rugby matches. In addition to serving as a social tool and a fun time together, understanding the game as played by the world's best provides keen insight into their own practices and matches. The coaches are present, pointing out intricacies of the game, even explaining the hand signals of officials, which to a novice can be quite confusing.

There is far more to the NOVA than just their friendships, however, as the club has become highly successful in recent years. With trips to the national Sweet Sixteen and Elite Eight in the last four seasons the Piranhas, as they are nicknamed, have developed a winning tradition. Traveling up and down the east coast in Mid Atlantic Rugby Football Union (MARFU) tournaments, NOVA has amassed winning results against some of the most competitive clubs in America. The teams also play in tournaments outside the MARFU region, playing this season in Nashville and Chicago and with trips scheduled for Minneapolis and Boston next season. The club has even visited England, scheduling matches with teams from the Royal Air Force and the city of Leicester, returning home undefeated-without having allowed a single point.

Members of NOVA have also helped to introduce the game of rugby to children in the area through Alexandria Rugby. Formed in 2006, Alexandria Rugby promotes teaching the game in summer co-ed programs as well as a highly successful introduction to rugby in the physical education classes at Polk and Patrick Henry elementary schools and Hammond Middle School. Alexandria Rugby also has teamed with the Scholarship Fund of Alexandria to award an inaugural Alexandria Rugby Scholarship of \$2000 to a deserving graduating senior at TC Williams High School. Two NOVA players have volunteered their time to be assistant coaches of the TC girls' rugby team. According to TC boys' rugby coach and head of Alexandria Rugby, Jeff Murphy, the NOVA women have been an invaluable resource at TC as, "the younger females see the older females as role models, ladies who have gone through what they're going though and therefore are better able to understand them."

Whether on the pitch or in the community it is clear that the Northern Virginia Women's Rugby Football Club is making an impact in this area. As the club continues to grow, their reach will also extend, enlightening us with their game and their camaraderie.



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