
A Brief History of Rugby in Lethbridge

By: Dr. Robert Kossuth, University of Lethbridge

As the story/myth goes, in 1823 William Webb Ellis, a student at a school in Rugby, England was said to have caught a kicked ball and then sprinted to the opposing team's end in disregard of the rules of football at that time. The sport of rugby emerged from the public schools and universities in England and was eventually codified through the establishment of the Rugby Football Union in 1871. Rugby had already crossed the Atlantic arriving in Montreal where a British army garrison introduced it to the students at McGill University in 1865. From this point, in Canada, the rules of rugby gradually began to change until a new sport, Canadian football, emerged in the twentieth century. It was not until after the Second World War when immigrants from Britain brought rugby union football back to Canada in the form we see played today.

There is evidence of rugby football being played in Lethbridge as early as 1891. The team, in this instance, consisted of members of the Northwest Mounted Police K Division who played the fifteen 'man' game. By the early 1930s, rugby was being played at the high school and adult level, however, this 'rugby' game was a hybrid version of what was rapidly becoming Canadian football. By the late 1960s the fifteen 'man' rugby union game reappeared in the city with the Lethbridge Rugby Club forming by 1970 and becoming formally incorporated in 1979. Several of the notable club members from this early period included Don England, Doug Mundell, and Bernie Ontkean. In 1992 Ontkean was elected to the Lethbridge Sports Hall of Fame for his work in promoting the sport through the club and in the high schools. To date, he is the only person in the Hall to be specifically selected for contributions to rugby.

In the 1980s rugby moved from the club to the university. The Trolls Rugby Club was established in 1986 "by a group of student hooligans." This social club was founded by Jim Urasaki, Toby Boulet, Quinn Skelton and Neil Langevin. The Trolls club continues to provide social rugby to university students. In 1999 Langevin was also the driving force behind the establishment of the University of Lethbridge Pronghorns Women's rugby team. After toiling in the shadows of the dominant University of Alberta Pandas team in the early 2000s, the Pronghorn women have emerged as a top performer in CIS, winning the national championship in both 2007 and 2008.

The growth of girls and boys rugby in Lethbridge has been supported through programs in the city's high schools and those from the surrounding region. The Southern Alberta High School Rugby League formed in 1984 as a boys' league, with a girls' division being established in 1995. Today the league includes girls and boys teams at the senior and junior varsity levels. In 2005 rugby became a probationary championship sport in the Alberta Schools Athletics Association, and received permanent sport status in 2007. In the past two seasons the LCI girls' team has won the Tier 1 provincial championship, with southern Alberta schools asserting dominance in the girls' side of the competition. At present, the future of rugby in Lethbridge, particularly for girls and women, is bright and will continue to play an important role in the sporting life of the city.

In March this year, Lethbridge native and Pronghorn team captain Ashley Patzer starred for the Canadian women's team at the seven-a-side Rugby World Cup in Dubai. Patzer, and other young women and men continue to successfully represent the city at the provincial, national, and international levels of the game, something we can all be proud of.
