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Dal men's rugby club: 142 years young

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It's been nearly 142 years since the men's rugby team played its first official game after the establishment of the Dalhousie Athletic Department. Almost a century and a half later the Dal rugby team is still going strong. Last year not only did the men's "Divisions 1" team go 6-0 only to lose in the Maritime finals but the club also won the Icon Sports Team Award for Club Team of the Year.

Even though the team chose the black and gold colors that Dal now decorates its uniforms with, men's rugby is still not a varsity sport.

This year, for the first time ever, there will be a Nationals tournament held for all college and university rugby teams. If the Tigers manage to win the Maritimes competition, they will need to raise \$25,000 to get to Victoria, B.C. for the tournament.

Rugby is getting more popular in Canada, with roughly 40,000 participants nationwide, yet men's rugby isn't recognized as a varsity sport at any university in the country. Women's rugby is a varsity sport at some schools.

John Hewitt, team president and co-captain of the division two team has been learning the game since he was eight. He says schools aren't really looking for more varsity sports.

"At Dal anyway, it seems like the bigger focus is on track and field, swimming and more individual sports; we don't even have a football team, so I don't think there is much desire for any more big team sports."

Club vice-president Pete Crozier is a "scrum half" and a fifth-year player. He says Atlantic University Sport (AUS) members do not want to see another men's varsity sport taking place in the fall because "it would be too much on their plate."

Because rugby isn't a varsity sport, the Dal team doesn't get as much funding from the school, so the team puts a lot of effort into individual fundraising.

The men's rugby team requires a \$165 membership fee, which is actually the lowest fee in the province. Insurance for Rugby Canada costs \$95 of the fee and the other \$75 is to help cover the costs of referees, equipment and travel.

There is an upside to not being a varsity team, Hewitt says.

"One of the pros of it though is that we are able to get guys who have limited athletic ability or rugby experience and just want to come out and enjoy the sport and meet

people. And we are able to do that because we don't make cuts. We're able to accommodate everybody.

The guys say they are happy for now to stay at club level and they feel it is probably the best thing for the sport.

Another hurdle for the team is gaining popularity and fans. For years prior the team was playing out in Bayers Lake. Since the team moved last year to Wanderer's Field in the middle of the city, it's been getting more and more fans with every game.

"Our popularity exploded from past years once we had games in the city, and next year we are hoping to have games on Wickwire field," says Crozier.

Rugby players may be hard as nails and traditionally into loosing teeth and slamming pints of Hoegaarden, but the boys say the intimidating image of rugby players as being is a big misconception.

Crozier says he wanted to continue with rugby but the big thing was "that I wanted to meet new people and keep in shape, and just have a good time. Everyone is really laid back and it's a great way to get involved in university sports. It's not intimidating at all."

As far as this year's team goes both the president and vice-president see integrating 25 new players as their biggest hurdle.

"It's a big step, it's a building block," says Hewitt. "There's a lot of individual skill and tones of talent its just getting the team jelling and on the same page."

Since the team started its season two weeks ago, after cancelling and re-scheduling season openers, the two Dal rugby teams are already feeling hot. They played the first games of the season against Acadia University in Wolfville Sept. 13. The division one team played first and hammered out a 29-3 victory while the division two team won the game 43-12, keeping Acadia scoreless until the last 10 minutes of the match.

The men continued their onslaught last weekend with the Division 1 team pummeling UPEI 76-22 on UPEI territory. On Sunday Acadia came to town to play the division two team at Wanderer's Field. The Axemen had their balls handed to them with the Tigers dishing up a plate of whoop ass in their 52-3 victory, making Dal's rugby club undefeated this season.

So it looks like the men are well on their way to achieving their goal of a winning season.