USA rugby ‘sevens’
tourney in Vegas draws passion, blood, beers | Journalism

02/11/2014
February 11, 2014
February 11th, 2014 Posted in Arts and Life

Story & Photos by Noelle Johansen

LAS VEGAS—The fan in the front row wears a t-shirt that reads, “80 minutes, 15 positions, no protection, wanna ruck?” The spectacle is rugby, and it was the USA sevens rugby tournament in Las Vegas, which attracted ruggers and fans from across the globe.

Roger and Val Johnson flew in from Wales to support their home team.

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The Johnsons—who have been married for “Jesus, 50-odd years,” Roger said—have been rugby fans for just as long, although neither Val nor Roger has never played. “I’m just an armchair critic,” he shouted over the din in the stadium as France scored another try against Spain. They have a couple of daughters in Vegas.

It was their first sevens tournament. “Sevens” rugby is a scaled-down version of the full scrum described on the t-shirt. Instead of the standard 80-minute matches, sevens games run 14 minutes. Each team has seven players on the field—the “pitch”—instead of the usual 15. But like the usual game, there are no pads or helmets, just a mouth guard and likely some medical tape offering little cushion against audibly hard hits.

It was the tournament’s fifth consecutive year at the Sam Boyd Stadium in Las Vegas.

Mike, 47, from Florida, never played either, because there wasn’t much rugby during his high school football days in Wyoming.

“I’ve always loved to watch it,” he said. “It’s a great sport. It’s just great, the contact, the action, the hard play.”

Mike (who refrained from disclosing his last name to keep his identity a secret from former Wyoming high school classmates) said he prefers his muppet alias “Sweetums” among his fellow muppet fans in the stands of the sevens tournament.

‘Mike,’ the monster Sweetums Muppet in the middle, loves rugby with a passion.

Mike said dressing up in costume is the “thing to do.”

“This guy talked about the Wellington sevens,” he said. “If you don’t dress up, you get heckled. So we’ve been coming for five years. The first three years we talked about a lot of things … last year we said, ‘so what about the muppets? Everybody loves the muppets.’”

The crowd certainly seemed to love his cross-dressing friend “Miss Piggy,” judging by the crowd’s volume each time he stood up to rival the choreography of the USA sevens cheerleaders.

Mike said he worked on his costume for several weeks, unraveling and dyeing the hair of several mops. His wife supported his endeavor.

“At first, she helped,” Mike said. “Toward the end she’s like, ‘God, are you done yet? I hate this stupid thing, there’s mop hair all over my house.’”
Mike wasn’t alone in the stands in costume. Former British rugger Don Sharpy wore a red suit covered in white hearts for the tournament. He said he has attended the event for the last two years, but this was the first year he dressed up. The 34-year-old father of two said he has raised his young sons to be rugby fans, the same way his own father did.

“My dad instilled the love in me, and as soon as I found the passion, I owned it,” Sharpy said. He said he has played rugby his whole life.

Sharpy expressed frustration at England’s loss to Samoa on the first day of the Las Vegas tournament, but was stoked when England came back to shut out Portugal, 54-0.

“I think they’ve got the chance [to win the tournament], I really do,” he said. “I think they can turn it on and—you know—hope springs eternal. I saw them last year and they were shit. This year they’re actually playing better, so it’s all good.”

England closed the tournament in fifth place with a nailbiting 26-24 win over Australia.

Fans Oscar Radoli and Tammy Irizarry shared high hopes for Kenya after a loss and a win against Canada and Wales, respectively. They arrived early on day two of the tournament to cheer from the front row. Radoli played on Kenya’s sevens team for several years until he moved to the United States to attend college. He now teaches at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Irizarry, who lives in southern California, coached and managed women’s rugby teams since her daughter began playing at age 8. Irizarry has watched sevens since the international tournament was hosted in Carson, Calif.

“At that time, Kenya was not big in the sevens,” Irizarry said. “They were fighting hard and they were learning the game more and more and more, and it was just amazing.”

The Kenyan team reached the tournament cup semifinals in 2010.

She met Radoli at the sevens tournament in Las Vegas three years ago.

“We saw a lady wearing a Kenyan jersey,” Radoli said of Irizarry. “We were like, ‘Who’s that wearing a Kenyan jersey? She doesn’t look Kenyan to us … she’s going to be our friend.’ And ever since, every year, we meet. We plan for it.”

Rugby creates lasting bonds, Irizarry said. “Rugby is a family,” she said. “These are friends you will have for the rest of your life.”

Radoli said he hopes the unique culture of rugby will continue to spread in the United States.

“It’s a way of life,” Radoli said. “It’s life, it’s such a great, charismatic sport played by gentlemen. After every game there are usually handshakes and, once in a while, we have a few beers together—you know, laugh about the hard times we gave each other on the field.”

New Zealand native Lara Andrews, 24, shared that sentiment. “Everybody plays rugby in New Zealand,” she said. “Rugby’s a way of living at home. It’s what we do when we’re born, it’s what we’re expected to do, it’s what you play in the backyard, it’s everything. America would be pretty good if they actually played rugby.”

Andrews moved from New Zealand to Pennsylvania four years ago, and was in Las Vegas for the first time to watch the tournament. She said she has been a fan her whole life and played for five or six seasons.
“I love the hard hits, I love the sexy bodies, I love everything about it,” Andrews said. “The boys are cute. They’re strong, tough. What more could you ask for?”

Andrews and other Kiwi fans were brokenhearted when South Africa beat New Zealand in the final match, 14-7, to win the Las Vegas tournament cup for the second year in a row. South Africa fans—and everybody else—poured onto the pitch to surround the huddled champions before they took their places on a small stage to accept the sevens cup.

The USA sevens tournament in Las Vegas is round four of the sevens world series. New Zealand took the cup in Wellington, NZ, and the series will continue in New Zealand in February.

Note: Reporter Noelle Johansen was a member of the USU women’s rugby team.

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