

Sports

Teen seeks to form a rugby team

Najia Lloyd set on selling sport at her high school

By Logan Mullen
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

It was just two years ago when Najia Lloyd discovered that field hockey and soccer were not quite for her.

Putting them aside, she picked up the rough-and-tumble sport of rugby, a game with which her family had a history. Her grandfather played semi-professionally in England, and her aunt played for a season in college while studying abroad in Scotland.

Since she made the switch, nearly all of her experience has been playing with the boys, and as the Bay State Games' July 29 rugby competition draws nearer, she's more than keeping pace with them.

From tackling the boys to sometimes even setting the pace, she keeps on leading by example.

Now 14 years old and a few months before even stepping onto the Concord-Carlisle High School campus as a first-year student, she's tackling her biggest challenge to date: starting a rugby program there.

Her timing is promising. Though often regarded as one of the fastest-growing sports in the United States, rugby was relegated for years to club status at the high school level here. This year, the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association led the way nationally by recognizing rugby as a varsity sport.

Lloyd has taken that as her cue.

"I knew that when I got to high school I would definitely do a sport," she said recently. "My mom even made a rule that I had to play a sport in high school."

"I just started thinking, 'I'm not going to play soccer, I'm not going to play lacrosse, I love rugby, I've been playing for a while,' and I thought



Najia Lloyd played rugby in the Bay State Games.

about . . . what I would have to do" to start a program.

It's no small task: Beyond wrestling with logistical red tape, organizers of such an effort need to draw sufficient in-

terest among students and find a coach to lead the enterprise.

Lloyd is fully aware of the obstacles, but the fact that she's willing to give it a go impresses many in the rugby community.

"I don't think incredible is too strong a word to use, quite honestly," said Bill Good, who sits on the board of directors of the Massachusetts Youth Rugby Association and assists in the organizing of the sport for the Bay State Games. "It's very impressive to say the very least that that young lady has that self-confidence and that kind of initiative and that kind of . . . passion for it."

Amy Beth Skendarian has been Lloyd's coach in the Metro West program for the past two years and uses similar language in describing her.

"She's driven," said Skendarian, "She's passionate, she's very coachable, she just has this desire to learn and wants to learn everything she can about rugby."

Having watched Lloyd play with the boys as well, Skendarian has seen her resilience up close.

"I think it's hard when you're with a bunch of boys, but she doesn't let that bring her down," Skendarian said. "She's an exceptional person . . . and she won't let playing with a bunch of boys intimidate her."

Motivated by her passion for the sport, Lloyd is now morphing into a saleswoman of sorts with both high school administrators and potential teammates.

So what's her sales pitch? "It is very much a team sport," Lloyd said. "In rugby, it's a lot of teamwork. If someone has the ball, you need to be behind them, if you're being tackled, there's a big group behind you trying to get the ball back."

"I have a great relationship with my teammates," she continued, "and I think if someone wants friendship and great [camaraderie] with their

team, then they should join rugby."

While playing the sport in high school remains a glint in her eye, Lloyd has the more immediate satisfaction of the Bay State Games to look forward to. Her opponents there might well become school-level opponents down the road, so she's using the competition and high-stakes nature of the competition to prepare herself for playing the sport at a varsity level down the road.

"With varsity sports, there's a lot of pressure competing in championships," she said. "I think with the Bay State Games and the prospect of my potentially playing varsity next year, it will really help train me and see what the competition is like and what kind of team-building aspects I need to push myself to perform my best."

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Renegades pitcher Ron Cochran (above left) throws to Guy Zuccarello of Belmont, with Rob Weissman doing the catching; Justen Cantan (right) prepares to field a ball.



PHOTOS BY BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Beeping balls keep visually impaired in game

By Tom Petrini
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WOBURN — The Boston Renegades loudly cheered for their teammates at the Beast of the East tournament, but fell silent when Joe McCormick of Beverly stepped into the batter's box. They knew he needed to hear the sounds of the game.

McCormick placed his bat on the ground and used it to measure his distance from the plate, got in his stance, and told his coach he was ready for the pitch. The pitcher and catcher shouted their cadence — "Set, ready, pitch!" — and the beeping softball was tossed.

McCormick cracked a line drive, sprinted full speed down the line, and dove into the buzzing tackling dummy before the fielders could recover the ball made from recycled pay phone parts.

The Renegades won the tournament and are once again the Beast of the East in beep baseball, a modified version of America's pastime that allows visually impaired players to hit a pitched ball, run to a base, and play

in the field while blindfolded.

Joe Yee of Medford, 46, had never run full speed until the Renegades' coaching staff showed him how when he joined the team five years ago.

"When we're practicing the running, it's such a safe environment," said Yee, a senior systems engineer at Harvard Management Co. "They first had me go slow, which really helped, and then they had me go at full speed, and when I tagged that base at full speed it was just amazing."

The Association of Blind Citizens sponsors the Renegades, the only athletic team for blind adults in Greater Boston. They're one of the top teams in the National Beep Baseball Association, finishing second at the World Series last year. Head coach Rob Weissman, 46, is a business analyst at IBM Bluemix who has been a part of beep baseball since 2000.

According to Weissman, players who come to the team with partial sight generally pick up the offensive side of the game more quickly because coaches can show them the finer points of swing mechanics. Totally

blind players typically have an easier time learning defense because they are more used to moving around and locating objects based on sound without being able to see.

There are just two bases — first and third — that resemble football tackling dummies. When the batter hits a ball tossed from about 15 feet away by their coach, one of the bases starts buzzing and the race is on. If the batter touches the base before one of the fielders possesses the ball, it counts as a run. If a fielder gets to the ball first, the batter is out.

No experience is needed to join the team. "We're always looking for volunteers and other players, anyone who wants to come out and get involved," said Shawn Devenish of Salisbury, 24, a physical education instructor at Triton Regional High School in Byfield, where he played football, wrestled, and ran track as a student with limited vision.

Christian Thaxton was a high school star who played two seasons of college baseball in Oklahoma before he lost his vision and had to drop out

of school. He thought he would never again play the game.

"Coming back out here and finding the Renegades, and them graciously taking me onto the team, it was getting a part of my life back," said Thaxton, 24, who moved East to attend the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton and now lives in Woburn.

While Thaxton has been helping his teammates with their swings, they have been helping him with his defense and his adjustment to blindness. Thaxton said having a tight-knit group that knows what he's gone through has been a huge bonus. Now studying at the University of Massachusetts Boston, he can reach out to a teammate and say, "I'm struggling with this aspect of school, how did you deal with that?"

Joe Quintanilla of Medford, 41, has been with the team since it was founded in 2001. "When I went to the first practice, I learned about how it all works and fell in love with it," he said. "At the age of 24, I could finally play baseball, hit a ball that's actually

being pitched to me."

The Woburn Host Lions hosted the Beast of the East tournament, providing food, volunteers, travel accommodations for visiting teams, and money to defray the cost of attending. Teams from New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania competed.

"It is a humbling game, more so than even golf," said Frank DiMauro, a member of the Lions, who has donned a blindfold to play in beep ball scrimmages against the Renegades. "Just to be able to hit the ball took me seven years."

The Renegades, who won the tournament for the seventh time, will return to the Beep Baseball World Series July 23-30 in West Palm Beach, Fla.

"We've been knocking on the door for years," said Quintanilla, who is in his 17th season with the team. "We're here, and we're not going away."

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NOTEWORTHY



RYAN NORTON
MEDWAY

The rising senior at Medway High was a key cog for the Southeast/Central boys' hockey squad, which won gold at the Bay State Games. He scored twice in the semifinal before adding a goal in the gold medal 7-3 victory.



CHRIS SCHWAB
HOLLISTON

A graduate student in electrical engineering at Rochester Institute of Technology, he earned first-team Academic All-America Division 3 Track & Field/Cross Country honors. He has a 4.0 GPA at RIT after also graduating undergrad with a 4.0.



MIKE VASIL
WELLESLEY

Team USA Baseball selected BC High's ace righthanded pitcher to its 18-Under Team Trials roster. He will be one of 40 players competing for a roster spot on the National Team in late August. Vasil finished with a 9-0 record this season.

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