

RUGBY AS A SPORT DISCIPLINE IN POLAND

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Abstract:

It would appear that among Polish sport disciplines - rugby is relatively little known and rarely cultivated. In the words of H. Orzechowski, rugby is not a mass sport in Poland and it seems after all that it has all the qualities that we value as a nation (or at least we like to think that it is), e.g. hardness, toughness and a high sense of honor¹. Over the Vistula River is more than 6 thousand licensed players at different age groups, grouped in approx. 80 clubs. Senior's competitions are divided into three leagues. Premier league counts eight teams, 1st league counts six teams and 2nd league – eight. There are 16 female and 37 male teams among seven-players rugby teams². Most of the clubs also has teams in different age categories. From super junior, to the senior. Several thousand players on nearly 40 million-strong nation is definitely too less³.

In this article author pointed out that in Poland in many places rugby is growing up in strength and has its strong supporters, what's more - in 1957 the Polish Rugby Union was established⁴. However, this game still remains for many people incomprehensible and exotic. The literature on the subject of rugby is quite poor and you will notice the dominance of the publication of two authors: Maciej Powąła - Niedźwiecki and Jacek Wierzbicki, while on the internet there are plenty of websites and blogs⁵ dedicated to this discipline.

*"Football is a game of gentlemen cultivated by hooligans,
while rugby is a game of hooligans cultivated by gentlemen."
Hubert Orzechowski*

At the beginning we would like to define and describe the nature and history of this discipline. According to the Polish edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica- rugby (from English *rugby union*) is a discipline of sport, which is played with an oval ball on a specially prepared for this purpose pitch⁶.

Rugby pitch is grassy, has dimensions 9 - 100 x 66-69 m, is limited by the sidelines and goal lines, behind which there is a field-goal by the width as the pitch and length from 12 to 22 m. Goals have a shape of capital letter H with a width of 5.6 m, and the bar is hung at a height of 3 m; height of the bars is unlimited (min. 40 cm above the bar). You can score a point in three ways: by placing the ball beyond the goal line into the end zone (ang. *Try*) (5 points) or a kick on goal (called *penalty kick*) (3 points) or from increase after touchdown

¹ H. Orzechowski, *Rugby: Ulubiony sport dżentelmenów*, „Newsweek”, Nr 65/2012, s. 19.

² Dane w sezonie rozgrywkowym 2015/2016

³ H. Orzechowski, *Rugby: Ulubiony sport dżentelmenów*, „Newsweek”, Nr 65/2012, s. 19.

⁴ M. Powąła - Niedźwiecki, J. Wierzbicki, K. Okapa, *50 lat Polskiego Związku Rugby 1957 - 2007*, Print 6, Warszawa 2007; <http://pzrugby.pl/>

⁵ Zob. np. <http://www.rocky-rugby.pl/>

⁶ *Encyklopedia Audiowizualna Britannica, Sport i rekreacja*, Poznań 2006, s. 118.

scored points (2 pts.) Kick at goal can be called “drop-goal” or from the penalty spot, then you should put the ball on the ground⁷. The rugby ball has oval shape with a length of approx. 29 cm, where longer circuit is about ten centimeters larger than shorter.

Rugby team consists of 15 players, divided into formations of “mill” (scrum) and attack (backs). The limit of changes is maximum five during the match. There are also changes in time, but only at the request of medical staff after which the player may return to the playing field. Characteristic elements of rugby is the way how a ball is passing – it can only be passed back (except of kicks), ruck, or maul - holding an opponent who is in possession, aut (called *lineout*) and a mill. This last is a permanent part of the game awarded for unintentional offense (e.g. passing forward)⁸.

The scrum shall consist of 8 players from each team, who holding their arms lean towards one another, so that the first ranks of both teams are in contact with each other. Between these ranks one of the players of the team for which the mill was dictated by referee (so-called "mill connector"), inserts the ball so that the players which are pushing the opponent were able to take it over. In rugby, it is not allowed to attack a player who is not in possession (usually it's late ruck) and a player who is in the air, grasp the head and neck. It is also illegal to kick and stopping opponent by leg.

It is commonly believed that rugby was established in 1823 during a football match, when one of the players grabbed the ball and ran with it towards the opponent's goal. The event took place in Rugby town near Birmingham in England, hence that sport has taken its name. In that town there were also written down the football rules in 1845, which have been quite successful over time. Apocryphal story passed from mouth to mouth, assigns the formation of game to William Webb Ellis, memorized e.g. in the name of the Rugby World Cup⁹. The management of Rugby school was since ancient times a followers of physical workout. According to H. Lipoński, such an attitude and a great rugby pitch caused that the school of Rugby could faithfully keep the old traditions of men's football game better than other schools.

It was clear that in many schools, where a yard was paved or lined with bricks, students will not be able to fall to the ground without exposure to injuries¹⁰. So this game was developed in a different way, becoming gentler in the way that a ball was controlled only by foot (dribble). The situation was different in Rugby, where thanks to the soft grass and perfect balls, manufactured from the late eighteenth century by shoemaker Gilbert and his successors, it was possible to play football as both foot and hand¹¹.

Another benefit was, that in 1928 Thomas Arnold became the director of school of Rugby, the man who started a great reformation of English teaching methods. Thomas Arnold destined a very prominent place for all kinds of sport in schools and universities in England, what fundamentally revolutionized the existing educational methods of landowners sons and gave new direction for sport development. In order to justify their methods, the great reformer repeated: I'd rather have my students playing football passionately, than to have used their free time to drink, dance or fight, sport is an antidote of immorality and a good method for the lack of discipline¹². Brought up in such a school accustomed to regular football, the graduated students became the most ardent promoters of playing ball according to the rules of Rugby on their universities.

⁷ *Encyklopedia Audiowizualna Britannica, Sport i rekreacja*, Poznań 2006, s. 118.

⁸ M Powąła-Niedźwiecki, *ABC kibica rugby*, Lublin 1997, s. 25.

⁹ M. Szulc (red.), *Wielka Encyklopedia sportu*, t. III, Kraków 2006, s. 95.

¹⁰ H. Lipoński, *Humanistyczna encyklopedia sportu*, Sport i Turystyka, Warszawa 1987, s. 162.

¹¹ M Powąła-Niedźwiecki, *ABC kibica...*, dz. cyt., s. 29.

¹² M. Markowa, *Miejsce sportu w pedagogicznej koncepcji Thomasa Arnolda z Rugby*, Warszawa 1983.

In 1871 in Edinburgh, the national teams of Scotland and England have played the first international match. In 1890 it was founded the *International Rugby Football Board* (IRFB). In 1934 it was established the *Fédération Internationale de Rugby Amateur* (FIRA). The most important international game is a cup of six nations of Europe. That oldest rugby tournament in world inaugurated its history in 1882. The first rugby match was played at St Helens Ground in Swansea and England defeated Wales 26-0. In the early years the cup was attended by four teams: England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Initially, there were multiple organizational problems, including in 1885, 1887 and 1889 when the tournament has to be stopped. In 1910, France national team joined the tournament for the first time and since that time five national teams had been competed in tournament - Five Nations Cup for nine decades, interspersed mainly by the explosions of wars (in the years 1914-1920 and 1940-1946). In 2000 the sixth country – Italy was allowed to join the competition and this formula of game play has taken place till today^{13, 14}. In addition to these teams also such a nations as: Australia, New Zealand and South Africa count in the competition for global primacy.

Rugby had spread outside the British Isles, not only to other parts of the Great British Empire, but, among others, to Argentina, France, Germany and the United States. In this last country rugby put the mark on the growing American football.

In USA rugby is developing very dynamically. Currently, the United States have the most licensed players in the world. There had been issued more than one million rugby licenses. In 1886 it was founded the International Rugby Football Board (currently World Rugby) for managing the development of the discipline. Between 1900 and 1924 rugby was four times an Olympic sport at the Olympic Games.

The promotion of rugby outside the UK was contributed mainly by French, who in 1934 led to the creation of FIRA (*Fédération Internationale de Rugby Amateur*). In 1987 was played the first tournament of the Rugby World Cup and in 1995 FIRA approved also professional games in this variant of rugby.

According to Loys Van Lee, the first Pole who practiced rugby was Sienkiewicz - reportedly the son of Henryk Sienkiewicz, however, there is nowhere records or evidence on this subject. He was the player of Racing Club and Stade Francais. According to the descriptions he was a young man with stately posture, weighed about 100 kilograms and played in the second line of the mill.

After the end of the First World War with the repatriates and military mission from France, rugby fans also came to Poland and had decided to spread this already very popular discipline also in reviving Poland. The main initiator of these activities was a Frenchman - Louis Amblart, who in May 1921 founded in Warsaw the Sports Association "White Eagle" - the first rugby club in Poland¹⁵.

The first official match with the audience was played on the pitch LKS "Pogoń" Lviv on 9 July 1922, when two fifteens of "White Eagle" ran to the pitch, divided into "white" and "black" team. The winners were "blacks" 6 to 3, and the judge of this historic event was the Frenchman Robineau. After the game, a very favorable comments appeared in the press. In 1923, Maurice Bacquet organized a team at the School of Infantry¹⁶.

In the twenties of the twentieth century, there were in Poland, besides the two already mentioned, the following rugby teams: Officer Sanitary School, Regiment of Artillery, student's club AZS, Varsovia (scout team), KS Rozwój, Ursynów School, Club in Plock, School of Physical Education in Poznan, Club in Murcki in Silesia. These clubs were played

¹³ <http://www.rocky-rugby.pl/> , dostęp z dnia 01.09.2015r.

¹⁴ https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puchar_Sze%C5%9Bciu_Narod%C3%B3w, dostęp z dnia 01.09.2015r.

¹⁵ J. Wierzbicki, *Historia Polskiego Rugby 1920 - 1945*, Warszawa 2011, s. 35.

¹⁶ Tamże, s. 38.

with each others during many social gatherings, but the official Polish championship has never been organized.

The first international match Polish team played in 1924 in Bucharest, where "White Eagle" was defeated by "Probables" team 0:46. Under this name was hidden the representation of Romania preparing for the Olympics, where they won the bronze medal. As a rematch, our rugby players played with the second representation of Romania losing 0:17.

A faint interest of sports authorities, weak promotion and lack of the coaching staff as well as hardware led to the inevitable end of this discipline in Poland. The last mention of rugby in the press appeared in 1929.

For many long years, rugby has disappeared from the map of Polish sports. Meanwhile, the discipline has developed rapidly throughout the world, conquering new countries. The situation changed on 14 December 1955, when according to ordinance number 121 of Chairman of the General Committee for Sport introduced rugby again as an official sport¹⁷.

In January 1956, three fans of the oval ball: journalists A. Karpinski, W. Wojdyła and W. Giełżyński, convened a National Gathering of Proponents of Rugby that has emerged the Organisational Commission under the leadership of A. Karpinski. Thus began a period of rugby reconstruction in Poland. A Czech coach Alfons Zeda arrived to Poland and had been training 40 instructors. They began to form new teams (a new teams were established in 22 clubs).

The first official match after World War II was played at the stadium of Legia Warsaw on 15 September 1956. Two rugby clubs faced each other: AZS-AWF Warsaw and the "Miner" Kochłowice. Varsovians won 3: 0. In the same year also took place the competition of "Sportsman" magazine's editor cup. In the final AZS-AWF Warsaw defeated "Black" Szczecin 14: 9. The first National Reporting-Election Conference on 26 January 1957 appointed the rugby section of the Central Committee of Physical Culture chaired by A. Karpinski. At the turn of 1956/1957 many clubs due to the reorganization of Polish sport put end to their rugby teams. Only 16 teams stayed on the battlefield. The first Polish Champion was in 1957 AZS-AWF Warsaw¹⁸.

It is worth to mention that in 1957 a specialization in rugby was introduced at the Academy of Physical Education in Warsaw. On 9 September 1957 took place a Warsaw Founding General Assembly of the Polish Union of Rugby - the first president was Władysław Trybus.

The first official international match was played with the audience of 3000 Polish viewers on 24 August 1958 in Łódź. Our team defeated NRD 9: 8 and what was interesting, match refereed German arbiter H. Ortelbach. Our team performed in the following squad: Waclaw Moczulski, Zbigniew Janus, Jerzy Masoń, Józef Grochowski, Eugeniusz Szostak, Jerzy Koter, Andrzej Ważyński (Henryk Hodiak), Sławomir Frankowski, Józef Sokołowski, Franciszek Nowak (capitan), Marian Głuszek, Bernard Stelmaszczyk (Eugeniusz Bartkowiak), Maciej Liepelt, Zdzisław Koniarz, Jan Chodkiewicz. The points scored: Marian Głuszek - 6pts. (two from laying – scored for 3 points in that time) and Eugeniusz Bartkowiak – 3pts. (penalty kick). The coach of the team was Marian Bondarowicz¹⁹.

Another important success in the Polish rugby was the victory in 1960. Our team defeated representation of Belgium (6: 0). The meeting took place at the Silesian Stadium in Chorzow.

¹⁷ M. Powąła - Niedźwiecki, J. Wierzbicki, *Encyklopedia polskiego rugby - Suplement 2004 - 2006*, Print 6, Warszawa 2007, s. 42.

¹⁸ Tamże, s. 56.

¹⁹ M Powąła-Niedźwiecki, *ABC kibica...*, dz. cyt., s. 50.

In 1960, there were 26 Youth Centres of Rugby, where the emphasis was put on working with the youth, and young people aged 13 to 18 years had been taken to the team. In the years 1961 – 1965, Polish Rugby Union reduced the subsidy to this discipline because of financial and organizational reasons. In view of the situation all the tournament trips were financed by players from their own pocket, and every year the number of teams appearing in the Polish Championships was less and less (in 1963 only 4 teams had been competing for the title). In 1965 it was a slight improvement in Polish rugby, as GKKFiT increased again grants for this sport. The year 1968 was successful for the Polish national team, because the rugby national team was ranked in first place in their qualifying group and entered the top four of best teams in Europe.

In 1969 particular regulations and rules for granting the Gold Badge Polish rugby union had been developed, which today is the highest prize for the most deserving people of Polish rugby. Another important event was the Polish national team match against France (0:67) at Decade Stadium in Warsaw, which was watched by 60,000 viewers, a record of audience till today.

In 1973 Victor Roebuck - English trainer had been leading a trainings at various centers throughout the country, presenting many innovations from the world and modern for its time English training methods. The effect of this could be seen in the same year – representation of Poland defeated Czech Republic - 23: 9 in qualifying for the European Nations Cup. It can be even mentioned that in March of 1988, just before the political changes Poland entered to the International Rugby Board

On 4 October 2008 at KS Builders stadium in Lodz had taken place a division 2A meeting of the European Nations Cup, in which the Polish national team was defeated in the final seconds of the match 24:13 by Ukrainian national team. The stadium was filled with more than 2,000 fans²⁰.

Currently, there are 4 rugby leagues in Poland: Extra-league, 1st league, 2nd League, regional league and “Polish League of rugby 7”. The most titled Polish team is Lechia Gdańsk. In the 50-year history, Lechia won the championship 13 times, 12 times was runner-up, 14 times get bronze medals and 10 times won the Polish Cup. This is the only Polish club that never fell to the second division. Other titled rugby clubs in Poland are: Arka Gdynia, Pogon Siedlce (history of rugby in that city was precisely described²¹), Budowlani Łódź, Orkan Sochaczew, Posnania Poznań, Ogniwo Sopot and Budowlani Lublin.



Photo 1. European Nations Cup match: Poland - Belgium, Warsaw 2009

Source: http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reprezentacja_Polski_w_rugby_union_mężczyzn.dostęp

²⁰ H. Orzechowski, *Rugby: Ulubiony sport dżentelmenów*, „Newsweek”, Nr 65/2012, s. 19.

²¹ Zob. J. Wierzbicki, *Walka o przetrwanie. Historia siedleckiego rugby 1979 - 2004*, Siedlce 2005 oraz J. Wierzbicki, *Walka o przetrwanie 2: historia siedleckiego rugby 2004 - 2009*, Siedlce 2009.

According to J. Wierzbicki, despite the crisis, this discipline exists on the sports map of Siedlce, to the delight of some and distress of others. Despite a great traditions, dozens of great events and very good results, as for the then conditions, the rugby section had never get easy. They tried to terminate rugby discipline not once, remove from the club or force them to capitulate, giving so little donation that allowed sections to operate only for one quarter. In the decisive moments, activists, coaches and players many times proved, that rugby cannot be so easily defeated²².

Rugby more and more often appears in different types of media. People who are associated with rugby in Poland wants to promote this discipline at every opportunity. As it turns out, it can be also promoted at scientific conferences. During the conference "Media and Values" organized by the Scientific Journalism Group of Bachelors Students Union of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Biala Podlaska had been performed a lecture "Television as a medium intermediaries for promoting the ethos of rugby player"²³.

Rugby is still not a popular discipline of sport in Poland, although this situation has been improving from year to year. Despite that, a large part of the population has a vague idea of rugby and its principles. This sport is many times mistaken with American football, and they are two completely different disciplines. Rugby is also falsely perceived as a brutal game for aggressive players who use unfair tackles and fouls. Therefore, persons associated with rugby in Poland wants to change the false image. In order to change the perception of rugby, they used a help of media, especially television and the Internet. Previously, the only way to reach a wider audience were newspaper articles, but their range was rather local. The electronic media caused, that knowledge of rugby began to improve. There are many web portals informing about the Polish league, but also international competitions. These sites allow you to know the rules of the game and the history of sport, and almost every club in Poland has its own website on which are published the latest news about the activities of the club. Information about the Polish league, specific matches, depots and events become quickly and easily accessible. It should be noted, however, that these portals are directed more to the players or people who in some way already are familiar with rugby and are conscious sympathizers²⁴. Currently Polish Rugby Union and Local Rugby Unions lead a nationwide campaign of teaching in primary schools rugby in the form of a non-contact form of the TAG Rugby. Since 2013, about 60,000 children in the country had contact with the sport.

The ethos of rugby has been used in the history of political struggle with very positive results. For abolition of apartheid in South Africa, Nelson Mandela used rugby representation as a tool to fight against racism in their country. With the Springboks team that in 1995 won on their own land the World Cup, he has managed to unite the nation and defeat a very strong and deep-rooted racial prejudice. The history of the events was described in the book of John Carling "Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation"²⁵. It was also disseminated in the movie "Invictus" directed by Clint Eastwood created on the canvas of that book. As you can see rugby can be a mainstay of many positive features, and even be a weapon in the fight against racism and be a helpful tool for uniting of nations. It is worth for the media to willingly showing out for the discipline not only because of its pageantry and athletic qualities, but also because of the positive features that come with it.

It is worthwhile emphasizing education advantages with itself a game of the Rugby is bringing which. It lets develop these personality traits which are necessary in correct functioning in young people. The rugby as the team game is supporting the hardening of the health, for forming of such personality traits, as the compliance for principles of the fair play,

²² J. Wierzbicki, *Walka o przetrwanie 2: historia siedleckiego rugby 2004 - 2009*, dz. cyt., s. 7.

²³ <http://www.rocky-rugby.pl/2013/09/etos-rugbisty.html>, dostęp z dnia 01.09.2015r.

²⁴ <http://www.rocky-rugby.pl/2013/09/etos-rugbisty.html>, dostęp z dnia 01.09.2015r.

²⁵ J. Carlin, *Invictus. Igrając z wrogiem*, Warszawa 2013.

the self-discipline, the camaraderie and the solidarity.²⁶ It enables young people to contact with constructive social groups, imitating positive behaviours of persons impressing them (of sports idols), is giving them the chance of the change of their relationship, most often negative, to world and assimilating into society. It also enables meetings between people in atmosphere of the frankness and joy, lets mutually meet and respect, is arousing feeling solidarities and the avocation in us to noble and of unselfish action. Is helping us to create new criteria of the heroism.

As far as football, volleyball and winter sports in Poland are becoming more popular, there is still no fashion in our country to practice a team sports such as rugby. It doesn't mean, however, that the sport in Poland is not at all cultivated²⁷.

Rugby - this strange sounding name of little known sport in our country, has had a centuries-old tradition. Many people can't decipher the secrets of this sport, does not understand its vitality, strength and how it could be attractive for those who at least once didn't try it. But just take a look at the history of this sport and a great spirit of that discipline to appreciate its values. The rules of rugby seems to be quite complicated at first, but they become understandable and appear to be the logical outcome of historical development.

To summarize this article it can be concluded, that there is a noticeable increase in popularity of rugby in Poland. Maybe the reason is, that a physical vigor again becomes fashionable among young men, or perhaps, thanks to a growing popularity of related sport in Poland, which is football in the NFL, so celebrated by the population of the USA. Quoting the author's words, referenced at the beginning of this article, it can be said that "rugby is not a sport, it's a lifestyle"²⁸.

²⁶ W. Okoń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, 2007

²⁷ <http://www.rocky-rugby.pl/>, dostęp z dnia 01.09.2015r.

²⁸ H. Orzechowski, *Rugby: Ulubiony sport dżentelmenów*, „Newsweek”, Nr 65/2012, s. 20.