

I took to the beauty of the game. Its flow. The choreography of a well-thrown pass, the integrity of a clean line, and the teamwork rugby required. The constant search for space and when it all came together, a well-executed try. That's what hooked me.

Rugby has everything. It's the ultimate trial of an athlete, testing endurance and strength. You can be big and strong in football, but you don't have to run very long. In soccer, you have to run but you don't have to be strong and you can't hit anybody.

What if, say, Bo Jackson had wanted to play rugby? Two-sport star, amazing strength and speed. Could he have passed the ball *and* kicked it? How would he have felt about having to tackle people all day, while constantly running what amounted to forty-yard dashes?

Elite Sevens players are the best-conditioned athletes in the world. If you're big and play football, they're going to put you on the offensive line. All you'll do is block people. Don't jump offside, don't hold, just control this monster in front of you. If you're lucky, you'll play more than a few years and retire without needing to pop Advils like breath mints. In rugby, you might be better at one part of the game than others, but you have to do the others anyway. Everybody does everything.

If one teammate doesn't do his job, the whole team suffers for it. There is room for individual stars, but they have to play within the demands of the team.

I loved working out. Playing rugby—Sevens or Fifteens—was an extended workout. There is no cardio workout that can match Sevens rugby. Two seven-minute halves, no stopping, nothing but running and tackling, getting up and running some more. Soccer players don't tackle. Football players wear armor. Rugby players wear mouthpieces. As my dad put it, the only pads in rugby are the ones you build in the weight room.

Rugby has no time-outs. Rugby doesn't stop. Players think on their feet. Rugby, especially Sevens, has the speed and flow of basketball without the timeouts.

It wasn't just the game itself, though. Rugby produces a unique band of brothers. It doesn't matter what level you play the game. The camaraderie, the shared experiences, the parties, the pain. It's a special subculture. You can walk into any rugby club in the world, tell them you play the game, and instantly have fifty new friends. It's an informal family, with all of a family's morals, values, and spirit.

As I progressed up the ranks, the cultural opportunities rugby presented made me love the game even more. Americans who see the world become more grateful for what they have at home. Travel with the Junior World Cup team never stopped giving me a fresh perspective on how lucky I am to live in the States. That rugby brotherhood gets tighter on the road, too. It's one thing to share a practice facility with your peers, the way NFL teams do. It's another to spend weeks at a time on the road, in places where the language and customs are nothing like ours.