

Historical Remarks for the USAFA Rugby Team 50th Celebration

Generals Moorehead, Forsythe, Rajczak, Eyre, Reynolds and to the 21 other General Officers who were AFA ruggers but who could not attend tonight (which includes Gen Wolfenbarger, '80, the first Air Force female four star), and the board planning sub-committee who have organized such a great time, thank you for giving me a chance to encapsulate the past 50 years of AFA Rugby. Before we get started, a special recognition to Vice Air Marshal Tony Mason, who joined the team in the fall of '69 and helped coach Osur take the team on its first ever overseas tour to England, and who has traveled all the way from England to be with us tonight. Tony had a difficult time on that tour when we played Cranwell, a team he just came from coaching and he had cross loyalties. But in the end, when we won, I think he ended up pleased.

I would also like to recognize the 1973 team captain Tim Hayes who has given us immeasurable help in selecting and setting up our historical website, USAFARugbyAlumni.com. Much of what you will now see and hear has been uploaded to that site..... however, there is much more out there in your basements and attic boxes that need to come out. Many of the seasons have absolutely no data. So Please review the seasons you played and let me know what needs to be corrected or added. Yes...dig out those files... USAFARugbyAlumni.com.

AND A DISCLAIMER: Not being a part of most of the history leaves me with gaps, incorrect data or outright lies. Where you find I am off base or missed someone, please let me know after so I may correct the record!

And for the record, our first game was 29 September 1968 where the A team ("All Blues") beat the Denver Highlanders, 29-0, and the B side ("Silver side") played the Denver University A team to a 16-16 tie. It was after that game that the Highlanders taught us proper after game decorum. I am told that continued until the Colorado beer drinking age was changed from 18 to 21, in 1987 when all post-match shenanigans stopped..... Well... maybe not.

The Highlanders were also the *last* team we played that academic year and we beat them 8-3 in the Colorado State Championship on the foot of 69 grad, Les Dyer who kicked 5 of our 8 points.

We retained the name All Blues for those first few years. We were not too sophisticated, but fit and fast. During one of our very first matches against Denver University, the announcer, Rugby Hall of Famer Terry Fleener, described our play as zooming around the pitch. He continued on with that silly phrase of 'zooming' all game, and towards the end, he nicknamed us "Zoomies"... However, we continued to use the nickname "All Blues" through the early 70s. But by 1974 the Zoomie name stuck, was adopted, and continues on to this day

To briefly recap our history, I took the liberty to lumping our seasons into four rather arbitrary eras: Pre Club Years, Formative Years, Golden 20 Years, and Modern Professional years, and I will just summarize a small bit about each of those Eras.

In the Pre Club Years to 1968

- There was not rugby club. Rugby was an intramural game
- When Cranwell came to visit, the British exchange officers assigned to USAFA were pressed into duty to put together a team for 'friendly competition'
- Details are sketchy, but the first time, in 1962 they won by a point. We then recruited some football players and won the return match, scaring them half to death in the process.
- Later, our motley teams played Royal Roads, Sandhurst, and in 1964, on the summer overseas field trip, we played both NZ Air Academy (lost) and Australia Air Academy (won)
- There were a few more matches played, but wanted to recognized members of teams who represented USAFA in some of those matches before fall 1968.. please raise your hands.

The years from 1968 to 1984 were really our Formative years

- Alan Osur and then C2C Angus MacDonald did all the required administrative legwork to begin our inaugural season, the fall of 1968.
- Again drawing on our intramural experience we usually fielded two or three teams during these years, and it was not uncommon for an A team player to play another half with the B or C side
- Fitness was our strength and a lot of kick and chase was the strategy
- Not many colleges had teams back then, and the first division in Colorado consisted of a few colleges and all the men's teams
- USA Rugby did not come into existence until 5 years into this era
- The men won a "National Championships" in 1978 before USA Rugby got their act in gear, and again, officially, in 80, 83
- Our women began late in 1977, and for the record, their first game and first win was 26-0 against Colorado College on 17 Sept 1977. The nickname for that team was "The Gordon Alderson Side", named after the British Exchange officer, Gordon Alderson. Squadron Leader Alderson was a big supporter of rugby, but was also a staunch traditionalist. He was firmly against women playing the sport. Rumor had it that he did all he could to discourage it the ladies, for which he was honored by the cadet women taking on his name for their team.

The years 1985 – 2005 were our Golden 20 years of Collegiate Rugby Leadership

- Men – Began to learn and hone tactical rugby skills
- In 15 of those 20 years we earned and were recognized in the national spotlight, winning our league, our geographic division and going to the USA nationals many times.
- On the Women's side, we don't have much data for the decade 80-90, but in 1990 the team won the opportunity to play in the USA Rugby National CLUB championship representing the West. They beat all the other adult teams in the Western region, both collegiate and adult clubs. Much to the dismay of our lady ruggers, the coach, Vern Avery, did not agree to letting the team go to the CLUB championships, as a protest to USA Rugby, because there was no COLLEGIATE competition. USAR got the message and the next year, 1991, there *was* a college division and Coach Avery led the team to win the first USA Rugby National Collegiate women's Championship. The assistant coach, Alan Osur, returned the next year to take over the team, and the ladies were in the running nearly every year under his leadership, outright winning the championship in 94, 02 and 03

From 2006 on is really the Modern Professional Era of Collegiate Rugby

- High school rugby exploded and really became a focus for our National Governing Body
- Collegiate rugby scholarships began to pop up and are now common
- The rest of the collegiate rugby world caught up... better athletes, improved facilities, dedicated (and paid) coaching staffs, official recognition as a varsity sport, and recruiting from that large group of talented high school players.
- Our National presence was shadowed by the other teams who took advantage of their institutional support and fielding experienced players
- Recently, our women ruggers have risen to be D1A contenders, runners up in the Fall D1A Championship in 2015, winning it outright in 2016, and winning the USA Rugby Collegiate Sevens Open Division in 2018
- The men team went to the 2016 Sweet 16, but have also continually contributed to our US Air Force Team, who were 15 a side champions for 8 straight years before the switch to the sevens format. Yes, Rugby is now a DoD and AF sport, and we have had at least one grad take part in the DoD World Class athlete program, where his active duty job was to live and train in the rugby Olympic training center. 2008 grad, Eric Duechlels is now playing professional rugby with the Seattle Seawolves.
- It is worth mentioning that Army and Navy have moved out from under their club status and have enjoyed dedicated facilities, paid coaching staffs, recruiting top High School rugby players, and the support of their athletic departments... But more on that later...

When talking about our history, I would be remiss if we did not talk about Alan Osur, founder of both the men's and women's teams. Alan, we all owe you a lot of gratitude... a lot of gratitude.... But also, many, many more individuals and teams owe you gratitude... let me explain:

- Without our Academy rugby experience, many *non-academy* teams would lose the richness of having an Academy grad be a part of their team. Many all star teams or representative teams would be without the talent encourage by Alan. Even our own national teams would be less but for Alan introducing rugby to men and women worthy of world class athlete status. Many teams, adult men, women, high school, Middle school and (yes) even grade school teams have either been started by grads or coached by grads... teams and experiences that might never have been without Alan Osur inspiring us to love the game.
- You see, Alan infected those who came in contact with him with this rugby germ, and then we passed it on to others who played, coached, even encouraged their kids to play... yes, .. you Alan, are to blame!
- Just to show I am not exaggerating this impact, would ask those of you in the audience to stand if you have played for a team **other than USAFA** or assisted in developing rugby players or another team in some way or other after graduation.
- Please remain standing.. Our sport engenders both individual and team accomplishment. Let's focus on the individual accomplishments for a minute.
- There are only a few in attendance, but if you passed this germ on to a family member or are a family member who got this germ from one of Alan's teams, please raise your hand ... [Merideths, Byrds, Baumans, Hens, Burrows, Traws]. Especially noteworthy are a father daughter pair who were both coached by Alan Osur, obviously at different times: Col David Rupert Baumann, 71 and daughter Col Mel Phillips, 96.
- Thank you and I will ask some of you to sit, but.. If you were recognized in some way for your on the field efforts (like all star team or All American team selection either as a cadet or after) please stand or remain standing.
- If you were All American, raise your hand,
- If you were selected to the Air Force Team, raise your hand
- If you were selected to an All Military/All Service team, raise your hand
- Would ask you to now sit down unless you are a grad and was selected to play on our National Team, the USA Eagles, and I know 4 of the 10 Eagles selections are here: **Ben Trautwein** '98, **Mike Hobson** '05, **Josh Dean** '04,. And for the women, **Sarah Emory** '98. Not here are the other 6 USA Eagles: Shalanda Baker '98, Laura McDonald '02, Alicia Binggeli '06, Matt Schmidt '00, Brian Lemay '05, Jackson Bristol '14, Thank you and please sit down except for Josh Dean; sorry Josh....

- The Woodley Award is named in honor of American rugby pioneer Albert Woodley, is presented annually to the top collegiate player nationwide. Often referred to as the "Heisman Trophy of rugby," this honor not only recognizes superior athletic performance on the pitch, but also acknowledges outstanding character and leadership displayed both in competition and in life. Josh Dean earned this singular distinction in 2004

Thank you.

- Alan Osur, or should we call you typhoid Alan!? You have created the structure where AFA rugby individual efforts of excellence can flourish and be recognized, from local to national levels. But you have also taught us that good teams do not just happen; they require organization and effort off the pitch and outside of the match.
- Will again ask our audience, if you have been a rugby administrator in some way, from team mom, team captain, president, union officer, coach, team founder, AFA Coach, OIC, our Affinity Group officer, or any other position that required more than playing, but also added to the success of a rugby team, please stand.
- Raise your hand if you held an officer or leadership position in a club, union or national organization.
- Raise your hand if you started a team or were a team coach
- Would ask you to sit down unless you were a member of the AOG Rugby Alumni Affinity group board *at any time*.....you folks please stand or remain standing..... Ladies and Gentlemen, It is through the leadership of these men and women that we are all here tonight, united in remembrance of our history and eager to learn about the future of our teams.

Thank you

- Now let's talk about our Academy **teams**... we have been pretty successful over the years... as an example if you were on the coaching staff, administrator or member of our team and won the state championship or whatever that was called in your day that amounted to the local championship, please stand. Yep, nearly every season!
- Please sit **unless** you were on the coaching staff or members of teams that went on to the next level, that is, regional competitions which would be equivalent to the sweet 16 please remain standing... remain standing if you won and played through to the national elite 8.
- Please sit, unless you were a participant in one of the USA Rugby final four collegiate championships

- And please sit unless you were a member of one of our 10 National Championship teams...
 - o Men: 78, 89,90, 03 – Coach Holder, Coach Osur
 - o Women: 91, 94, 02, 03, 16, 18 – Coach Osur, Coach Russert

Thanks you

Lest we forget those coaches who came after Alan and contributed much to our history, and we have a few in the room, let's take a few minutes to recognize them ... please stand and remain standing when I call your name:

- **Denny Merideth, '73** – 2016 D1A Sweet Sixteen
- **Tex Byrd** and his able assistant coach **Air Vice Marshal Mason** who prepared the team to be the only collegiate team to win the Aspen Tournament ... ever.
- **Dave Gaines '88** who coached the 1998 team to the Elite Eight
- **Mike (Satan) Smith**, led the team the final four and a third place finish in 94
- **Floyd Finley, '89**, led the team to the final four and a second place finish in 95
- **Dan Marine '96**, Head coach in 2005 when they won through to the sweet sixteen and head of Rugby Operations when they won the 2004 championship
- **Amy Rusert** – Coach of the 2016 Fall D1A National Women's collegiate champions and 2018 National Collegiate Sevens Open Division.
- **Rob Holder** – led the team to the 2001 Round of 8, 2002 Sweet 16 and in 2003 won the national Collegiate championship

These coaches did not do it alone, to be sure, so if you were an assistant coach or OICs for these coaches, to include assistants to coaches Vern Francis and Alan Osur... please stand.

Thanks.. please be seated.

And for everyone, less we forget, let's give a round of applause for the friends, spouses, family and significant others who were not infected with this rugby virus, but were certainly affected by it in more ways than we can imagine.

- Time to mention our most successful coaches. First up is our most successful men's coach - **Vern Francis, '71**, final four 6 times, in the finals 3 times and two time national champions in 89 and 90. Vern sustained a neck injury from a bicycle accident in 2009 that rendered him a quadriplegic and confined him to a wheelchair since. Due to his handicap, he is not able to be with us tonight, but at our insistence (and with the able help from one of his OICs, Keith Gay) he sent a video. I have shortened his on screen time 75%, but will make sure all the messages he wanted to relay are said.

Video

- Vern goes on to say he never played for the AFA team, but fell in love with the game and at his first assignment, McConnell AFB KS, he started, was captain and president of the Wichita RFC and was recently inducted into their hall of fame.
- His next assignment was at CU for academic enrichment before returning to USAFA where he was assistant coach under Alan Osur for a few years. He was so respected as an assistant coach that Alan entrusted him to take a team to Royal Roads Canada. It was there he saw his entire career float before his face when called down to the police station to face cadets who were picked up with drug possession. Turns out it was snuff... tobacco... the joke was on the Canadian Mounted, but not before Vern had to change his pants.
- After a PhD at UCLA he returned to USAFA and was assistant coach to Sqn Ldr Bill Mulvehnny for 2 years before taking the team over in 1985 academic year.
- After his first full fall season, he was asked by Bob Wolf, USNA coach, to assist coaching the Combined Services Juniors after the fall season and bring along some of his promising cadet players. He really wanted a break from rugby, but felt compelled to help out his friend Bob. The coach and players met for the first time at 8 AM the first day.

Roll Video

- Vern realized the benefit of zoomie rugby went further than our campus and he went on to successfully coach the Combined Services Juniors for another 5-6 years.
- Vern also talks about his requirement for cadets to be on season: they had to commit to a spring break trip.... By bus, 5 games in that week, and on the off days a morning run and two training session / day. The cadets called it the Bataan Death March but responded to the challenge and the teams were better for it.

Roll Video : Lack of support... let Vern tell a classic...

- He also recalled the semifinal vs Army in 1989 where he recognized some familiar Combined Services Junior players on the Army team who would recognize the call on our penalty plays. When in the waning minutes, a 5 m penalty call set up the perfect opportunity for the play, but Vern had prearranged for the call to not reflect the actual play but would serve as a decoy. Army fell for the ruse and we scored, winning the game by one point. After the

match those Army players congratulated Vern with a bit hug and the comment “Damn you coach”.

- Then, in the Championship match of 1990 .. well .. let’s hear in from Vern

Roll Video

Many thanks and respectful applause for our most successful Men’s coach. Vern Francis, ‘71

- BUT as successful as Vern was, nobody has surpassed **Alan Osur’s** achievement with both the men’s and the women’s teams, 18 Seasons of coaching Zoomie Rugby: 15 times reaching the Elite Eight, 8 final fours, 4 National championships games, and won 3 National Championships.

Alan Please stand.

Thank you.

As you can see Alan, we have enjoyed a lot of individual and team successes over the years, all of which can be traced back to you. As I reflected on how to present 50 years in 25 minutes, it became obvious I could not tell all the stories..... In fact, I **should NOT** tell all the stories. But I quickly realized that most of our history is not in this room. What we have here is very impressive, but it is only a small part of our history and your legacy... history that is not only in our minds and hearts, but also in the minds and hearts of 10 times the audience here, over *2500 other Academy rugby graduates who are not here*. We all owe you. We can all say our Academy rugby experience forged part of who we became, and we are better for it. Thank you Alan, thank you.

Finally, If you are a member or coach of one of the current teams, please stand. Tonight I hope you have gained a sense of belonging to a rugby network that has an incredible history, has enjoyed immense success, and has enhanced those qualities that our Academy endeavors to teach; qualities that are strengthened through our play on the rugby fields. You are standing on the shoulders of 50 years of Air Force Academy rugby. All we alumni ask is that you continue to leave it all on the field, enjoy the camaraderie after the matches, remember the mates who played through the mud, blood, and beer with you, and after graduation, we hope you continue to play, coach or encourage others to participate in rugby at every opportunity. Of course, we fully expect you to eventually join us grads in telling and retelling our stories, and supporting the future of our AFA Rugby programs, but we also want you to remember the code of our sport: Play hard, play fair, maintain Humility in victory, Courage in defeat, and forever Honor and respect the game and the players who play it.

Thank you.

It is now my pleasure to introduce our esteemed English colleague, Tony Mason who will make a short presentation. To introduce Tony may take longer than his remarks, but will make it brief and not embarrass him too much. Tony had a distinguished career in the Royal Air Force, which included our Air War College, the RAF Staff College, a tour at our academy, Director of RAF Defence Studies, Deputy Air Secretary and then full Air Secretary for two years prior to his retirement. Not liking retirement, he became an academic, being appointed to an Honorary professorship and Director of Center for Studies in Security and Diplomacy, U of Birmingham. He served 5 years as specialist air adviser to the House of Commons Defence Committee. As an acclaimed author, Tony also holds the awards of Companion Order of the Bath, and Commander, Order of the British Empire: Ladies and gentlemen, Vice Air Marshal Tony Mason.