

UT News

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**** UTHSCD Cardiologist is America's Top Rugby Referee

DALLAS--When Dr. J.V. "Ian" Nixon calls it a week, he pulls on a pair of shorts and a jersey and, armed solely with a whistle, dives between two packs of bruisers who, to the uninitiated eye, seem bent on only one thing--bloody carnage.

The game is rugby, and in the United States Nixon has no equal in that rough-and-tumble sport. Nixon, chief of Noninvasive Cardiac Laboratories at the Veterans Administration Medical Center and associate professor of internal medicine at Southwestern Medical School, is also the No. 1-ranked rugby referee in America.

It is a position Nixon has held for the past four years and one that keeps the cardiologist on the road many weekends. Since the 1985-86 rugby season began in September, Nixon has officiated in Canada, England, Nebraska, Florida, Oklahoma, Chicago and San Francisco as well as Austin, Houston and Dallas.

"My top priorities are my work and my family," says Nixon, 45, who is married and has two children. "However, to be reasonably successful in rugby, you have to give that certain priority, too."

Nixon has been more than "reasonably successful." Nixon's officiating credentials include four test matches involving international teams, five U.S. national club championships (the Super Bowl of rugby) and a score of regional and interregional matches. The U.S.A. Rugby Football Union also has sent Nixon abroad in referee exchange programs--to New Zealand in 1983 and to England in 1984.

In April, Nixon will travel to Hong Kong to officiate at the World Invitational Sevens Tournament, a fast-moving form of rugby played on a regular field with seven rather than 15 players a side. He is the first American referee ever to be invited to whistle matches at this international tournament.

Indeed, Nixon has officiated at so many different games involving so many different teams that he has become a man for whom a tie is almost never appropriate gift. It's a rugby tradition for a team to give a visiting referee a team tie, and by his own estimate, Nixon has "about 50 or 60."

In addition to being the top American referee, Nixon is one of only three men to ever receive the Golden Eagle Award, the highest honor given by the U.S.A. Rugby Football Union in recognition of significant contributions to the development of rugby in this country.

The story of how Nixon came to his high position in this obscure (by American standards), strictly amateur foreign sport begins in Cheshire, England, where he started playing rugby at age seven. He continued playing through college and medical school at Victoria University of Manchester, where he lettered in both rugby and cricket, and stayed with the game after graduation in various rugby clubs in England and, after 1972, in America.

In rugby, a game of virtually continuous action, leadership comes from the players on the field, not the coach on the sidelines, so Nixon's experience and skill made him particularly valuable to the American clubs for which he played--first in Boston, where he was selected to an all-star New England team, and then in Dallas, where he joined the Southwestern Medical School faculty in 1974 and captained the Harlequins to the Texas championship the following year.

"I could fulfill a role even as an older player because of my skills and tactical knowledge," says Nixon. "In American football, the game stops to enable decision-making. In rugby, all the decisions are made while the game is in play."

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As his responsibilities at Southwestern increased, Nixon decided to "retire" from rugby in 1976 at age 35, but he still wanted to stay with the game. He had offers to coach local teams, but the heavy time commitment of coaching worried him, so Nixon says he "took up the whistle first, to see if I could do that."

In rugby, the referee's role is very different from his counterpart in American football. He works alone, for one thing, and has to stay with the action, literally running with the pack. There is no set uniform, so a rugby referee has to be careful to wear "neutral" colors to make him easily identifiable. But even more significant, a referee in rugby has vastly more discretion in interpreting the rules and a much more active role during play than his equal on the gridiron.

"In football they've tried to legislate everything out. There is no room for interpretation. Every infraction has to be identified and penalized," says Nixon. In rugby, the action of the game and the safety and enjoyment of both teams are the paramount considerations--within the rules of the game.

Rugby's "advantage rule" is a good example of the referee's wide latitude. This rule allows him to signal an infraction but to continue play if he thinks the non-offending team can turn the situation better to their advantage than if a penalty were levied against their opponents. Should the team then fail to capitalize on this bonus, the referee then may call the play back to the point of the original infraction and levy the penalty.

Because he has so much influence on the style of play, the referee has to establish his authority right at the outset, Nixon says. "If you're sloppy in the first 10 minutes, you might lose control. If the referee doesn't take care of (certain infractions), it might become a provocative situation in which players begin to take care of it themselves. The players have to trust the referee, and the referee has to trust the players, or mayhem ensues."

Nixon's personal "thou shalts" of refereeing include being thoroughly conversant in the changing rules of the game, applying them fairly and consistently on the field and maintaining a certain level of physical fitness.

Keeping up with the action in two, 40-minute halves of almost continuous play can be grueling, but Nixon says "it isn't fair to the other 30 players if they've got a 31st man on the field who can't keep up." That means training, and for Nixon this training consists of running three to four times a week for up to an hour at a time. He usually increases the regimen just before a major match.

When most Americans think of rugby, they usually think of football without pads--and injuries. But while a referee has to stay with the action, he rarely gets hit, although Nixon says "occasionally a ref will be knocked down"--as Nixon was at the 1984 national championship game.

An important part of rugby that the referee doesn't miss out on, however, is the social side of the game, the post-game camaraderie. "Rugby's not like professional football," says Nixon. "You can't run up and down the sidelines abusing the referee and then not invite him to your post-game function."

And it is this part of rugby that Nixon finds most attractive. "One of the great assets of rugby is that it's an amateur game played by people from all walks of life," he says. "One meets people one would not necessarily meet unless one played rugby." In addition to fellow physicians, Nixon has friends who are construction workers, developers, lawyers and bricklayers, all of whom are rugby mates.

These social functions serve as an additional opportunity to stir up interest in officiating among players ready to retire. "Rugby is the only amateur sport in this country where the referee is not paid," says Nixon. "There is no financial gain whatsoever." Probably as a consequence, there are about three times more rugby clubs than there are qualified referees to officiate their games.

So what is the reward for this dedication? "The challenge and the ability to make, allow or encourage 30 people to enjoy themselves," says Nixon. "But if I didn't say I enjoyed the success I'd be lying, wouldn't I? There is a big difference between refereeing a weekend game and being flown around the country. That can't be denied."

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