



Old Boys Club

■ By **MEDIHA DIMARTINO**

They call themselves The Old Boys. Just don't confuse them with the stuffy office crowd your father's generation had to contend with.

They're rugby aficionados who've aged out of the rough and tumble of league play but are still up for an occasional tackle and a beer or two after the game. Among them are Orange County business owners, financial

advisers, lawyers, doctors and architects who got hooked on the sport in college, and who still might show up to work with a black eye or bandaged limb.

Beyond Work

"It's like the mafia—once you're a rugby player, you're never out," said Nick Vujnovich, president of **Back Bay Rugby**, a Newport Beach-based club that's cultivated a roster of about 200 Old Boys with roots tracing back to the 1960s.

Among them is **Ronan Cosgrave**, a managing director at Pa-

cific Alternative Asset Management Co. in Irvine. The Ireland-native picked up rugby when he was 12, and again while getting his MBA at **Columbia Business School** in New York. He keeps in touch with former teammates and considers them "some of my best friends from business school." He signed up with Back Bay after moving to California in 2005, and plays "a couple of regular games" with the club's adult team and also with the 40-and-over team

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when his schedule allows.

Rugby, he said, challenges him mentally and physically, a refresher after spending the day working at a desk. The game rarely stops until the half ends, and, unlike baseball or football, it requires continuous participation of all players in the match, with few substitutions.

"Rugby does not allow you to contemplate your life," Cosgrave said. "You're not sitting there idling for half an hour when you're not at bat. When you're out in the field, you go into the mode, and you're not really thinking about anything else."

Rugby, while a very physical game, also emphasizes self-restraint—for example, rules stipulate that when you tackle a player from the opposing team, you can't slam them onto the field. You have to hold on to them as they go down.



Cosgrave: 'I do nothing else in my life that could get me injured'

"You can be angry as all hell, but you learn how to limit your response," Cosgrave said, adding that players who break the rules "don't last very long in rugby."

Injuries, however unwelcome, still happen. "I have a job, which is somewhat visible ... and turning up for work with two black eyes isn't exactly what I can be doing anymore," he said. "But I do nothing else in my life that could get me injured, so there is an element of an adrenaline rush [from] doing something that potentially can hurt you."

The father of two young boys said he'd like to get more involved with Back Bay, especially with youth coaching. However, he's waiting for his sons to get a bit older and to show interest.

"I don't want to force it."

Onfield Doc

Then there's former transplant surgeon **Aloke Mandal**, who recently became a partner at Irvine-based executive services and consulting firm **Hardesty LLC**. He discovered rugby while attending Dartmouth, and after taking a break to finish medical school, he joined **Los Angeles Rugby Club**. There he served as an Old Boys representative, helping organize matches for the 40-and-over crowd.

His skills as a doctor came in handy about two years ago, when an opponent nearly lost his ear—Mandal used a surgical stapler to mend it on the sidelines, and warned the player not to go back into the game until the injury healed. Two matches later, just as Mandal was about to score, he got "walloped by this big guy in a helmet."

"As I lay there sprawled on the ground, he comes up to me and says, 'Hey doc, the ear feels great,'" Mandal laughed.

He moved to OC in 2014 and joined Back Bay. He participates in the Catalina Old Boys Rugby tournament put on by his old club every May, as well as Back Bay's Sharkapalooza in August.

Networking

Participants fly in "from all over the country" to play a few matches, then get a drink at the Harp in Costa Mesa, an Irish pub that sponsors the team.

Mandal also travels with other Old Boys to international tournaments. Their latest adventures included stops in Italy, New Zealand, Japan, Argentina and Scotland, and they plan to be in Barcelona in September.

Game "laws" at their tournaments are slightly different than regular rugby leagues. The playtime is reduced from 40-minute

halves to 20 minutes, and there are unlimited substitutions.

"It's just like the real rugby but in slow motion," said Vujnovich, senior mortgage banker at **HighTechLending Inc.** in Costa Mesa. "You can run on (the field) for your three minutes of glory, get your jersey and then run off again—hopefully run off."

"The key thing is not to stretch before the game," laughed Mandal. "You could pull something."

Ed Burlingham, owner of Costa Mesa-based fastener manufacturer **Burlingham International**, had his share of rugby-related injuries, including two hip replacements and a knee surgery.

"That's just part of the gig," said the former Back Bay president and head coach who was inducted into the U.S. Rugby Hall of Fame in 2015 after serving as captain of the U.S. national rugby team for seven years.

Burlingham was a math and science teacher and a football coach at Laguna Beach High School before starting the business with his father in the 1970s. The school schedule, however, conflicted with travels to rugby tournaments. He took a year off from teaching to give Burlingham International a try and "never looked back."

"I toured a lot," Burlingham said, adding that he was almost always "put up by teams" who "bend over backwards" to take care of him. Likewise, for any rugby player who came to town, "I would do the same."

Robert Sweeney, who's chief financial officer at **National Funding** in San Diego and frequents Back Bay games, moved from New York to Huntington Beach. The first thing he did was call the rugby team and "instantly got 40 friends ... Everywhere you go, even in foreign countries, you mention rugby, and it's, 'Oh brother, come on in, have a drink.'" The sport also reveals one's character—noncontributors are weeded out, and bad attitudes don't stick around. That insight has guided Sweeney when hiring employees.

"If I'm looking at two resumes, all else being equal, the rugby guy will get the nod," he said.

The networking aspect of rugby helped Vujnovich jump into the mortgage industry. He moved to "the States" from New Zealand, and started working in his brother's warehouse.

Six months later, while standing on the rugby field, **John Lawyer**, a teammate he barely knew at the time said, "If anyone would like a career in the mortgage industry, stay after the practice, and we'll set you up on Monday." The two worked together at various OC-based companies until a few weeks ago, when Vujnovich moved on to HighTechLending.

Last year he paid it forward—Lawyer's son reached out to Vujnovich, who called up his former boss at **Lending Tree**, **Anthony Hsieh**, who got him a job at Foothill Ranch-based **LoanDepot LLC**, where Hsieh is chief executive.

"It's pretty amazing, the networking we are willing to do for a fellow rugby player," Mandal added.

Rugby is a "state of mind" for **Nicolas Corcia**, chief financial officer of **Parex USA Inc.** in Anaheim, a major construction-materials manufacturer headquartered in Paris.

"You feel like a part of the family," he said. "It's really about the support, because you can't play by yourself. You have to have someone else on your back helping you."

He stopped playing in regular mens' leagues about three years ago and instead referees for adult and youth leagues on weekends. He also tries to make it to Old Boys tournaments, including the most recent one on Catalina Island.

"It was really fun, because it's a bunch of old boys that really don't care about playing—they care about the after-game." ■



Game and postgame: (from top) Back Bay's adult team scrums in Oceanside; 'The Doctor' shows he still has game at tourney in Italy; Old Boys fellowship at Costa Mesa's Harp, a team sponsor