



[Home](#) > [Articles](#) > [These Filipino rugby players are breaking stereotypes about women in sports](#)

[Articles](#) > [Play Out](#)

These Filipino rugby players are breaking stereotypes about women in sports

written by Kevin Rebutan | May 17, 2019

Challenging the gender norms at all costs—blood, sweat, tears, and bottles of beers notwithstanding.

Some place away from the playing field, undraped from their team jersey, these Filipino rugby players look every bit as any other women. And you must have seen them in their typical form: either wearing corporate attire for their full time day job, or school uniform for some of them who still study.

But when they don themselves in an array of purple and sky blue, and set foot in the vast open pitch—while withstanding dust and summer heat—these women can give men a run for their money, as they pave the way to make room for females in a male-dominated sport.

We've heard countless accounts of women empowerment, and all these have demolished the traditional, age-old culture of gender inequality. With more women coming forward to further the balance, what makes their story a compelling tale to tell?

Some time last March 2019, the first ever women's division of an international rugby festival founded in the Philippines has finally commenced, held at the San Lazaro Leisure Park in Carmona, Cavite. Among the competing teams are the Nomads Rogues, the host club's female representatives, which, impressively, have only been founded over a year ago.

Meanwhile, the Rogues' male counterpart, the Manila Nomads, is a century-old sporting club established in 1914. Comprised of roughly 20 men of different nationalities—thus, the team's name, in honor of its original expat founders—Manila Nomads is the second-oldest sports club in the country which pioneered the game across the archipelago.

Having played only amongst themselves back then, the Manila Nomads steadily attracted players who later formed other rugby clubs. Consequently, in 1989, the Manila 10s International Rugby Festival came to fruition, and is now tagged as the premiere social rugby tournament in the world with over 20 teams participating annually.

Three decades later, the historic participation of the Rogues and the other women's teams proves nothing but this: it's about time for women to take part, or, lo and behold, to take over.

Grit, Guts, and Glory Rugby

"Rugby is a very physical sport. It looks very intimidating if you're not familiar," tells Fitz Taua'a, coach of the Rogues and the Nomads.

However, for someone who's watched the game live for the first time, to say that rugby is 'intimidating' is an understatement. Seeing players, at one point, lock heads, shoulders, and arms, and then at another moment, pile on top of each other; seeing them grab all that their hands could: the ball, their teammates and opponents; and seeing them run around in a frantic frenzy are a sight to behold.

Manila Nomads and Nomads Rogues coach Fitz Taua'a

Each game is a beautiful chaos, an amalgamation of finesse and brutality in equal measures. All these while the referee speaks of jargons like kick-off, line-outs, sin bin, conversion, ruck, and scrum, among others—all of which I cannot honestly comprehend. So, despite my naivete about rugby, I have eventually found myself engrossed with all the gritty and pretty details of the action-packed games.

In affirmation to Taua'a's earlier statement, former team captain of Manila Nomads, Nick Jones, attests to the physicality of the games. "There's a lot of contact but that's what brings everybody closer together," says Jones, and adds that rugby—and the party that follows after the games—has formed lifelong friendships amongst the athletes.

Jones, who must have sensed my obliviousness of the sport, also points out what makes rugby all the more engaging. He says that unlike (American) football, where players portray specific and specialized role, rugby athletes do everything.

MAKE CONTACT. Grab the ball, and run to the goal. Whatever it takes.

“Here, you pass, you run, you tackle, so you have to be a more well-rounded athlete. You get to do every part of the game,” Jones explains.

And that well-roundedness, in case you’re forgetting, is also demanded of women, of the Rogues.

Women are never without, and always about ‘we’

Inclusivity and diversity are the words that the Rogues live by.

For a sport that is regrettably known more for the preconceived notions about it, the Rogues can’t afford to be selective. And while former captain Bianca Natola is cognizant of the struggles that come with recruitment, she reaches out nonetheless.

“I recruited girls from different communities, from every corner I could find,” says Natola, and notes the importance of particularly talking to women in leadership positions.

Among the first things that Natola has addressed is redressing misconceptions about rugby. In concurrence with Taua’a and Jones, she iterates that the sport embraces all body types, ages, nationalities, weight and height. And, more often than not, physical attributes are only secondary. For her, a lot about the sport comes down to one’s drive and commitment.

Basically, as there is available position for everyone, anyone can play.

“Rugby is for all shapes and sizes,” Jones reminds, “there’s position for small, fast people, and for the big, strong ones.”

Wyxie Carolina

Wyxie Carolina, 40—who wears many hats such as that of a single mother, a web developer, a crossfitter, a weightlifter, and a Rogue—is a testament to Jones’s reminder.

Previously unathletic until she set forth on a fitness journey to be of good example to her children, Carolina has confined herself in the gym. And while she was able to build a certain level of strength and power, she didn’t have anything to use those for.

“Rugby is like functional training with all your muscles moving and in use,” says Carolina.

On how she manages her time amidst an erratic schedule, Carolina as a mother surely knows best: “Just show up. When my kids and my teammates need me, I show up,” she says, “because you cannot form a decision of not wanting to show up and do it without actually showing up and trying.”

Echoing the same sentiment, half-Filipina Rita Kash believes that stepping in the playing field is stepping out of one’s comfort zone. And when in doubt, Kash guarantees: “Your teammates will keep you going.”

The future is now

Camaraderie, sisterhood, healthy lifestyle, and empowerment are only few among the many rewards that rugby bestows. But only those who are valiant enough to take on the challenge will be rewarded.

In a country where other ball games such as basketball and volleyball dominate the sports industry, rugby's glimmer of hope remains alive only if the next generation carries the torch. And that's what the Rogues and the Nomads are paying attention to.

HIGH KICK. And high hopes.

While rugby is still relatively a small community, it is among the fastest growing sports in the Philippines. Having started at point zero, there are now almost 20 active teams in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao.

"Rugby is truly on the rise," affirms the organizing committee chairman David Feeney. To qualify such estimation, he adds that the sport is reaching more schools and universities across the country—so much so that some of the Rogues sit at the juncture of being an athlete and a student.

19-year-old Filipina-British Jemima Rowley is currently on her third year college as a Psychology major. While working on her thesis, Rowley already has her eyes set on pursuing rugby after school—in her own words: "As long as I can, as long as I want."

Ronalyn Molines, 20, on the other hand, is currently in senior high school, and plans to take a degree on Hotel and Restaurant Administration in college. Aside from her studies, she also considers rugby as her motivation in life, as it personifies her two characters: "When I'm out there in the field, I become both a princess and a monster."

For Taua'a and Jones, who are Filipinos more by heart than by blood, these young minds' ideals say a lot about Filipinas in general.

"The Filipina girls that we have are strong-willed and are really just about the attitude. They have natural athleticism as well," tells Taua'a, to which Jones adds, "They've broken a lot of glass ceilings just being able to play rugby."

All photos taken by Roc Verdera.

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