

On a 'Mission'

Rugby club claims D-III national title

By Pete Borello
Town Crier Staff Writer

When Mission Rugby endured a winless season four years ago, team members couldn't possibly have imagined this. But there they were on June 2, celebrating a national championship.

The men's club team, with players from Los Altos and Mountain View, claimed the USA Rugby Division III crown by beating the Boston Irish Wolfhounds 32-22 that afternoon in San Diego.

"We're really excited," said Mission player/spokesman Paul Simko. "It's a David and Goliath story."

The Irish Wolfhounds came in as the favorite, having reached the final a year ago. Part of perhaps the most organized rugby club in the country, they have a coaching staff and strong Division I and II teams.

Mission doesn't even have a formal coach. Most of its practices are voluntary. The one-team club has been around for 30 years, yet Mission's best season prior to this came back in 1996 when it reached the round of 16 in the Division II playoffs.

Mission's best move since then may have been dropping into Division III two years ago.

"We were getting beaten up in



COURTESY OF PAUL SIMKO

The Mission Rugby team won the Division III national championship earlier this month in San Diego. Front row, from left, are Arcia Dorosti, Geoff Beckstrom, Connor O'Brien, Fred Tigarea, Salesi Taufua, acting coach John Tyler and Glenn Trollman. Back row, from left, are Justin Hower, Brian Schnack, Samitha Samaranyake, Jon Wubbles, Joe Domine, Paul Simko, John Barsotti, Bill Gorham, Siaoisi Ulukivaiola, Viliami Tai, Tom Mell, Kevin Leal, Fabio Rojas, Phil Giurlani, David Lawson, Nolan Skiver, Paula Sakalia, Onesi Havea and Brian Harrison. Not pictured: Toa Ngata, Kevin Heath High and Frank Merrill.

Division II," said Simko, part of the squad that went 0-12 in 2002. "(Silicon Valley) was coming off the boom and people were moving out of the area; numbers were a problem for us."

Mission just missed the playoffs last year, eliminated from contention with a loss to Stanislaus in the final week of the season. Mission got its revenge, though.

"This year we beat them, and they were ranked fifth (in the nation)," Simko said. "That's when we knew we had something special."

Mission didn't lose a match in the regular season. The team outscored its 13 opponents by a combined 457 to 92.

Next came the regional playoffs in Tucson, Ariz., where Mission routed Bend and rival Stanislaus to capture the Pacific Coast championship. This put Mission in last month's national playoffs in Lexington, S.C. Thanks to Joseph Domine's drop goal in the 75th minute, fourth-seeded Mission upset No. 1 Toledo 13-11 to win Pool A and earn a trip to San Diego.

"We got a little lucky there," said Simko, who has been with Mission for 10 years. "A Toledo guy missed a penalty kick (with no time left) that got us into the final."

All three division championship matches were played at Qualcomm Stadium Rugby Complex, "and our match ended up as the best and the closest," Simko said. He estimated that more than 1,000 people attended the game.

Mission's staunch defense



DECLAN PRENTY/BOSTON IRISH WOLFHOUSES

Mission's Tom Mell places the ball, with Geoff Beckstrom supporting him from above. Arcia Dorosti (7) and Dave Lawson (to Dorosti's right) also come up to support.

played a prominent role in the 10-point win according to Simko.

"We had a lot of goal-line stands – that was the key to the win," the Mountain View resident said.

No stand proved bigger than when Boston, down 20-15, got in prime position to take the lead with 20 minutes remaining. Mission's Onesi Havea thwarted the threat, however, stealing a pass at the goal line and racing 99 meters for a score.

"If he doesn't steal that pass, they easily score," Simko said of Haeva, who outran four Wolfhounds. "No one from our team was within 50 meters of him, so if he got caught, (Boston) would have run it all the way back."

The try (five points) and the conversion (two) "gave us a little breathing room," Simko said.

But Boston rallied a minute later, pulling within 27-22.

Mission had to play the last seven minutes short one player,

penalized for repeated fouls. The team still managed to stop Boston at the goal line, then scored a try by Brian Harrison with time running out to seal the win.

All that was left was the celebrating. Among those taking part: Los Altos resident John Tyler, Mission's acting coach for the match.

"He knows a lot of nuances of the game," Simko said of Tyler, a rugby veteran who has coached the team in the past. "He knows what to say and what to scream."

Other local contributors included Arcia Dorosti, Tom Mell, Geoff Beckstrom, Jon Wubbles and Kyle Dosskey of Los Altos. Dorosti, a Los Altos High grad, made two conversions in the game. Mell is club president.

"We have great chemistry – we win as a team and lose as a team," Simko said. "We trust each other, protect each other and play with a lot of heart. All our guys are passionate about their rugby."



DECLAN PRENTY/WOLFHOUSES

Mission's Siaoisi Ulukivaiola runs toward the action in the national title game.