

The uncoachables

Mission Rugby is on its own and undefeated

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There's no drills. Practices are free-flowing and optional. There isn't even a coach. This is the formula for the 2006 Mission Rugby team, arguably the best in the club's 30-year history.

"Like our captain says, 'If we play our game, nobody can beat us,'" said flanker Arcia Dorosti, a Los Altos High graduate. "And we honestly feel that. Even though we don't have a coach, we know what our game is."

There is some structure, as the mention of a captain would suggest. His name is Glen Trollman and his voice is loudest. Off the field, Tom Mell has acted as the team president since 1995 — he joined in 1991 — and Fabio Rojas helps out with the Web site and paperwork.

The fact the team is 13-0 this season and is pummeling opponents suggests an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach suits Mission.

"We just haven't been able to find a coach that everyone respects," said the Nicaraguan Rojas, aka the Human Bowling Ball, a prop in the front row and a member of Mission for about five years. "We have some players who have been with the team maybe 12, 15 years. They no longer live in the area, but they show up every Saturday to play. So it's hard for a coach when someone who's been here longer but doesn't show up to practice gets to play. It's those kind of things that a coach may not understand."

Started in 1976 when the undergrad team at Santa Clara University was inundated with players who had already graduated, the rugby team was based out of Mission College in Santa Clara and had among its founders the co-owners of CB Hannigan's in Los Gatos. Before the season started, Mission played round robins against the SCU undergrads and law school while graduates from both started making their way onto Mission's roster.

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Daily News / Jack Arent

PROP — Mission Rugby prop forward Fabio Rojas scrummages with his teammates and high schoolers at the 49ers Academy in East Palo Alto.

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Now Mission includes players from the Palo Alto, Sunnyvale and Santa Clara areas and plays at Cubberley Community Center and El Camino Park across from the Stanford Shopping Center.

But the leap from great to elite has come in the past few years with the inclusion of the Polynesian group of players from the likes of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa that has meshed with core of the team.

"They bring a skill set that was lacking for a number of years," said Dorosti, who has been with the team since 1998 except for a two-year hiatus when he was at UC Davis. "The club has had success in the past, but I don't think we've ever matched this level of success."

"Over the last couple years, the East Palo Alto guys have been trying to start a team and they haven't had a lot of success as far as the club team," said Mell, as scrimmages often include members of the East Palo Alto Razorbacks. "The high school teams have a lot of success, and a lot of kids once they've graduated if they don't go off to college they've been joining us."

The Polynesians bring a level of athleticism and knowledge of the game that during last year's two-loss season began to have great impact. Now with forwards in the scrum that weigh 230, 250 and 270 pounds in the front and are anchored in the back by three more behemoths (6-foot-5,

250; 6-foot-5, 270; and 6-foot-4, 260), Mission punishes its opponents.

"We've got some big boys out there," said Mell, who is one of the runners from the back. "A lot of teams will pound it in the forwards to draw people in and then push it out. But we sort of do the opposite. We try to kick it out, get them tired and get those brakes, their forwards, having to keep running out there, and then we start pounding it with our forwards."

Pacific Coast champs

Two weeks ago in Tucson, Ariz., Mission easily won the Pacific Coast Championships by dominating an undefeated Bend, Ore., side 77-12 and archrival Stanislaus (from Modesto) 31-5.

Mission outscored opponents 457-92 during its undefeated season and will travel this weekend to Columbia, S.C., in a quest to win the Men's Division III National Championship.

"The main problem that we have this year is money," Mell said. "When you do well, like we're doing, you have to go to Arizona, and then we have to go to South Carolina."

Twenty-five players are booked for the trip to South Carolina that will cost upwards of \$20,000 after tickets, vans and hotels. That's after dues and other expenses that often come out of the pockets on those on the team who can afford to pay. Mission raises donations through its Web site: <http://mambo.missionrugby.com>.

Just like the team feeds off its energy on the field, it feeds off its camaraderie.

"Basically what we do is the guys that

can pay will chip in more and pay for the guys that can't pay," Mell said.

Pay won't be an issue this summer when Mission hosts the Tonik Sevens Rugby Cup Series at John Lucas Greer Park in Palo Alto. For four Saturdays starting with the June 24 Opening Weekend, Mission will play with the best on a 7-on-7 format with 7 1/2-minute halves instead of the regular 15-on-15, 40-minute halves matches. On July 8 it's the Tonik Cup, a \$7,000 money tournament; on July 22 it's the Men's National Qualifier; and on August 5 it's the Air Pacific Marist Sevens, another \$7,000 money tournament for which four teams from New Zealand will be flown out.

After the match

The only thing that may match the intensity of the tournament is the drinking that follows it.

"Once it's over, it's over," said Siaofi "George" Gulukivaiola, Mission's hooker and a member since 2001. "It gets personal sometimes, but after the game it's all left on the field. We go and laugh about it and have a few beers with the other team. It's more fun that way."

Made all the more fun by winning.

"When we're playing our game, it's really beautiful and it's fun to be a part of," Dorosti said. "We're definitely peaking at the right time. We're playing our best rugby at the most important part of the year."

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