

A Brief History of Sarnia Rugby

The Sarnia Saints Rugby Union Football Club was founded in 1958 and was incorporated in 1977.

Portions taken out of a 2008 communique from Keith Etherington, one of the clubs "ORIGINALS".

Variations of amateur rugby were first reported to have been played in Upper Canada in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Two World Wars and the Great Depression played a toll on the development of rugby all across Canada in the first half of the 20th Century. The Lambton County road known as Rokeby Line is a link to the origins of modern rugby football. In Britain a boy playing soccer football picked up the ball and ran with it while playing at his Rugby School – a school set in a place originally named Rocheberie (a rock place overlooking a river – an ideal place for trading) located on the River Avon. Forms of football have evolved differently all around the world for hundreds and thousands of years. Sarnia-Lambton has been blessed with many forms of football excellence for decades. Rugby Union is one of the many sports promoted and supported by the members of the Sarnia Saints Rugby Club. The core values of the game of rugby on and off of sports fields (Integrity, Passion, Solidarity, Discipline, Respect) have been instrumental in helping the culture of the Sarnia Rugby Club evolve.

In mid July 1958 The Forest City Rugby Club was founded in London. In Sarnia, Keith Etherington and Ron Stott, both from the North of England, started to think about forming a club in Sarnia. KE was from the east coast; he played Union. RS was from west coast and had played Professional League Rugby for a club called St. Helen's Saints. (Hence the Sarnia clubs name.)

The two went to London to watch a practise. Fun was had and a decision to start their own club in Sarnia was made. KE contacted Fred Wheeler the sports writer of the Sarnia Observer and CHOK Radio and arranged for notices about a desire to form a Sarnia Rugby Club.

About fifteen former players came together and started practising; the majority were from Australia and the UK. Two of them worked at the Hudson's Bay Department Store so they had to always work on Saturdays and therefore could only play on Sunday's. Two games were played in the first year; against London. The first was away and was a 3-3 draw. The return game in Sarnia was a loss; the referee was a London guy that was true to his club. In the first year, two staff of KE & RS's employer were required to play rugby to complete the team. The staffs names were Doug Eaves and Bill Kilbreath.

When Sarnia submitted its application to join the predecessor of Rugby Ontario, the Provincial Unions Secretary was a man named Denis Fletcher. Fletcher's Fields in Toronto are named after him. The President of Rugby Ontario at the time was an Anglican Minister named Guy Marshall; he later became the bishop of Argentina. He may have then been a supporter of Puma Rugby. When the application was put before the Ontario Directors, white jerseys were specifically indicated. This was counter to a then long standing edict that white strip not be allowed – there was already another well known team in the world that wore white jerseys. Because the club had called itself the Saints and that their pitch at the time was located near Divine Street, white shirts were considered a good colour to be allowed to the club.

First years were difficult; survival questions were prevalent. There were no leagues – the game in Ontario was dominated by & for Senior Toronto Clubs. Friendlies were played against clubs in Hamilton, London, Brantford, Oakville, St. Kit's and Kitchener. Most of the early opponents are still in existence. People were able to help keep their clubs carrying on. <The early Oakville Club had financial concerns and folded. Years afterword, KE and two other enthusiasts helped to re-start the Oakville Rugby Club.>

At the clubs 25 year mark, The Sarnia Rugby Club had a somewhat permanent club home off of Confederation and it had a B side and was beginning to form a youth development program. Juniors were u20 and played in Black with long sleeves, cuffs & collars. There was no league, games were difficult to arrange. Twenty-Five years of operations was an achievement. At the time, although never

quiet permanent, the club was always able to find excellent training and playing options and facilities in Sarnia. Many of the members that participated at the time of the clubs quarter-century remained with the club in different capacities for years – this is a testament to the culture of rugby and to The Sarnia Rugby Club. However, it is true that very few of them continued to participate on the playing field, selection for them gladly became unlikely.

At about that time Old Boys Rugby was beginning to be played locally. The local contingent of over 35's (or older) has always been blessed with talent. There have been many times that the local over-agers have been the core of the SW Ontario **Golden Beavers** Golden Oldies Rugby Team. The Golden Beavers have toured the world. The Sarnia Old Boys (SOB's) do exist and rarely announce the playing of a game in advance – the players do not make a practise of doing anything too early.

From the mid Seventies to mid Eighties the club played behind Frank Pinsonneault's Blue Water Splash Park. The field had what were considered to be the tallest uprights in Ontario. The uprights were manufactured by club volunteers and were erected by hand by the clubs' players – no easy trick. It was in the early eighties that Ed Lepps was first listed to a Sarnia game sheet. He was slow to attend and was carded often.

Beginning in the eighties, the Sarnia Rugby Club and its members supported local high school rugby sport programs for girls and boys. Members have acted as coaches and officials and the club from time to time has made financial contributions too. Club members continue to offer support to local schools. Club members know that rugby is a game that can be played for life and can accommodate participants of all shapes, sizes and builds. Rugby provides unique opportunities.

Since the eighties the club has leased a portion of the Bell Field House at Norm Perry Park. At the time of the clubs' initial proposal to the city, the building was scheduled to be raised. The club made significant investment and has had an absolutely positive working relationship with its landlord and other user groups. The club has hosted many international tour sides over the years and has also hosted two full International Canada Games versus England Students and USA u20 Women. Rugby has been good for tourism & hospitality in Sarnia.

The club has also attracted many individual players from overseas to take part in summer rugby; countries include Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland, Australia, St. Lucia, Argentina, the States, the middle east and New Zealand to name a few. Having guest players from away has broadened the horizons of many young Sarnia athletes. The club now offers visits from international students to grade school teachers across Lambton County. Young rugby players learn that they can be hosted around the world and will be invited to play in games wherever they visit if all they do is take boots with them. When the club reached fifty years of age, celebrations were had. Over half of the Originals were able to come back to Sarnia to reaffirm long-time friendships. Originals travelled from Europe, all three coasts of Canada, the Far East and Africa.

It is always interesting and sometimes confusing for some to link or unlink Norm Perry to Rugby; he played for the Sarnia Imperials in the Ontario Rugby Football Union – absolutely NOT the game or league that the Sarnia Rugby Club takes part in. The Galloping Ghost was a renowned Sarnia grid-iron footballer and a former Mayor of Sarnia (1936). He was also the first President of the Canadian Rugby Union. One has to laugh and realize that the varieties of football played around the world include many different codes and due to history & convenience, terms have evolved and are interchanged often.

Beginning in the year 2009, the clubs' members have made a mid season point to raise money for other local groups. The club refers to this tradition as Playing It Forward. Local groups and the club have benefited by the tradition. PIF recipient causes have been varied and are typically always locally based in some way. Past recipients of Sarnia Rugby fundraising have included Youth Sports, The Breast Cancer Society, Multiple Sclerosis Society, Fire Fighter Groups, Canadian Mental Health, The Sarnia

Afghan Memorial, St.Clair Child & Youth Services, the Do-It-For-Sarnia Bluewater Health Foundation Campaign, Brain Injury Awareness of Sarnia-Lambton and the Ontario Brain-Tumour Foundation. One of a kind game jerseys are auctioned each year to raise money for others in the community.

The club has grown. From one men's side playing only 2 games in a season to its current membership of just below 200 annual subscribing members. The club offers programs to adults, teens and minors, both genders. Not all sport clubs are able to do this. The game of rugby as managed by its' Provincial and National governing bodies encourages clubs to grow and provide programs of any rugby description. At different times of the calendar there are also touch & flag versions of rugby, Sevens, Tens and Fifteen aside options and even sport camps for children to learn basic fundamental & transferable movement skills with rugby ball in hand. On occasion, The Sarnia Rugby Club fields as many as 8 different rugby programs in the same week. Growth has had its challenges.

The clubs' sides play in leagues administered by SW-Rugby and the Niagara Rugby Union, both are branches of Rugby Ontario. With growth the Sarnia Rugby Club has partnered with many other community organizations. Carpenters Local 1256 have supported the clubs' adult sides and their annual Playing It Forward Campaigns; as well, UA663 Welders & Pipefitters have generously contributed to minor rugby programs. Via the clubs regional governing body, SW-Rugby, Iron Workers Local 700 have helped to sponsor teen girls & boys regional Representative Sevens Rugby teams.

The Sarnia Rugby Club shares its' amount of longevity with few other rugby clubs, sport groups or community organizations. It has been an achievement that is quietly acknowledged by its membership. The club is always looking for new people. With good people, club rugby in Sarnia-Lambton will continue to provide sport opportunities to young people of all ages and will continue to be a part of the community in a variety of ways.

Through the years the club has survived and thrived. There have been many members asked to play for Canada and Ontario – at all age levels and both genders. There have been Regional & Provincial Champions too. As well, there have been struggles on and off of the pitch and members have always chosen to persevere. All of the club's members will acknowledge that fun is the best reason for anybody to participate in rugby.

When club members of all vintages take stock of their rugby experiences they always smile and laugh and although there have been victories, the participation in rugby fun on and off the pitch is what always comes to mind. Winning has never been everything – although it is better than losing. Most all rugby people have forgotten how many scores have been reported as 3-3 ties. Ed Lepps & his wife Olga are still around and continue to visit the club from time to time.

To all rugby people of all descriptions, age groups and fitness levels & to all that deep inside wished they could play the game of rugby.....come out to Norm Perry every other Saturday, May thru August, and watch some rugby. Visit the clubs' home in the Bell Building and review the team pictures and artifacts that have been gifted to Sarnia's Rugby Club by guests from around the world. Know that you will be welcomed,

Lyrics of The Sarnia Rugby Club's First (unofficial) Club Song

We're forever blowing bubbles
Pretty bubbles in the air
They fly so high, they nearly reach the sky
Then like my dreams they fade and die
We don't play for adoration, care we not for victory.
We just play for inspiration, Sarnia Rugby Club are we!
Balls to _____, Balls to _____;