

Coaching Sevens (and other activities) in Trinidad and Tobago

Emil Signes – May 16, 2000

Following two weeks of practice sessions with the national sevens squad of Trinidad and Tobago, I realized, up close and personal, the difficulties of running a rugby program in a small country with virtually no financial resources and a playing culture that undervalues fitness and discipline.

Nevertheless I also came away with a profound respect for the efforts being made by T&T -- a country with less than 1000 serious rugby players -- to establish themselves as a nation to be reckoned with on the world stage. This is a story about my observations as a coach and human being following two busy, emotional and fruitful weeks in Trinidad.

Trinidad and Tobago made it through the first qualifying round of the Rugby World Cup Sevens 2001 by winning the Caribbean Sevens championship in Port of Spain in January. As the winner, they joined the US, Canada and seven South American nations in Santiago, Chile on May 6-7, competing for three spots at the RWC 7s in Mar del Plata, Argentina next January.

91 teams are taking part in this process. The final 24 will comprise 4 teams from the Americas, 4 from Asia, 6 from the South Pacific, 3 from Africa, and 7 from Europe. This includes 9 automatic qualifiers -- host Argentina and the 8 quarterfinalists from the Rugby World Cup 1997 -- Fiji, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, Samoa, Tonga, Korea, and England.

As part of their preparation T&T felt they could benefit from the help of a specialist sevens coach, and I was honored to be the person asked.

They asked for a month but the demands of my "real job" and the April 8 wedding of my son Ricardo made that impossible. I was however, able to give them 17 days. During that time we had 14 practice sessions, and got a lot accomplished. We also lost two players to injuries during practices, something that was personally distressing to me.

Ironically, two of the potentially best days for practice, Easter weekend, were days off: the Pakistan - West Indies cricket match was in town both days, and in the cricket-mad West Indies, it's best not to interfere with their true national sport.

T&T came out of the qualifier in 5th place and with a 4-3 record, losing to only Canada and the US (twice -- the ridiculous format never allowed them to cross into the other bracket where they felt they had better match-ups). Not as well as they hoped, but a good result for a country with such a small rugby community and little international exposure. With the talent on which they have to draw, I can see huge room for improvement in the future.

Rugby in Trinidad

Counting all the people in T&T that consider themselves rugby players gets you past 1000. Nevertheless, if one were to count the actual number of people, including Under-19s, playing rugby on a given Saturday during the season, the figure would be closer to 500. These would be all men and boys; although women's rugby has begun in T&T, there is yet to be any formal structure to it.

Rugby's growth is hindered by the fact that it is a minor sport in a country of barely more than 1 million people. Both cricket and soccer far out-shadow it, as do track and field and basketball. For women, netball and field hockey dominate.

Nevertheless, T&T is making a concerted effort to improve its rugby, by increasing both the number of people playing the game and the quality of the athletes that play. Furthermore, they feel that they are most likely to make an impact on the rugby world in sevens. I spoke with Larry Romany, a member of the T&T Olympic Committee, a fitness expert, and a supporter of the development of rugby in his country. He noted

that the areas with the "geno-types" most suitable for sevens play (by that I assume he means "of West African descent") -- Tobago, Toco and Mayaro -- have yet to be developed for rugby.

Larry is also a firm believer in fitness testing, and on his advice the TTRFU Executive introduced testing in 1998 following the Commonwealth Games in Malaysia. This event made it clear that improved fitness was necessary if T&T had any serious plans to make an impact on the world scene. It is a process that – based on my experience at least – may take a while to “sink in” but should eventually reap rewards. It will help identify potential new international-level players and improve, as well as just measure, fitness levels of current players.

One person who is making a difference is my host during my stay in Trinidad, the TTRFU's Rugby Development Officer (RDO), Ian Jeffery. Ian is a Scotsman who played for Selkirk, the South of Scotland, and Scotland U-21. He also was a regular member of the Selkirk Sevens and their most successful captain ever. We figured out that he was probably on the team that defeated Atlantis at the Kelso Sevens in 1987, although neither of us could verify that.

During the first 2 years of a 3-year contract -- thanks to IRB funding from the World Cup -- Ian has made an incredible difference in what will be the future of T&T rugby. He and Assistant RDO Verne Ross, who – with the Ministry of Sport -- began the process with the introduction of tag rugby, have been charged by the TTRFU with the responsibility to implement development strategies and initiatives. They have greatly expanded the extent of rugby in schools. School rugby in T&T was formerly restricted to 8 schools in one geographical area (Port of Spain). Now there are 26 schools in 4 areas (Port of Spain plus East (Verne's home base), South and Central). They run teachers' workshops and secondary schools' workshops as well. They have touched the souls of 1500 new boys and girls aged 9 to 14 in 1998 and 1900 in 1999. An Under-19 league with 6 clubs was founded, and the first ever T&T U-19 team toured Barbados last year.

Ian has made 3 trips to Tobago, where, as well as conducting coaching clinics, he is helping them restart senior rugby. He is reaching out to areas, including Toco and the South, where T&T hopes to recruit athletes capable of playing world-class rugby. The South, with only one active club (the Rastafarian Rainbow RFC), actually contributed three of T&T's 10-player sevens squad this year. Ian feels that only the tip of the iceberg has been discovered in the South. Other previously untouched areas include Mayaro and Moruga, where Columbus set foot in 1498.

Ian is also developing women's rugby in Trinidad, and has gradually entered teams into the Caribbean Sevens tournament. This began with an exhibition match, and this year will expand to a full-blown women's bracket.

He is also contributing, per the suggestions of the T&T Olympic Committee and TTRFU, to establish a culture of increased self-discipline and fitness within a country whose rugby has little background in either. One example is that fitness testing will now become a regular part of player evaluation. (Although it must be said that demands to increase their endurance as measured by the bleep test were met with decidedly mixed reactions by the squad.)

Another can be seen in parallel experiences Ian and I had on the last day of training for the national squad. Our session was to start at 9 AM. At 9:15 there were 4 players there, and at 9:30 six. Finally, at 9:50 the last member of the squad arrived. On the other side of the Queen's Park Savannah, where Ian was conducting an Under-19 squad training, 20 of his 27 players had arrived before their scheduled 9 AM start. The culture of timeliness, the culture of fitness, may not arrive in time for many of the current national players, but hopefully the next generation will have an improved sensitivity to these areas.

Ian is the latest in a line of dedicated people -- from within and without -- that have served the development of T&T rugby. These include Brian O'Farrell, former director of the School's Union and father of three T&T international players. He, together with others, including Gregory Rousseau, kept T&T's dreams alive during the last two decades.

Clubs in Trinidad

There are only six first division clubs in Trinidad: Caribs, Harvard, Northern, Royalians, the National Defense Force and the Police, all in Port of Spain. Second division clubs include Rainbow, 3 clubs from the East – Youth Training Center (YTC), University of West Indies (UWI) and Eastern Graduates, and Roebucks from Port of Spain. Three second teams of first division clubs (Northern, Caribs and Royalians) round out the 8-team division. Six teams -- Caribs, Northern, Royalians, Harvard, Eastern Graduates, and YTC -- now have U-19 squads as well.

Caribs are the dominant club in T&T, having lost only five games in the last 10 years. They realize, however, that they could be much better than they are, and this situation alone demonstrates the difficulty of raising the level of rugby in the country.

In order to increase the competition, in 1999 four "Superteams" were created, made up of three club teams each. They played over a three-week period and the games were used as part of the selection process for the national team. With the lack of geographic diversity that exists among first division clubs, this is as close as T&T can come to our regional All Star tournaments such as ITTs.

A T&T Travelogue

It wasn't all rugby, of course. One of the first things I learned was the expression "to lime". More (or less) than partying, from what I can figure out it's just a generic description of a few friends hanging out and having a good time. Taking this as a definition, there was a lot of limin' going on during my visit.

Darryl Woo, the first person to meet Atlantis on our first visit in 1995, national team manager Tony Loregnard, and Ian met me on my arrival, Friday evening April 14. After the obligatory couple a beers in the airport parking lot, we briefly stopped at my host's house for a continuation of the lime, biding time till the start of Hosay at midnight.

Ian's house is located on Fort George Hill, high above Port of Spain, looking down on the city and the Gulf of Paria. At night, the lights of the city dominate the view. In the daytime, however, it is the water that attracts the eye. Regardless of the time, however, it is a great venue from which to observe the city.

Hosay includes a series of floats representing Moslem-style edifices and heavy red and blue moons carried by strong men to the beat of incessant drumming. And of course lots of people on the street enjoying the show. Adrian Curtis Bird's book "Trinidad Sweet" describes Hosay: "Curiously it is the minority Shiite sect of the Moslems who account for the one Moslem festival that is in the Trinidad tradition of shortlived splendour and extravagance. This is . . . to mark the martyrdom in 680 AD of the prophet Mohammed's grandson, Hosein, in the struggle for the caliphate of Arabia. . . Blue crescents . . . for Hosein's brother Hassan, who, as caliph, was poisoned, and red for Hosein who tried unsuccessfully to take his place."

And I had arrived right in the middle of it! That was sooo coool . . .

Besides having my 2,433rd beer of the evening during Hosay, I experienced the first of many T&T culinary treats available from street vendors. In this case it was *corn soup*. With Trinidadian pepper sauce. Yeah!

Following a good night's sleep, Ian and I visited the noon version of the Hosay parade, followed by a lunch at the Woodford Café consisting of *curried conch*, *callaloo*, and *breadfruit oildown*. The good life!

A bit of rugby

At the afternoon session with the national squad, I discovered they had runners that, based on their speed, ability and skill, could compete for spots on the US sevens team. The downside was that they tended to turn the ball over every time they got within shouting distance of a defender. There were also a lot of technical issues I knew I could work on. The national coach, Gregory Rousseau, gave me carte blanche at the sessions, and Gregory, Ian and I were to work together as a team throughout my stay.

Volunteers filmed the sessions, and the players were able to get video feedback on their performance. I was pleased to see a steady improvement in the quality of the play as time progressed, and I got positive feedback from players and coaches alike.

One distressing thing was the lack of quality practice time available on weekdays. It gets dark at 6:30 PM (no daylight savings time here!), there are no practice fields with lights, and players can't come till after work. Getting 1 ¼ hours of quality practice per day was about as much as could be expected.

As to the quality of the field itself, it felt just like being on the rock known as the Conshohocken "B" field, AKA Philadelphia-Whitemarsh's training pitch. And we had to share it with cricket.

The early onset of darkness, however, means people can get to their liming earlier. One post-practice hangout was the Harvard clubhouse, where a steelband practiced on an adjacent basketball court as we sipped our Carib.

More food

Meanwhile, I was on a hunt for local food at every meal. A sampling follows.

Roti is a local form of the Indian chapati, a cooked pancake of wheat flour folded over curried ingredients such as meat, vegetables, potatoes, etc. By the time I left I had sampled goat, chicken and vegetarian varieties. All with deliciously spicy Trinidadian pepper sauce, of course.

Pelau was the meal served the team between sessions when we trained twice. It is a popular "quick dish", a cook up of rice, peas, chicken, beef and . . . many other things that may strike the fancy.

Bake and shark is "the" food to eat if you visit Maracas Beach. A bake is a fried roll, shark its contents. It's a "must do" thing, but once is enough, unless you're really into "deep fried" . . .

On our next trip to Woodford I went 100% T&T and had *pig's foot souse* followed by the Tobagan specialty of *curried crab and dumplings*.

Then there was a trip to Little Lisbon for authentic Portuguese cuisine (yes, there is a Portuguese influence in T&T): *garlic fish* followed by *rabbit*.

And who could ever forget the dockworkers' favorite hangout: The Breakfast Shed. Located in the unattractive port area, it is a long shed with various stalls that all serve the same basic staples. My breakfast? *Callaloo*, *fish soup*, and *coo coo* (a cake-like mixture of cornmeal and okra -- and far too much butter). To drink? *Maubly*, a bitter, almost medicinal drink (but a local treat to be tasted nonetheless).

I must admit to the occasional slip: a visit to Pizza Hut and even -- can you believe it? -- a Philly Cheese Steak!

Then there was the incredible barbecue at Brahim Kazanjian's house. Brahim is a native Philadelphian with a Trini mother. He played for O'Hara HS, Marple Old Boys, Philly-Whitemarsh, and the East U-25. He married his childhood Trini sweetheart Catherine about 5 years ago with the intention of bringing her back to Philly but never left. From selling carpet on street corners he is now the proud proprietor of Kazanjian's Carpets and employer of several Carib teammates.

When I visited Brahim on Friday the 28th I was revisiting the rowdies of the 1980s Marple HS Old Boys. Just like being in Philly listening to a profound thought or two disguised among a string of obscenities. At any rate, Brahim invited me, Ian, and a bunch of family members and Carib teammates for a barbecue on Sunday (his 36th birthday). He served the largest, most succulent shrimp I have ever tasted. Not to mention marvelously spiced steak and chicken. Finally, both the corn on the cob and tomato salads were almost as good as New Jersey's (high praise from this Jersey boy!) And how can I forget the Havana cigar?

On my final evening I once again enjoyed *jerk pork* at a sidewalk stand near Smokey and Bunty's, the local hangout in St. James, "the town that never sleeps". Another local delicacy to be found on this corner was "*doubles*," two thin fried bakes sandwiching a sauce of chickpeas and other ingredients with pepper sauce and chutney for flavoring.

Smokey and Bunty's was the location of many a lime during my visit. Usually with Tony Loregnard, my partner in hot pepper sauce, as one of the attendees.

One beer country

I'm not sure I've ever been to a country where one beer dominates the social scene as much as in Trinidad. Sure there is another local brew, Stag (also brewed by Carib), and Heineken, and a new microbrew called Howler (after the Howler monkey of Trinidad). But basically to be liming in Trinidad means having a "Carib in de hand . . . "

Multi-ethnicity

As uniform as de beer in de hand might be, so diverse are the colors of the hands that hold it. Mainly composed of African, East Indian, and people of mixed ethnicity, with a smattering of people of Chinese and European descent, T&T is truly a rainbow nation with beautiful people. Those that still rant about miscegenation might start at the realization that this tiny nation has provided three Miss Universe / Miss World champions in the last dozen or so years. Granted, a two-week stay does not make one an expert on these matters, but it certainly seems a country where people of all shades mix more easily than in the US.

The rugby community comprises all ethnic groups, though Indian players seem few and far between.

Cricket

Cricket is the West Indies' sporting passion, and also Pakistan's. To have these two teams in town was a huge event and the 25,000-seat stadium was sold out both days of the "one day cricket" events.

The stadium seating areas are distinct one from another and admission is separate. Perhaps the most desirable of all is the "Trini Posse" area, where music and free beer is available all day long for those that pay the going price for entry. It's the closest thing I can imagine in cricket to the South Stand at the Hong Kong Sevens. (And quite a bit different from the ambience in cricket's home country of England.)

At any rate, the West Indies had lost to Pakistan in Barbados a couple of days earlier and the two weekend games represented the 2nd and 3rd games of the series. Had the West Indies lost Saturday, Sunday's match would have been meaningless. They won, however (I got a bit of a nap in until the West Indies bowlers starting getting the Pakistani batsmen out early in the bottom of the inning), 218-147, setting the stage for a rubber match on Sunday, where Pakistan won pretty easily.

Interestingly enough, although the man introduced to me at the Pelican bar in 1995 as "the greatest cricketer in the world", Brian Lara, is a Trinidadian, neither he nor any other Trini was on the West Indies squad. Lara, who set a world record 375 runs in a test match (yeah, I know, it doesn't mean a thing to me either), is taking some time off, and I guess there's a big drop between him and Trini #2.

The Beach at Maracas Bay and Blanchisseuse

Although on the water, Port of Spain has virtually no beaches. Going to the beach means making the 45-minute trip over windy mountain roads to Maracas Bay, a gorgeous beach of fine sand on the Caribbean bordered by palm trees and enclosed within two lush green hills. It is more oriented towards locals than tourists, and the area is full of little stands, mostly specializing in bake and shark.

On one of our trips, we continued on East to Blanchisseuse, literally the end of the road (an entire stretch of the northern coast of Trinidad is completely inaccessible via car). Blanchisseuse was another good food day, as I sampled kingfish in sauce, salad with plantain, sweet potato, dashine, ahh . . .

Lotto Madness and other culture

Always one to get in a bit of culture everywhere, I attended the theatre production at the Central Bank Auditorium, "Lotto Madness." It was excellent, and I was continuing to be impressed by the level of culture in Port of Spain.

Unfortunately, poor planning thwarted the event I was really looking forward to, a visit to the exhibition at the National Museum in honor of Lord Kitchener, the famous calypsonian who died in February. I tried to go on the last day of my visit, a Monday, and was surprised by the notice that the museum was open only from Tuesday through Sunday (sigh) . . .

I did, however, buy a 2 ½ hour video tribute to Kitch that I've already watched five times. . . .

Joan Jett

It was Saturday night, April 29, and I had just gotten off the Internet having read some depressing notes about some rugby issues in the US. I retired to Ian's veranda with a Carib, when I realized the live concert taking place at the cricket oval at the bottom of the hill was clearly audible from our vantage point. Looking out over the lights of Port of Spain over the watery darkness, I suddenly heard Joan Jett, live, blare out "I love Rock and Roll", loud as could be, from the Oval. I looked at my watch and it was 11:28 PM. For a moment I forgot the depressing email frenzy. Rock and Roll brought peace and life was good.

More Training Notes

As training went on, a few more things became clear. First, although they have a few players that can play with anyone -- given some high-level experience -- T&T rugby hasn't yet attracted enough of them. Second, many of the current national players don't understand -- perhaps don't believe -- the level of fitness and commitment necessary to compete at the high levels of international rugby. Working towards this level can come from two directions, both of which T&T is following. One is giving their top players exposure to high-level international competition, making them see, up close and personal, just what it takes to play at this level. Another is inculcating their young players with the necessary attitude to do "whatever it takes."

The team was selected just after I arrived, but two replacements had to be made just prior to departure -- flyhalf Kurt Collier popped a hamstring and center-wing Brent Barry broke a finger. Sad, sad events.

Nigel Arismendez, a 6'3 forward with wing speed, was the captain, and creator extraordinaire Sean O'Farrell, who along with his brother Brendan were schooled in Ireland (although born in Trinidad), was the vice captain. Perhaps the most amazing athlete of the group was 21-year old David Straker, who plays for the uncoached Rainbow RFC of San Fernando. I reckon that in time he'll be able to play all seven positions, but we had him working, despite his 6' 2 ½" height, at hooker and scrum half as well as wing. The entire squad:

Nigel Arismendez	Prop and captain	Royalians
Sean O'Farrell	FH,C and vice captain	Caribs
Alan Fraser	C,P	Harvard
Adam Frederick	P	Northern
Mark Hamilton	W	Northern
Marcus Knaggs	C,W	Northern
Brendan O'Farrell	SH,FH,H	Caribs
Ron Silverthorne	SH,H	Caribs
David Straker	H,W,SH	Rainbow
Dale Trotman	P,H	Caribs

Management comprised coach Gregory Rousseau, manager Tony Loregnard and physio Colin Bell.

The future of Rugby in T&T

T&T is committed to becoming a rugby country to be reckoned with in both 15s and 7s. As noted earlier, they think they'll succeed at sevens first (and I concur).

While not an unqualified success, the Chile tournament was a step forward. T&T expects to improve year by year. One thing they plan to do is to raise the level of the Caribbean Sevens and commit to tournaments overseas. Within the next few years, there are several sevens goals to shoot for:

The Commonwealth games of 2002 in Manchester, England
Hopefully the Olympic games of 2004 in Athens, Greece
The Rugby World Cup Sevens of 2005 (TBA)
The Commonwealth games of 2006 in Melbourne, Australia

And there's always the hope for an invitation to a major sevens tournament like Hong Kong or another of the IRB's World Sevens Series tourneys.

In 15s, besides bringing rugby to younger players, T&T plans to improve by inviting better teams there, showing them a good time and learning from them on the rugby pitch. In addition to their local resources, external resources like Ian Jeffery and me will be employed where they think we can be helpful.

T&T will be relying in large part on its youngsters to make a mark. TTRFU Secretary Brian Lewis stated what I've already mentioned: there is a great determination to inculcate the culture of fitness and discipline into the up and coming players.

In 15s, T&T believes that qualifying for the Rugby World Cup 2015 is a realistic goal.

The TTRFU expressed interest in using my expertise to help them prepare for the sevens part of their future, and it's something I'd really enjoy. Whether I can give them the required commitment of time is something I'll have to work out. I must say, it's very rewarding to have been asked!

Thank you!

Finally, sincere thanks to all the people that made my stay so rewarding.

Firstly the team itself and its coach Gregory Rousseau.

Surprisingly, perhaps, to Matt Godek, who with virtually no notice was able to respond to my request to come up with a set of jerseys in T&T colors to serve as the 2nd set required by the IRB.

Then Ian of course, Tony Loregnard, Curtis Nero, Brian Lewis, Brian Stollmeyer and Paul Mowser. And last but not least, everyone that bought me a Carib.