Ex-Gobbler ‘Mauling’ Now

By DENNIS LATTA
Sports Writer

Back when he was a football player at Virginia Tech, Clarence Culpepper was a happy man when he made the first string.

Now Culpepper is happy because he has made the national side. It’s a different sport, but Culpepper has made the first string again, on a national level.

Culpepper has been named to the U.S. national all-star rugby team. He’ll be traveling to England for a six-game series in the fall.

But rugby doesn’t have common terms that the man walking up Campbell Avenue hears every day. Instead of simple phrases like blitz, red dog or crack-back block (now everyone knows what they mean), rugby has scrums, mauls and rucks. Like hockey or lacrosse, it’s a lot complicated game if you understand, which makes a lot of sense.

In rugby, the first team is called the ‘A side’ with the second team being the ‘B side’ and on and down the line. When Culpepper, who is on the staff at Ferrum College, says he is on the national side, that means he is on the national team.

“I guess it’s the highest honor you can receive in rugby in the U.S.,” said Culpepper.

The Tech graduate is a wing forward. Actually, he was the last man cut from the team, but one player couldn’t make the trip and he was moved up to the squad.

“I’ve enjoyed rugby tremendously since the first time I played it,” said Culpepper. “I was living in Philadelphia and a friend got me to try it.”

In the U.S., football means only one sport, but in many countries soccer and rugby are the sports that are referred to as football.

Culpepper has played both American football and rugby football and thinks rugby might be more demanding.

“A rugby game is continuous,” the former Tech linebacker noted. “There is no substitution. Rugby is more demanding when it comes to endurance. It requires a different type of conditioning. While rugby is continuous, you get a 25-second rest after every play in football.”

Both games involve a lot of physical contact, but even that differs. “You don’t wear equipment in rugby,” Culpepper explained. “You don’t tackle the same way. I’d say the injuries are far less in rugby.

“American football is much rougher in terms of contact. You get hit on every play. In rugby, you have a lot of contact, but it’s not with the same intensity. You can tackle only if the man has the ball and there is no blocking.

“To people not familiar with the game, rugby can look like chaos, especially on a muck or maul. But if the game is played properly, they don’t last long,” Culpepper pointed out.

Culpepper qualified for the national team because he plays on the A side for the Roanoke Rugby Club. Roanoke’s club also has a B side.

Then Culpepper was on the first side for the Virginia Rugby Union all-star team and he made the first team for the Eastern Rugby Union.

On the Eastern team, Culpepper competed in a national tournament in Greeley, Colo., where he was chosen for the national team.

The U.S. squad, which will be an underdog in most games because rugby isn’t a big sport in this country, will play five club teams in England and end a tour there with a game against England’s national team on Oct. 15.

Clarence Culpepper (With Ball) Has Been Named to the National Rugby Team

The Roanoke club competes in the fall and spring. In the Virginia union, there are 20 clubs with teams. Rugby is a growing sport: It seems that after watching just one scrum, people like the game.