Rugby Comes To Wayne, Nebraska - In a Big Way

How many rugger have dreamed of building the next great rugby club? Start with the basic wish list: solid player base; community visibility; a dedicated facility; well-securing training and match pitches; a clubhouse and fully equipped changing rooms. Now imagine the ideal setting for this future rugby powerhouse.

Wayne, Nebraska

Chances are, only one would pick Wayne, Nebraska (population 5,000). But improbable as it seems, the small farming town and Wayne State College are home to the second-largest rugby center for the sport in northeast Nebraska. What's more is that Wayne State, the 1996 Nebraska Business Person of the Year, is also home to the 1996 Nebraska Business Person of the Year.

Wayne State coach Darrin Barnar (left) and the club's patron Rod Tompkins with members of Wayne State's men's and women's teams.

Getting Started

Getting started meant making the most of its resources, including flight benefits as a Northwest Airlines employee, strong rugby ties as a member of the 2000 National DII Champion Fort Worth RFC and solid connections from four-years as a Wayne State football player. "The first step was getting a team in Wayne to play and that's where we can start," said Barnar. "As long as I was bringing in teams for a one-time exhibition, I put in the maximum effort to make sure that they would be ready that night right away.

Nebraska vs Oklahoma

True to this goal, Barnar went for the perfect contest - a Nebraska-Oklahoma match the day following the No. 1 vs. No. 2 football clash between the two archrivals. "More important than being a big local draw for our first event, managing that event was the big challenge for the future," said Barnar. That blueprint included a mix of sponsorship, media coverage and local support that garnered much high visibility and promoted community interest.

Promotion-Sponsorship

Fox Sports World signed on as the match's title sponsor. It was the club's first-ever social event sponsorship and proved to be a valuable example of making a sponsorship work. Sponsorship fees helped to advertise the match across Nebraska, giving the event considerable media and consumer promotion, consumer promotions and providing opportunities to capture local sponsorships from a restaurant, a hospital and a soft-drink distributor. Combine an advertising trade that put over 100 radio ads on the air as well as a live broadcast, and rugby was everywhere.

We tried everything possible to get people to come to the match. "My personal favorite was setting up a bar; Switzer for a radio program to talk rugby and grab the Nebraska-OU pot," said Barnar, referring to the former OU and Dallas Cowboys coaching legend. "I can't tell you how many people heard about that.

The hard work and organization paid off, as over 700 people enjoyed a full day of rugby featuring a Husker victory over OU in the 2001 Fox Sports World Challenge Cup. "As it was rugby's first impression up here, we wanted the match-day to be professionally staged," said Barnar. "That meant everything from a 16-page match program. A catered hospitality tent for sponsors and VIPs. A half-time conversion kicking contest for air

line tickets. Color guard. Music. School and community support. We tried it all.

Wayne State RFC

Not everyone who enjoyed the match was simply a rugby fan. Volunteers from the Sports Management and Communications Departments helped staff the event and recorded the match for show on local cable. The interest in founding a team soon created the Wayne State RFC officially began with a meeting that attracted 75 male and female recruits.

Two years later, the numbers tell the story. Both teams finished in first place in the Great Plains RFU Collegiate Division II. With a men's record of 12-3 and a women's tally of 11-2-1, the season again wasn't on the schedule.

Beating the Nebraska women for the first time was a big stepping stone," said Barnar. The girls even authored the "WSC De
doises Nebraska's" headline from the Wayne Herald to send to Barry Switzer.

Extras

The club's off-field development has also been the result of paying attention to the extras. For coaching help, Barnar brought in some mates from Fort Worth for a two-day mini camp. "Having a specialist front rower, back rower and a South African backfield pairing is something that no #1 position at 3rd. Barnar couldn't be happier and the 10-6 loss to other farming

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