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## IU RUGBY MOMENTS

My name is Art Stump and I played IU rugby from the first side formed by Bob Pace in '62 through the spring season of '68. I played wing forward position (strong side breakaway). Playing rugby taught me many unexpected life lessons at unexpected moments, and the following story is one of my IU Rugby Moments.

IU ruggers played many a punishing game in the Old Stadium at the center of campus. Sometimes Issy Abramov's genteel narration and lively Baroque Ensemble music emanating from the press box helped to keep a lid of civility on the conduct of such games. And sometimes it didn't.

In those days toughly fought rugby games were often settled by attrition as much as anything, since players downed with injury had two minutes to recover or be carried off the field, and there were no substitutions allowed for any reason. Playing on with one or more players short was a serious handicap to overcome in a closely fought game, and every player knew that instinctively. It was one of the facts of rugby life that shaped the coarser strategies of the game.

For several seasons we had a splendidly reckless halfback, who was given the name Gary Gist by his parents. However, almost no one on the team knew his real name. Mike King, in his affectionately mocking manner, had early on dubbed Gary to be "Sammy Silvertooth" for the shiny silver incisor he so proudly displayed in his front row of teeth. Consequently, that colorful nickname was what everybody called him, and it was perfect.

Sammy was an unusually fast talker and an even faster runner, repeatedly finding himself at the center of the most violent action on the field. He was about as fearless as they came, and when tackled, he was supremely skilled at cupping himself around the ball at the bottom of the loose scrum in such a way that only his teammates could heal it out.

During one particularly nasty game we'd been grinding our way up the pitch from east to west and were closing in on the try line at the far northwest corner of the stadium. I was bound loosely to the outer edge of one of Sammy's open field scrums, trying to steady it while he worked his magic below.

There was a sizable crowd in the stadium that day and the pitch was awash with the noise of screaming fans. Even so, I could hear a distinct clunking sound above all the noise, a puzzling sound to be hearing in the give and take of a rugby game. It was more a thunking sound, actually, with an audible hollowness to it.

As the scrum twisted itself back and forth over the ball, I pushed hard from the right flank to help steady its movement, hearing all the while the steady thunking that was coming from somewhere deep inside the mass of tangled bodies. With each thrust of my legs my head pushed further into the body of the scrum, and suddenly I was able to see clearly what it was I'd been hearing all along. I could hardly believe my eyes, as right in front of my face a cleated rugby foot was savagely kicking Sammy's head, again and again and again.

The next thing I knew, I was squarely in the midst of one of two times in all my rugby games that I'd ever totally lost control. I'd exploded in rage and was giving flat-out chase to the young man with the treacherous cleats. My single-minded purpose in those frenzied moments was to inflict deliberate and serious damage.

In the opening seconds of the chase my prey had fled the pitch and bolted across the running track with me tight on his six in a wholly visceral pursuit. As we charged past the retaining wall and up into the stands, the crowd fell momentarily silent, possibly unsure what it was they were witnessing or who it was they should be cheering. But in no time our disruption became spectacle and the crowd leaped to its feet in howling approval. We scrambled on, wildly upwards, helter-skelter over row after row, at times zigzagging through spectators, all the way to the topmost seats in the stadium.

By then the fire in my rage had waned some, and I could see that the young man was still quite high on adrenaline in his desperate state of flight. I knew that I was not going to overtake him. As I gradually broke off my pursuit, I remained profoundly outraged and not the least bit apologetic; yet oddly enough, I felt a discernible sense of relief that I'd not caught him.

I turned about, avoiding the eyes of the applauding crowd, and walked back down the stadium steps to the turf. Members of both sides were attempting to restrain their fellow players and allow a semblance of order to return to the field. The obligatory barrage of verbal challenges continued back and forth for a while, but eventually the referee managed to reassert his authority, regaining control both of the game and of the players. Sammy was up and walking around, rubbing his head and confused at all the fuss, talking as fast as ever.

I have no memory of how the situation ultimately resolved itself that day, no memory of which side won the game or even of who the opposing side was. Nor do I care. What I have often wondered about since, however, is what one walks away with from such an all-consuming emotional release and how one understands the lessons that it has taught.

"Maybe you grow a bit," I'd speculate privately, "maybe you learn how better to measure or how better to channel your responses." My hope in retrospect is that at least I was left with a greater understanding of and respect for that unexpected turn of circumstance in my future that would demand of me an immediate and decisive response.

I firmly believe that a key part of excelling in high-contact sports like rugby is being comfortably capable of violence: that is, being willing and able to receive and to deliver various forms of violent physical aggression. In a game environment, of course, such aggression is regulated and takes place within agreed upon limits and sets of rules. Nevertheless, what we learn in that environment can be invaluable in helping us to cope with larger life experiences: not because they teach us things about life, but because they teach us things about ourselves.

What I think I walked away with from my "Sammy Silvertooth" incident, more than anything else, was having experienced, for better or for worse, a moment of total personal release, with all of its accompanying clarity. I experienced the sudden abandonment of conventional restraints in the pursuit of something unquestionably necessary and just.

That said, I cannot articulate even now the actual lesson that I may have learned that day—*if I learned anything at all*. A great remaining unknown that haunts me still is whether self-control will be part of my reaction to future extraordinary circumstances demanding of response, or whether those circumstances alone will dictate my behavior.

What I do know for certain is that in a later time and place, many years removed from my life as an IU rigger, my attorney would call to my attention from across a conference table how fortunate I was that I had responded as I did in the case that we were discussing, and not as I'd been overwhelmingly inclined to do in the moment.

“Otherwise,” he counseled me, “we’d be having a very different conversation today.”

And I have no doubt that he was right.

-art stump