

Morris Spreads Rugby Fever to 1000+ Youth

By Katy Rank

Every Saturday morning in July, you can find over 700 children gathered in Morris County, NJ to play rugby. These inter-town mini tournaments run like clockwork during the American Flag Rugby summer season, thanks in no small part to the yearlong organizational planning of the Morris Corporation.

Picture Denville, NJ, home of the Denville Dawgs and host to two of the matches last summer. The seven fields are numbered and clearly labeled for the parents and visiting teams to find their locations. Match schedules are emailed the week before and available for distribution at the central tent, where the athletes can get sports drinks and fruit in between their games. The referees, comprised of Morris men, women, and U-19 players, are given their match schedules and the games begin promptly at 9am.

Every ten minutes, the Referee Coordinator blows an air horn to signal the end of the half or match. At the end of the day, Youth Coordinator Tom Feury collects score reports from each coach to report to the local newspaper and the entire celebration moves to a volunteer parent's home for a post-match social and barbeque.

The seemingly effortless execution of the youth program has inspired its growth this year to an estimated 1,000 children from Morris County. The success of the youth program attracted neighboring Union County to start the program, which will span three towns this coming summer. Danbury, Connecticut, the Boston Irish Wolfhounds, the Saranac Lake Mountaineers and other clubs in Pennsylvania and Oregon have also been in touch with the Morris Corporation and started other branches of American Flag Rugby.

“We have almost grown out of control,” jokes Mike Stumpf, Referee Coordinator and Laws Committee Chair, who says Morris would love to spread the game to every club across the country. “We have developed this program so we can get it to the whole nation—to the school systems, everywhere in the country.” With the start-up binders and videos the club produces and the recent growth of the program, it appears as though they are well on their way.

What is American Flag Rugby?

Morris Rugby developed a variation on Rugby Union specifically designed for the American child. “I came up with the name because I wanted to convey that this was a game that is clearly in tune with our kids. This game is designed and tuned for American kids, no experience necessary, fully inclusive, and with a level of structure and discipline that American kids and parents have come to expect from recreational sports,” says Mike Stumpf.

In this non-contact version of the game, kids play a version of sevens where the defense removes the ball carrier's Velcro flag instead of creating a tackle situation. The game develops as the players develop in skill level. The youngest

group of children focuses more on passing and flat defense and progresses through the age groups to a ruck-like simulation for the oldest group of children. All age groups have a slow introduction to scrums and lineouts and convert tries using drop kicks.

Why is the Program So Successful?

The bottom line reason for Flag Rugby's success is that it's fun. "The kids just love it," says Feury of the enthusiasm for the sport. Unlike some sports in which kids participate, American Flag Rugby gets every child actively involved with the game and this is wildly attractive to kids who previously spent long days in an outfield or goal box. Everyone touches the ball in rugby and everyone can score points. "Our brand of rugby is highly inclusive," says Stumpf, "kids of many ages can play *together* and include different athletic abilities and genders."

Parents also appreciate the game because they can have *all* of their children participating in one location at the same time. They also appreciate the low commitment level and flexibility with missed practice time due to vacation or other sports. Stumpf says the attitude of Morris is "Show and play when you can," leaving families the opportunity to keep their kids active in the summer but not have to miss out on other things.

Long Valley parent Ken Ray was in town for just a few days when a neighbor gave him a flyer to send his daughter to play rugby. Ray was immediately impressed with the rugby culture. "All of a sudden she had this team around her!" says Ray. Through youth rugby, his daughter was "gaining camaraderie, which was very important to her those first few months of being in the community." Six months later, Katherine is still wearing her rugby jersey everywhere and claims moving to New Jersey was the best thing to happen in her life.

Stumpf comments that Morris has demonstrated with flag rugby something that has not been seen anywhere and gotten entire families involved. The parents see how positively it affects the kids and get involved in the entire corporation. "We are not just creating rugby players, we are creating people involved with and promoting rugby just because they see the value in the sport. Parents help to promote the game because they see how healthy it is for their families." Feury is also quick to emphasize that American Flag Rugby is a family and community oriented activity adding the phrase "It's a social thing!" to most correspondence with players and parents.

A final reason the program has seen so much success is that Morris sets up a clear path for lifelong rugby development. Kids can move up through High School, play rugby in college then return to Morris to play for the senior clubs. "This youth activity teaches the ideal that athletic activity can and should be a lifetime resolve." (Stumpf says?)

The Beginning

The Morris Youth program began the summer of 1998 when Tom Feury took his oldest son Blaze to a youth clinic at the Can-Am tournament and was inspired by Pat Walsh's Baltimore youth program. Feury decided to retire from the Morris A-side and restart his rugby career as a Youth Director.

Feury and his wife KJ spent the next months getting their program started, securing permissions from town recreation programs and field space. KJ applied for and won the program many grants to give the program seed money to acquire balls, practice pinneys, cones, and other equipment. The summer of 1999, the Feurys had 28 children signed up to play.

That first season, Feury got help from Stumpf and from men's coach Peter Glanvill. Glanvill developed skills clinics to teach the kids the basics of rugby while Stumpf created a video: "What is Rugby? A Youth Rugby Orientation." The video was an excellent tool to bring the game to the parents and helped create enough interest for a second town to join the following summer.

Craig Chapman became the Director of the Montville program and got 30 more children to sign up while Denville had expanded to 50. Another of the Denville coaches, Peter Simcox, tired of driving his children to Denville, decided to start up another division of the program in Long Valley. Entering the summer of 2001, the program had expanded to include 172 youth players.

Rapid Expansion

The summer of 2001, the success of the program had begun to attract coaches who weren't even involved in rugby. Carmine Catalano, a football coach from Parsippany, had started coaching in Montville when his kids got interested in rugby and stepped up to start his own youth program in Parsippany. Other parents with little to no rugby experience were volunteering as coaches.

Thanks to refereeing and coaching clinics before the Flag Rugby season, volunteer coaches who had never played rugby were able to learn the rules and participate in the growing youth program. The program expanded to cover even more towns and now includes teams from Denville, Montville, Long Valley, Parsippany, Mine Hill, and Byram.

By 2001, three years of children had aged out of the flag program and were left with few rugby options. Bob Karetsky, then Youth Development Chair for Met NY, stepped up and created a boys' high school program managed by John Sutherland and coached by Karetsky, Kurt Murrell, and Kevin Laughlin. Morris began a U-19 program that has since expanded to include boys' and girls' teams with over 50 boys and around 18 girls involved in competitive schedules.

The Top Dawg—Key to Success

Such an organized youth program would never be possible without the dedication of Youth Coordinator Tom Feury, creator of the Morris Program and Director of the Denville division since 1999. While Feury wouldn't comment on the amount of hours he dedicates each year to Youth Rugby, his extreme involvement is evident to all involved with the program. "My personal belief is that for any program to be successful, you need to have one key person to step up and take responsibility for running it," says Feury.

Both Tom and KJ provide a level of enthusiasm that extends well beyond the boundaries of the summer program. Serving as Administration Central, the Feurys organize the meetings, set up the sponsors, manage the payments, plan the socials, and most importantly, delegate responsibility to committees of volunteers to ensure a successful season each year.

Safety First

When Morris first started their youth program, there was a great deal of safety concern from both coaches and parents. Since the kids had never played a sport like this before, coaches had no prior experience to rely on for safety knowledge. "Nobody knew what to look for," said KJ Feury, a Nurse Practitioner with a special interest in concussion studies, "How would we know if a kid's too hot or too thirsty?"

KJ solved this problem by securing grant money from the National Safe Kids Campaign, a program whose North Jersey Chapter she coordinates. "The program was getting a little tired of little league and football and they were intrigued by rugby," she says. The campaign gave the group funding for three years with a focus on hydration. Most of the organization's funding on a national level comes from Gatorade, so they were able to use the money to provide safety training for coaches and sports drinks at all events.

"We just bombarded the kids with literature," says KJ of the packets of information they handed out at the beginning of the season. All the coaches used grant money for CPR certification and a Rutgers Safety Course for youth sports. The organization also handed out literature on concussions and encouraged the coaches to follow up by reinforcing the safety information with the kids.

The safety training has been very effective and the program has seen only one injury over five years—a broken ankle from running on uneven ground at a practice session.

Community Refreshments

Part of the rugby tradition that was so appealing to newcomer parents was the food booth at each of the rugby events. “I thought it would be like all other youth sports where you donate some cookies and sell them to earn money for the program,” says Ken Ray, a first-time rugby parent last summer, “I was so surprised that everything was free. It was such a novel concept that made everyone feel welcome.”

In an effort to further both the message of rugby as a community and a healthy athletic endeavor, KJ helps to organize the food booths to focus on hydration and carbohydrates. “We figured it was better to give the kids healthy foods rather than junk,” she said. While the teams keep a tip jar at the food areas, all the fruit and bagels are either donated by parents or local businesses or purchased with the grant money.

Securing Financial Support

Proper financing is often a barrier to many clubs hoping to start a youth program. As many senior clubs struggle to meet financial ends each year, they find it difficult to work a youth program into their budgets. Morris Rugby was no exception to a budget battle and the youth program could not have gotten started without the grant money KJ Feury secured and the John Sutherland’s insistence that the youth players “needed to look like rugby players.”

Sutherland pushed the corporation to pay for a set of jerseys for the kids that first season. The Morris Rugby Corporation had the creation of a youth program in its mission statement and had put aside money over the years to help create one.

Morris Rugby tries to keep the cost of participation low so they can reach as many children as possible. Each child pays \$35 per season, which covers a pair of flag shorts, a set of flags, a t-shirt, and a rugby ball with a bit left over toward food and refreshments. Since each match costs around \$200, that leaves a lot of fundraising to do to meet the costs of supporting the program. Much of the food is donated or paid for from a tip jar at the games and the rest is covered by sponsorship secured by each town.

The program coordinators for each town seek corporate sponsorships to fund the remaining costs for their teams. Each group gets the practice t-shirts donated by local businesses (often parent entrepreneurs or business owners) and the organization arranged for Godek Sports to donate the jerseys in exchange for booth space at tournaments. Thanks to hard work seeking sponsorship and grant money, the program is now self-sufficient and operates in the black.

Yearlong Planning

Planning a summer rugby league for more than 700 children involves early planning and regular meetings. The season organization kicks off every September when the coordinators for each town gather to review the past season and decide what worked and what needs improvement. The groups also determine what committees are needed for each year and elect a law committee, referee coordinator, equipment coordinator, treasurer, and festival director.

By November, the group tries to set the budget for the coming year and discuss fundraising strategies. They design the year's t-shirts for the kids, discuss potential program expansions, and begin to solicit price quotes for equipment. In February, the budget is finalized and equipment is ordered for the summer.

The hard work starts in April, when the members begin to advertise the summer league. Morris Rugby tries to reach the entire county by reaching out to schools, newspapers, parks and recreation facilities and PAL buildings. KJ also begins to process applications and payments that come in early. All told, Morris Youth Rugby secures over 100 volunteers as coaches, refs, and committee members.

Strong Coaching and Referee Programs

Perhaps even more difficult than acquiring kids to play rugby, is finding enough people to teach them to do it. In April, the Corporation sends out a call to senior club members and interested parents to volunteer as coaches. Morris senior clubs do not have a summer season; so many members are able to help at the 2-hour practices twice a week. Each town coordinator hosts a coaching clinic in early May to teach the volunteer coaches the rules of American Flag Rugby and to go over the plays and drills the group has put together in their coaching binder. The volunteers are broken into age groups and taught tested methods of teaching basic rugby skills to kids of various experience levels.

Around the same time, Mike Stumpf runs clinics to train the AFR Referees, distributing videos of the game and a law-book he put together when he designed the game. The refs, comprised of high school players and senior club players as well as parents new to the game, learn the different rules for the different age groups. The corporation compensates the high school players with \$25 cash for each day of reffing and gives the club players a credit toward dues. The payment strategy is a successful way to get the high school players involved and helps build commitment to the Morris club.

Grassroots Growth

Currently, around 20% of the male youth players go on to play for the Morris high school age group, but Feury expects this number to rise as the corporation has introduced a separate tackle program for the U15 players. Once a week, the kids

interested in learning the full contact game have separate practices and last summer finished the year with a U15 game against a traveling Canadian side.

This year, the corporation expects to have four sides for their U15 tackle program in addition to their AFR in July. So far, the only contact option for the girls is the newly formed high school team that also allows eighth grade girls to participate.

“This year, we are going to advertise [the tackle program] from the get go,” says Feury of his hopes to increase this portion of the youth program. Using the same strategy of getting flyers to the schools and local parks and recreation facilities, the corporation hopes to continue growth in this facet in the same way they grew the non-contact game.

Passing the Flame

Perhaps the most important feature of the Morris Youth program is the ability to replicate it at other clubs. Morris has created videos and binders they are willing and able to share with other interested clubs. They have developed rapport with rugby suppliers and found companies to create jerseys and flag shorts for 1000 tiny athletes. They have tested their advertising methods and are happy to share their strategies and flyers with the nation.

The Union County Mudturtles, a neighboring county team, approached Morris about starting a youth program several years ago. They received the binder a year prior and attended the coaching and safety clinics with the Morris coaches before starting their summer seasons. “The best thing they gave us was that packet of drills,” says Chris Clark, BLANK TITLE for Union Rugby. “That was like having lesson plans to hand to each of our coaches.”

Morris welcomed the Union team to join in their match schedule and final tournament and has helped the Union program grow to include 120 kids. Clark is quick to point out that starting a team still involves a great deal of hard work and organization, but “the comfort you get from someone else having already done it is invaluable. You know they are there as a resource but you still have to show up and do the legwork.”

The Union team took advantage of the knowledge of pre-ordering shirts and getting the message out on summer things to do flyers in all the local schools. Morris invited the administrators into the coaching listserv so they could observe the communication and planning processes for starting a team and has worked hard to get their own program rapidly expanding to include high school boys and girls programs.

Bring Youth Rugby Across the Nation

If American Rugby ever hopes to compete successfully at an international level, we need to develop strong programs for our children to get them interested in the game from an early age.

Looking at the growth of high school rugby programs across the nation, we can see that there is a high demand for rugby among America's youth. The established youth programs across the country have flourished and provide grassroots connections to rugby at the collegiate and club level. Morris Rugby Corporation has done the legwork and created rules, drills, sample training sessions, coaching clinics, and advertising campaigns for a successful youth rugby program. Best of all, this group is eager to share their work with other interested clubs.

If your team is interested in creating a youth program, please contact Tom Feury at tfeury@optonline.net or call 973-246-4664.