



Krissy Landes, a lock for the Scioto Valley RFC in Columbus, OH, (here with husband Steve and baby Jack) returned to the pitch and played in the 2007 D2 Club National Championships just eight weeks after giving birth.

## RUGBY AFTER CHILDBIRTH

FOR MANY WOMEN RUGGERS (LIKE OUR WRITER, A SOON-TO-BE MOM), THE PULL OF THE PITCH REMAINS STRONG EVEN AFTER TAKING ON THE CHALLENGES OF NEW MOTHERHOOD.

BY KATY RANK LEV

*"At the beginning I had to ask myself if I really wanted to do this . . . I thought my international career was over, but the Netherlands qualified for the World Cup so that was something I didn't want to miss."*

—Netherlands international Kitty Vloemans on coming back to the game after delivering twins.

I'm not playing rugby this spring. For the first time in 10 years, my boots sit clean in the basement and my socks, spandex and game

shorts are folded neatly on the shelf, sidelined like their pregnant owner (who can't fit into her jersey right now, anyway). But I yearn to be playing again, and want nothing more in this universe than for my future offspring to be dangling from his Baby Bjorn watching me, his mommy, blow through a ruck.

Returning to the rugby pitch post-childbirth is an athletic challenge like no other, with an off-the-charts degree of difficulty. Women rugby players are already bucking centuries of societal expectations to play this full-contact sport—the only one where the rules are the same as they are for men—let alone playing the game when you're not breastfeeding, changing diapers and scraping spit-up from the folds of tender new-

born skin. Yet for a woman rugger, playing during the bloom of new motherhood is a most necessary claim to sanity.

I've had excellent role models for dealing with rugby life beyond gestation. Last summer, before I was unexpectedly knocked up, I got to play alongside the three Knudsen sisters at Saranac Lake. Their husbands stood on the sidelines with their sons and daughters in hands-free backpacks while Claudia (a US Eagle scrumhalf), Dawn, and Paula teased one another about not losing baby weight and being too heavy to tackle. They even called each other "fat-ass" while the referee looked on in shock. By the end of the day, Claudia realized the wet spots on her jersey came not from the sweat of playing three games, but from her desperate need to nurse her daughter.

"Hey!" said Mouse (a pickup player we snagged from Frederick), "I'm lactating, too!"

When I tell non-rugby people about moms getting physical while their hungry infants look on, they gasp and say, "Why would women do that?"

I think the real question is how could they not? After being part of the 15-as-one ethic, where teammates will give up their bodies for one another, how can you give it up? Rugby players, if you haven't noticed, are addicted to the sport with fanatical zeal. This doesn't go away just because a woman also whelps a future recruit.

Krissy Landes, a lock for Scioto Valley, was determined to stick with rugby throughout her pregnancy. She came to most practices—even just to watch—and never missed a game. In fact, the day she went into labor, the men and women had home games and Landes refused to miss either her teammates or her husband Steve on the field. She marched up and down the sidelines, breathing through contractions, until halftime of the men's game when she couldn't bear it anymore. Steve came out of the match and rushed Krissy to the hospital, still wearing his kit.

Eight weeks later, their son Jack got to watch his mom help the team take second place in the 2007 D2 National Club Championships.

The decision to come back after birth is not a new one. For years, Tracy Watson (a prop for Albany whom I've always secretly called "scary thighs") has been terrorizing the opposition with her deadly tiff-arm. Then, at the social, she scarfs down pasta next to her teenaged son.

Some lucky moms even get to face off against their own children, a common occurrence at



The Knudsen Sisters (l to r), Claudia (a US Eagle), Paula and Dawn, from central PA, have all been rugby-playing moms.

men's alumni games. But it takes on special meaning for women ruggers. KO Onufry, for example, gets the honor of not only being an original Eagle, but also tackling her daughter Skylar when the Olde Girls face the NESSies. How miraculous must it feel to have grown your opposition within your own body?

My body is at the center of every rugby decision I make, including the one about coming back after childbirth. For the past decade, I've worked very hard to make sure my body wasn't decorative but functional. Rugby asks us to swell our shoulders beyond the confines of fancy women's clothing. It forces us to grow leg muscles that just don't look nice in the types of pants Angelina Jolie can wear.

And we do these things because we love the results. We spend hours in the weight room because the rush of the pushover try is beyond compare . . . except perhaps the rush of tiny movement within my abdomen.

Paula Knudsen Burke, now a part-time coach in central PA, says that something amazing happened to her body after taking the pitch again. "I don't know if the pain and experience of being pregnant and then physically giving birth just made me realize that my body was . . . more than I ever thought," she says. "When I stepped onto the rugby field several months after having [my son], I felt I could run over people with impunity. Of course I did have the leaking boob

factor to contend with." After being careful with her body for nine months, she felt liberated by the contact and challenge of the game.

I think I know what Paula means. Slowing down has probably been the most difficult part of being pregnant. Just as I was reaching a new peak in my fitness thanks to Crossfit, I learned I had played two rugby games with a small human inside my womb. There went my dream of a 300-pound squat or a sub-seven minute mile, because my energies are being diverted elsewhere. The ferocity I normally apply toward nausea-inducing cardio is needed to grow eyelashes and thighbones and lungs that will one day shriek, "Hands in the ruck!" to help the referee. That vision of returning to the pitch is what makes my modified workouts worth it.

Rugby player is a deep and permanent fixture in my identity as a human being. This is true for all of us. No matter what life has thrown at me, it's all (for the past 10 years anyway) been okay because I've known I could always return to the pitch where everything was normal for


the two hours I spent with my face near some girl's muddy butt cheek. The moms who come back do it because they have to—even though the first time they hear their baby crying on the sidelines, they agonize over this decision.

Playing rugby is what we do. The sport feeds us, strengthens our bones, and whets our thirst to be "more than."

I won't be a mother by Mother's Day. I'll be darn close, though, and cheering for my Pittsburgh Angels as they square off against Buffalo. Elsewhere in the country, dozens (maybe hundreds?) of moms will get something better than flowers or breakfast in bed. They'll hear the sweet music of "Go, Mommy!" as their children, the third generation to live in a Title IX world, watch them play rugby. These rugby babies will get something for Mother's Day, too. They'll see a world where women can be simultaneously nurturing and ferocious, leaders and teammates, dependable and strong as steel.

And all of them will proudly say their moms are part of it.

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