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Rugbymania excites France's women

PARIS. Sébastien Chabal – nicknamed “the Caveman” -- is a Central-Casting monster, a black-bearded, rat's-nest-haired, 1.92 meter-tall, 114-kilo hulk who runs like a rabbit and collides with opponents like a loose cannon on HMS *Bounty*. When he explodes across the rugby-field, broken bones, blood and despair all follow, and they are not his. Sex-symbol of France's team at the World Cup Rugby finals here, he delights millions of “chabalistes” fans with his size, speed and unpredictable behaviour -- like stomping on opponents and tackling referees.

La rugby-folie has captured Frenchmen since Sept. 7. France's opening-game loss to low-expectation Argentina shocked a too-cocky team and nation. **Even though Friday's game against Ireland knocked France out of the running**, rugby will continue selling big flat TV screens until the festival ends Oct. 20.

Football, soccer, rugby. All trace their ancestry from early 19th-century games at the aristocratic English school in Rugby. (Naturally, the French claim it all started in medieval France, even in Roman France). Eventually, three different games emerged.

North American football – with pre-programmed, cheeseburger-fed robots patting bums and bursting out of huddles for only a few seconds at a time – looks like the Prussian army on manoeuvres. Soccer (“football” in Euro-lingo), runs cardio-vascular marathons (sometimes killing young players) to produce scores of 1-0 in a game like hockey.

The third game, the “game played in heaven,” is rugby. Legend claims it started on a soggy field at Rugby in 1832 when a school-boy named William Webb Ellis, exasperated

by a too-slow soccer game, grabbed the ball and ran with it – instantly inventing “rugby.” Tackling, scrumming, and serial, on-the-run, backward passes flowed impulsively. Chaotic action and much-higher scores made rugby a game for both “butcher-boys and gentlemen.”

History doubts that Wellington claimed the 1815 battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton. But rugby’s toughness, resourcefulness, initiative and team-spirit likely helped scattered armies of soldier-bureaucrats hold and expand the British Empire after the 1830s. Rugby was the game of hard men – and for women who marveled at them.

Four out of 10 stadium fans here are women. Women from grannies to teenagers praise rugby’s values: courage, comradeship, courtesy. Players respect adversaries and referees. Hooligans stick to soccer. But French women also look misty-eyed describing players’ hard, well-defined bodies. Uniforms help. American football-players, note fans, wear goofy, below-the-knee pants and wimpy pads. Soccer guys wear nondescript mid-thigh shorts. But *les rugbymen* wear really short shorts.

Making leaner soccer men look effete, hunky rugby stars with beefy thighs fill magazine spreads. A nude rugbymen’s calendar (“Stadium Gods”) outsells a famous Paris naked firemen’s calendar. Chabal, of course, is the ultimate wild-man fantasy, say women. His “gentle, twinkling” eyes torment Beauties to his Beast.

Funnily, few French except hard-core aficionados know quite how rugby is played. National TV networks, magazines and newspapers offer seminars explaining ‘rucks and mauls’, ‘locks’, ‘no. 8s’, ‘scrums’, ‘drop kicks’ and ‘converted tries’. Even Paris city billboards play with rugby jargon to enhance the festive mood.

As in many things French, juicier “sidebar” tales sometimes overshadow what’s happening onstage. Apart from customary players’ gossip, media interest has focused on two men in the wings who recently became PR allies: French rugby coach Bernard Laporte and – can you tell any French story today without him? – “Omnipresident” Nicolas Sarkozy.

Tall, bald, squinty-eyed Laporte is not just a coach. He is France’s Secretary of State for Youth and Sports – with a rain-check to take up his government job when the rugby series ends. This, because he had a chance summer drink with a Sarkozy bodyguard who wangled him a lunch with then-candidate “Sarko.” Laporte’s sports fame and 16 personal sponsorship contracts made him doubly attractive to Sarko, who loves hanging out with celebrities and successful businessmen.

Another Laporte magnet: France’s national soccer team infuriated Sarko by disinviting him from the 2006 soccer World Cup in Berlin. So he latched onto Laporte and his rugby squad to prove sportsmen still loved him. Sarko also hoped a big French win would lift national spirits, predisposing voters to back his controversial freer-market reforms.

A memory of how France’s winning the 1998 soccer World Cup at home helped his predecessor Jacques Chirac? Sure. Superstition? Not if you believe the 577 inhabitants of Larrivière-Saint-Savin in southwest France. Commemorating an accident that killed three local rugby boys, they restored an abandoned chapel and renamed it Notre-Dame-du-Rugby. A stained-glass window shows the Virgin Mary holding a small boy gripping a rugby ball, with players jumping below them.

If you watch the wild hugging and inspired improvisations of a real game, you can easily believe that rugby is indeed the game played in heaven. But it's a stretch to imagine hairy, scary Sébastien Chabal as the model for Larrivière-Saint-Savin's stained-glass baby Jesus. He couldn't even have made a convincing choirboy.