

Rugby - a new sport at the Lyceum Alpinum Zuoz

As soon as the students discovered that the new Gamesmaster was a rugby player and coach, the requests for the school to have possibly its first ever rugby team came flooding in; clearly enthusiasm and motivation would not be a problem. Even so, finding time to include a rugby season in an already very full sporting calendar proved difficult. Consequently training did not start until December 2008, and with two meters of snow already covering our grass pitches we had no alternative but to train indoors. Despite our large hall, rugby training indoors was always going to be problematic; contact and tackling skills could only be practiced where gymnastic mats could be placed and it was awkward to coach the fundamental set pieces like scrums, rucks and mauls. Despite these obstacles, moral and interest remained high and training sessions throughout the winter regularly involved twenty plus senior boys.

By the end of February the squad was showing real progress, but we desperately needed a competitive match to aim for and therefore the opportunity to train outdoors. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your perspective, the huge snow falls of the 2008/2009 ski season meant that the Engadine would not see green grass until May. May would also signal the start of the exam season, therefore, time for our final year boys was running out. We needed help from the Lowlands and quickly. An Internet search and emails quickly resulted in us organizing a training weekend with the Zurich Grasshoppers Rugby club for early April, and thanks to the assistance of an ex-Gamesmaster Greg Hart, now at Zurich International School, this would be followed by our first match at the end of April.

Although indoor training continued in the build up to our weekend with the Zurich Grasshoppers, nothing could have fully prepared the squad for the 5 hours of intensive tackling, scrumaging, contact and fitness drills that awaited them. Assisting us on Saturday was Ben, a Grasshoppers 1st XV player and junior team coach. He was superb, a great combination of comedian and sadist! Between us we worked the boys to exhaustion, but they loved it...or at least they did when we had finished. After some light training on Sunday morning, we were able to watch and learn from the senior Grasshopper's 1st and 2nd teams in action against Lausanne and Lichtenstein respectively. All agreed, a very effective weekend - we felt ready.

The morning of the match saw the team plus supporters gather at the Zuoz train station. All the team were suitably dressed in school blazer and tie and there was an atmosphere of excited optimism. We arrived with enough time for some final preparations, warm ups and team talks before the match began. We took the field cheered on by a crowd of close to 100, including some Lyceum students plus Mr. Gaskell, Mr. Davidson and Dr. Schmitt. The first 10 minutes were characterized by classic stalemate with both defenses cancelling out any attacks. However, the experience of Zurich team eventually showed as they spotted gaps we had left down the right wing, moved the ball wide to their quick man who had an unopposed sprint to our try line.

After a quick motivational team talk, the 2nd period began very positively; we were more organized in defense and importantly kept possession of our ball for longer allowing us to build sustained attacks. Our pressure on the Zurich team finally brought reward as we were awarded a kickable penalty inside their 22m line and in front of their posts. To his credit captain Leopold Albrecht showed ambition and decided not to take the easy 3 points but to run the ball and go for a 7 point try. This optimism resulted in our best moment of the match; the ball was tapped and passed to a rampaging Michael Kuenburg who used all of his strength and weight to advance the ball to within 3 meters of the Zurich try line despite having 3 or 4 would be tacklers hanging off various parts of

his anatomy. When the Zurich team finally brought him down, he did exceptionally well to recycle the ball and present it to Oliver Gamble to continue the drive. Oliver smashed across the line, but tragically was held up and unable to ground the ball. At the resulting 5 metre scrum we failed to control the ball and Zurich were off the hook.

The remainder of the match was again dominated by good attacks but even better defense from both teams. Zurich were clearly the more experienced team and were much quicker to organize themselves both with and without the ball. But we were growing in confidence and individually making some hard and committed tackles. This was typified by our eventual joint "men of the match" Roman Berchtold and Louis Kahane, who between them probably broke more tackles and made more tackles than anyone else.

Even training at altitude in Zuoz cannot fully prepare a team for their first, intensive and passionate game of rugby. Towards the end of the game, our unaccustomed players were tired, bashed and bruised. Consequently Zurich sealed the win with a couple of late tries and the game was over. The post match analysis by both sets of players and supporters was dominated by one opinion; nobody could believe that it was the Lyceum team's first ever match. For a squad containing a majority of complete new comers to the sport of rugby, the game had been nothing short of miraculous. Disappointment at losing the match quickly evaporated and was replaced by a sense of pride in our performance. Later that evening as we enjoyed the Zurich nightlife, everyone was thinking and talking about the same thing....our next match!

Mark Jones, Coach