

In Hawaiian Gardens, youths go into scrums, out of gangs



Don Bartletti / Los Angeles Times

An Eagles rugby team from Hawaiian Gardens lines up in a scrum to start the action. Coach Ernie Vargas has his two boys and one girls teams going to state playoffs this weekend.

Rugby has become a big sport in the small L.A. County city. What started as a youth diversion is now a quest for a championship.

By Sam Quinones, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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When flag football season ended, Gonzalo Rios and his teammates found themselves with too much time on their hands. So Rios and others formed graffiti tagging crews.

Administrators at Fedde Middle School in Hawaiian Gardens worried that the youths would end up in gangs and spoke to Ernie Vargas, the players' football coach.

Vargas, 56, is the town's youth sports and gang intervention coordinator. Having played rugby in college, he suggested that the children form a team.

None knew the sport -- a fast-paced forerunner to American football. Vargas showed them a film and took them to a tournament in San Diego. He taught them the basics and began scheduling games in the Southern California Youth Rugby Organization.

They liked the relentless tackling and physical contact. It was football without pads.

The Hawaiian Gardens Eagles youth rugby team was born.

"After that, everybody started changing," said Rios, now 16. "Everybody stopped banging. We liked the sport so much that we didn't have time for that no more."

That was in 2006.

Since then, Hawaiian Gardens -- one of the smallest and poorest towns in Los Angeles County -- has emerged as a Southern California youth rugby powerhouse.

The city's program now has three teams and 45 players under 16, including a team of girls who protested when the city seemed willing to fund only boys teams. Many players have family members who are in gangs.

Sharing cleats and jerseys, they beat rivals from larger cities and from wealthier areas where the sport is better known: San Clemente, Santa Monica, Long Beach and San Diego County.

The three Hawaiian Gardens teams won their divisions this season; the girls squad went undefeated.

This weekend, 10 Southern California teams will compete in the state youth rugby playoffs in San Luis Obispo. Three teams will be from Hawaiian Gardens.

The players -- black, Latino and white -- have learned rugby's essential lesson: Support each other.

"They blend together well," Vargas said.

The teams remain as unknown to town residents as the sport they play; their own parents don't understand it.

Yet Hawaiian Gardens youth rugby squads offer a glimmer of what is possible to a town where gangs are entrenched and races haven't blended well.

A blink on the 605 Freeway, Hawaiian Gardens, with a population of about 15,000, is less than a square mile in area -- a collection of modest stucco houses, dense apartment buildings and low-end retail.

The working-class town may be best known for its casino, with its giant electronic freeway billboard, that provides a large chunk of its tax revenue.

But more about Hawaiian Gardens is defined by its insular barrio and HG, a local street gang that has plagued the city for generations.

The town "is really settled," said Jorge Escamilla, 16, a ninth-grader who started playing rugby on Vargas' first team. "My neighbors have been there for three generations; they don't get out of Hawaiian Gardens."

When blacks began arriving in the mid-1990s, they were targeted by Latino gangs, police said. In 2003 and 2004, blacks were shot at and wounded in racist attacks. Also, Artesia High School erupted in violence as gang members attempted to drive out black families.

"The air was hateful," said a black woman whose daughter plays rugby and who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisal.

Tensions remain, particularly at Artesia High School and Fedde, which most of the rugby players attend. This week, rumors circulated at Fedde that blacks were going to be attacked, parents said.

In this charged atmosphere, Vargas' relatively new multiracial rugby teams are like a blast of fresh air. Some of the children have traveled across Southern California, played teams from Japan and New Zealand and scrimmaged on the floor of Staples Center.

Rugby "gives you that sense of feeling that you're still alive," said Marco Gomez, one of last year's players.

But, many parents were put off by the rough-and-tumble nature of the sport. This was especially true for the girls squad, which scrimmages with the boys in practice. Rugby didn't fit some parents' ideas of a girl's sport.

"I was frightened," said Luz Barriga, whose daughter, Jackie, 14, plays on the squad. "I didn't know what it was. It was just males."

But as the season progressed, Barriga watched Jackie, who had never played a sport, grow attached to rugby. When Jackie hurt a shoulder, she begged for two months to be allowed back on the field. A doctor finally approved it last week.

Jackie now plays softball, too, and her mother has an appreciation of rugby that failed her at first.

"It gives her a positive thing to do after school," Luz Barriga said. "Kids get in trouble after school if they don't have anything to do."

Despite their success this year, Eagles' practices can be lackadaisical and chaotic. Vargas spends his time telling players to stop talking on cellphones and remove iPod earphones. He hounds them to run laps.

"In their own personal lives, everything isn't perfect. Discipline in life comes later on, as they mature," Vargas said. "What I'm trying to do is keep them from getting in a gang."

Other teams, he knows, are far more disciplined and have more experienced coaches.

So why do the Eagles win?

"Every single one of us grew up like underdogs," Escamilla said. The first year "I got hit pretty bad. I'd get back up. Everybody here is like that: You get hit and you get back up."

A test of that came in August.

An informal 19-and-under Hawaiian Gardens boys team played a tournament at Staples Center, which they eventually won. However, a men's tournament also was underway.

When a men's squad didn't show, organizers asked Vargas if his team wanted to face a men's team of New Zealanders, Samoans and Americans. The boys agreed.

So a bunch of scruffy Hawaiian Gardens 19-and-unders -- the youngest of whom was 14 -- stepped onto the arena's artificial turf to face men who were almost twice their age and could bench-press triple their weight.

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In one play, Rios dived over one man to hit another. In another play, the smallest player on the Hawaiian Gardens team scurried between the legs of a rival behemoth.

Of course the Eagles lost. But they scored first, and lost by only two scores. The team returned home that night scraped and bruised.

"But I was very happy I was there," said Marco Gomez, then 17.

Looking past this weekend's playoffs, with the town's budget limited, Vargas is searching for sponsors for the team, and to help pay for a trip to England next year.

Meanwhile, rugby seems to have settled in Hawaiian Gardens, which Gomez doesn't find that far-fetched.

With its gang culture, "Hawaiian Gardens is like a big, giant, rugby field," he said.

"The difference between life and rugby is there's good sportsmanship after the game. In real life, we don't have that."

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