

York takes first step to World Class Competition



Peter Hsu photo

By ALAN RISEN

"When I first came to York ten years ago," said rugby coach Larry Nancekivell, "we started (the Yeomen rugby team) with 18 people, of which one had played half a game, one had seen part of a game when his car stopped at a red light at the practice field — and the others had no idea at all what the game was about."

Today York boasts three rugby squads and a record that includes impressive international wins over the Yugoslavian national team and a team from Wales. This rise to international calibre is symbolic of an overall striving by York's athletic department during the past ten years to produce world class athletes, coaches and officials.

"We're very interested in the elite athlete," said Athletic Director Bryce Taylor in an interview. "Our approach benefits everyone. Firstly, the university benefits because through striving for excellence York has achieved international fame. If a Japanese gymnast or any foreign gymnast for that matter comes to Canada, they go to York because they have heard this is the central place in Canada for gymnastics. And secondly the athlete benefits from the university because of the expert coaching found here."

The reciprocal, almost symbiotic, relationship of the athlete and the university is further explained by Dr. Taylor:

"I've found that if we provide excellent coaching at the university we attract the best athletes. Then the athlete himself helps the coach in training other players."

In fact, York's training facilities are available to any top calibre athlete whether or not he is a member of the York community.

"The agreement we have with elite athletes is this: You can work out with our team, but you have to help with our team too," explained Dr. Taylor.

An example of this theory in action is Steve Mitruk, a member of Canada's Olympic gymnastics team. Mitruk comes to York for coaching by Tom Zivic. In return he helps coach members on the York varsity squad.

STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE

The rise of the rugby team from an inexperienced squad that almost was refused varsity status (they had to play an exhibition season in 1967 to "prove" their worth) to a veteran unit with international experience is also typical of the drive for "excellence and international fame" at York.

To gain playing experience, coach Nancekivell started taking the rugby Yeomen outside the university league for competition with stronger teams.

Last year, the Yeomen entered into a club

league during their off season. Ranked as an unknown commodity, the Yeomen quickly made their presence felt by piling up scores of 64-0, 48-0, 52-0 and 54-0 in their first four games.

Nancekivell then decided to take his team overseas for some international competition. A tour of Yugoslavia was planned through York's Yugoslavian gym coach Tom Zivic.

"We had no basis of knowing what we were up against," explained Nancekivell, "because very few matches had ever been played between eastern European countries and the West." But the same disadvantage held for the Yugoslavians, as they soon discovered.

It was arranged that York's first game would be against the Yugoslavian national team Nada in the city of Split. The York training base on the Adriatic island of Badja was sorely lacking in rigger facilities. The forwards had to clear an area in a garbage dump and the defence practised on a cement handball court which afforded no room for straight-away running.

Though outsize by the Nada national team and hampered by unusual Slavic interpretations of the rules by the referees, the speedier Yeomen outclassed their rivals and came away with a 19-11 win — their first international victory.

The following game, against Mladost, the second-ranked team in Yugoslavia, was an even easier match: York chalked up an intimidating 33-6 win. Having seen what York did to the top two teams in their nation, two of the three teams set to meet the Yeomen next decided to default the matches, even though York offered to field a weaker team. The final game, against Delos of Ljubljana, was an easy 43-9 victory for York.

Last spring York hosted a Welsh rugby team and proved inhospitable hosts by drubbing their guests 22-3. They are planning a return trip to Wales in Christmas of 1974.

WORLD-BEATERS?

Does this mean that the rugby Yeomen can be world-beaters on the international scene? Not really. Canada still has a long way to go before reaching parity with the traditional rugby-playing nations like those in the British Isles, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa or South America. But with continued excellent coaching from people like York's Larry Nancekivell, Canada may surprise some people sooner than expected.

Nor is this to suggest that rugby is York's one claim to fame in international competition and training. Gymnastics and track and field (with such Canadian stars as Debbie Van Kiekelbelt) and rowing are all well recognized both on and off campus. And the high quality of coaching and facilities available can be carried over to

almost any other sport or training exercise available at the university.

Is all this aimed at the 1976 Olympics to be staged in Canada? "Not at all," says Dr. Taylor. "Our interest in amateur sport and the elite athlete goes back ten years — well before other Canadian universities entered the field. In fact York is about five years ahead of the other universities in the development of amateur sport in Canada. We have always been providing leadership in this field."

UNIQUE PROGRAM

An example of York's leadership can be seen in the summer seminars held annually, which provide instruction, both on the individual and team level in many sports. Dave Smith, administrator of the summer seminars, describes the program:

"We are the only university in North America to offer such an extensive program for amateur athletes. In addition to our own coaches, many of whom are international champions, we bring in national coaches and international champions from all over the world, including Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, England, the United States and Russia." Sophisticated techniques such as films and instant video tape replays help the

coaches correct mistakes of their pupils. And with a ratio of eight students to one teacher individual attention is assured.

The seminars, which are open to the general public at all age levels, also fall into the York pattern of "We help you — you help us."

"By providing this opportunity for amateur athletes and coaches to develop in specific areas," says Smith, "we familiarize the public with our facilities and our resources."

One direct and immediate benefit of the seminars is the tremendous athlete-recruitment bonus it affords York. This factor becomes clear when one notes that York's 21-member gymnastic squad (many of whom were high school all-stars) is larger than any other university contingent in Canada and most in the United States.

York expanded its summer seminar program this past summer from five to eleven sports. As the program further expands, York continues to gain greater international recognition while providing the coaching, facilities and leadership which may some day produce athletes who can compete as equals with those from any other country in the world.

Reprinted from *Communique*, the York Alumni Association magazine.



Peter Hsu Photo

World class form is demonstrated here by York's Sharon Tsukamoto who is a member of Canada's Olympic team and was one of four York members of the six-member OWIAA team that won the Canadian championship last year.