

Breaking the soft tag: How rugby is taking root in Tooro



Trail Blazer. Nyangoma (C) joins the children for a priceless photo moment. She is the driving force behind rugby's steady rise in Tooro region. Inset is a teen girl dashing for the try line at Booma Grounds, where Tooro's love affair with the oval ball is taking shape. PHOTOS/ SWAIB R. KANYIKE

From Curiosity To Culture. Once an unfamiliar spectacle, rugby is steadily carving out space in Tooro region through persistence, passion and community buy-in. From boda-boda curiosity to organised competition, the sport's growth—driven largely by pioneer Nyangoma—has turned Fort Portal into an unlikely but promising rugby frontier.

BY SWAIB RAUL KANYIKE

In the calm of Fort Portal town, one Monday afternoon, I stopped by the boda-boda stage just opposite the main mosque. Phone in hand and in my broken Rutooro, I showed the boda cyclists a video of a rugby game being played and asked them where I could go play that particular sport.

Out of the five, two told me they were taking me to Booma Grounds, on the other side of town. During the short journey, I engaged the boda to dig more on how he got to know about the sport.

"I don't know much about it. I don't even know its name but there is a time people from Kampala came here to play and we got a good number of customers. Then one day on TV I watched a certain lady being praised for having introduced that sport to this area," he said. That is all that I needed to gauge the popularity of the sport of rugby in Fort Portal and Tooro region in general. Two out of five boda cyclists isn't a bad sample size. The lady being talked about is Norah Traton Nyangoma, the pi-

ioneer and bearer of rugby in the region, also founder, Tooro Lions Rugby Football Club, the oldest club in this part of the country.

At the Booma Grounds, however, she was absent. She was in Kasese on other duties but had directed me to Anthony Twikirize, the club secretary. And true to word, I found a group of youngsters playing touch rugby on the fringes of the stadium, with a football game going on on the inside.

The journey

Nyangoma's introduction to rugby came through the Tag Rugby Trust in 2014. When

Youth Opportunity Uganda, an NGO she was working for, initiated a rugby program to instil teamwork, discipline and brotherhood through the oval ball, she grabbed it with both hands. However, with the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns, the program went down but Nyangoma stayed. She kept working with a few willing youngsters who came around to pass time.

And there's a saying that if you don't want to play rugby, make sure to not touch that

ball. It is magnetic and addictive in an unexplainable way. Whoever came got hooked and returned the following day; on and on the numbers swelled up, giving birth to Tooro Lions. Nyangoma immersed herself into various coaching clinics at national level and targeted schools like St. Leo's Kyegobe and Nyakasura as her main catchment area for both girls and boys and age grade programs.

Last year, she was selected to represent Uganda at the Gallagher High Performance Academy in Poland as one of the developing

coaches from across the globe. Today, she is the face of rugby in the region and also the women's national U-17 coach, a role she handles every weekend with a rigorous trip from Fort Portal to Kampala and back.

Tooro on the national map

With the sport spreading far and wide across the country, Tooro region raised its hand to join the big

boys. In 2023, Tooro Lions went out to hunt and captured the Western Region 7s and 15s titles.

Also, competing against the best in the country during the Nile Special national 7s circuit means the players had an opportunity to rub shoulders with their idols.

"Do you know what it means for a local boy from Fort Portal to line up and play against a guy they've always watched on TV and read about in newspapers? Those are the small gains we achieve and keep aiming for more," says Nyangoma. Since Tooro Lions' formation in 2020, they

have managed to host two national 7s tournaments and played in the Uganda Cup.

However, with the team's growth, some individuals became overly ambitious and broke away to start another club, Fort Portal Tyrants. Much as it came as a spear in the ribs for Tooro Lions, Nyangoma and Twikirize choose to look at the positives, insisting that two big teams in the region not only help to grow competition and rivalry but also spread the game farther. Fort Portal Tyrants played in the Uganda Cup last year. Tooro Lions didn't, because they are still rebuilding to strengthen, after losing a number of players to their neighbors.

"It hurts because it put us down a bit. But we continue to work hard to see that the team stays afloat. Apart from the usual rivalry as opponents there is no bad blood. Even when they (Tyrants) hosted their Uganda Cup games, we extended support in so many ways after all it is rugby in Tooro that wins," stresses Nyangoma.

The toughest opponent

There is a feeling that Batooro are generally a soft, tender lot. As a Kampala chap, the times that I have visited Fort Portal, I can actually attest to this. The way of life is slow compared to many places I have been to. Be it in the local markets, streets, hotels and the main mosque where I prayed my Asr and Maghrib prayers; you find everything soft and slow. The weather, too, comes with a soft and clean feel.

Even the two hours that I spent with Nyangoma at a local eatery, she came off as a gentle and tender person. Rugby is known to be an aggressive, tough sport.

Now, that is the biggest opponent that the rugby community faces in their quest to spread the sport. Some parents wouldn't let their children join this "rough" sport. Especially girls. Remember the boda cyclist that I told you about in the beginning? He explicitly told me he can't let his children play it, lest they break their limbs. He said he'd support them to play football.

"Yes, we have been painted as the softest tribe in Uganda but shall we sit down and live with that tag forever? No, we have to change the mindset and show the world that we can ably compete with anyone," Twikirize insists. He also challenged all Batooro across the country to rally behind the teams in the region for better fortunes. Starting a rugby team is one thing and keeping it above the waters is a completely different task.

The rugby gear; jersey, boots, balls, cones, tackle bags and pads, mouth guards, and other necessities are expensive, compared to football. For now the teams rely on small donations from individuals, friends and partners plus the Union. A drop in the ocean but a good start.

The hope, according to Nyangoma and Twikirize, is that more keeps coming in and as the sport develops, Tooro region will undoubtedly be mentioned in sporting (rugby) corridors all over the country.

FACTS

Rugby in Tooro

Lead figure: Norah Traton Nyangoma
Main club: Tooro Lions RFC
Founded: 2020
Base: Fort Portal

Key Milestones

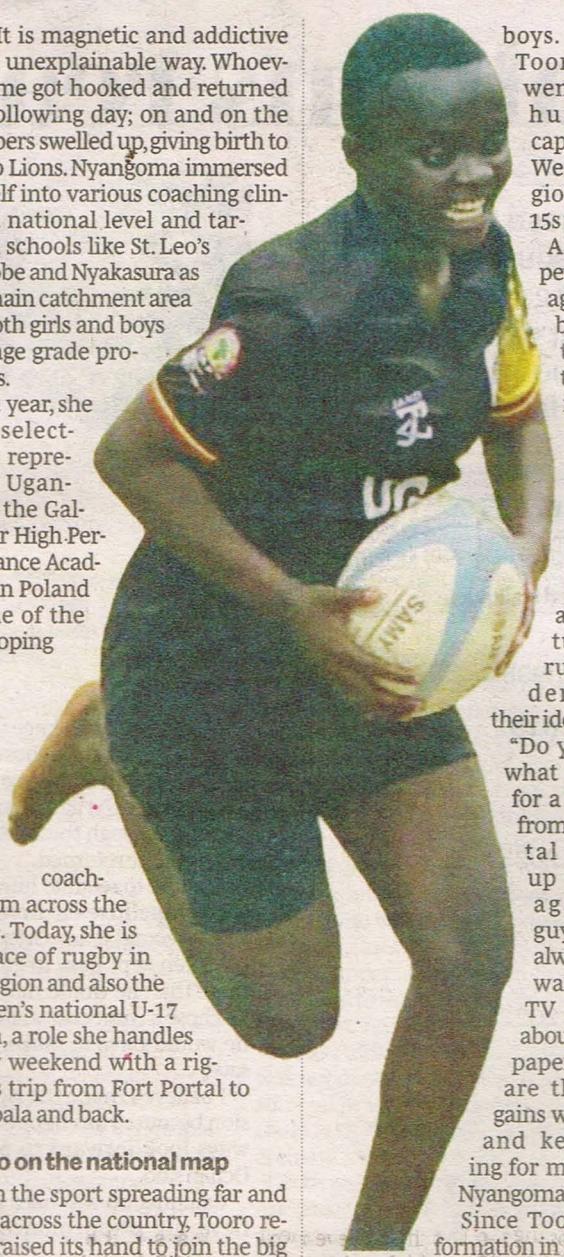
Western Region titles: 7s & 15s (2023)
National 7s hosts: 2 tournaments
Uganda Cup: Participated

Clubs in Region

• Tooro Lions RFC
• Fort Portal Tyrants RFC

MINDSET

No Longer Feared. Rugby's biggest opponent in Tooro is not another team but perception. Long viewed as too rough—especially for girls—the sport has had to battle cultural hesitation in a region known for its gentle pace of life. Changing that mindset, advocates argue, is key to ensuring rugby's survival and long-term acceptance.



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