



PHOTO BY NOVA RUGBY

Fly-half Liz King beats the cover against New York in a match last season.

Making Friends, Then Tackling Them

Women's rugby grows in Northern Virginia.

BY GREG WYSHYNSKI
THE CONNECTION

When Lizzy Zacharias moved to Arlington, she wanted to find a way to meet people and have fun on the weekends. So she signed up with local softball and kickball leagues, only to find they weren't for her — because they were too injurious.

"I sprained my ankle a few times," she said. "When I played rugby in college, I didn't get hurt."

Zacharias is one of more than 60 women who compete for Northern Virginia Women's Rugby, a club program that has seen its membership explode in recent years. Zacharias herself is a first-year player.

Vicki Bolton, a teammate and a team liaison, said NOVA is the only women's rugby program in the country to play Division 1 and Division 2. She attributed the 17 new members the team has this year to growing popularity for the sport at the college and high-school levels.

The players range from college-aged to players in their 40s. "It's suitable for all shapes and sizes. I'm relatively short and slow, but I can hit people hard," said Bolton. "And then there are the tiny, little people who can run around the outside and people like me can't catch them."

It's also a great way to stay in shape while playing a challenging game. "Our coaches

have always said, 'You don't play rugby to get fit, you get fit to play rugby.' During the season, we're practicing twice a week and playing on the weekend. You definitely get more fit," said Bolton. "Rugby's a great all-around sport. It's exactly the game that the men play, which is attractive to [women] because they don't want to play a watered-down sport."

KATIE GAVIT REALIZED early on that there's nothing watered-down about NOVA.



A plane flies overhead from National Airport during a match at Gravelly Point.

PHOTO BY VICKI BOLTON

The Arlington resident, 27, had played on a club team while attending Denison University in Ohio. She hadn't played for a couple of years when she joined NOVA Rugby last spring as a social outlet and a way to keep in shape. "It was definitely a little more intense than college," she said. "After the first couple of practices, you're acclimated to it."

The two NOVA women's rugby teams compete in two seasons — one in the spring and one in the fall — competing against teams from around the U.S. Their "home field" is Gravelly Point in Arlington, under the flight path from Reagan National Air-

port, but they will travel to matches in places like Nashville, where they'll be the weekend of March 23-24. They practice twice a week at Oakton High School in Vienna. Visit www.novawrfc.org for full schedules and times.

Caro Fowler, a Leesburg resident who played rugby at Wellesley College, said she's seen different levels of experienced players come out for the NOVA team. "Since we don't have rugby in the States, people regularly show up not knowing much about it, spending

the first year not really knowing what's going on," she said. "You have to be dedicated to it. It's when you hold back that you get hurt."

Zacharias said the program is perfect for rookies who haven't been exposed to rugby before.

"They're very open to people who are brand new to the game. You just jump in and learn. There are different levels, so you can still come to practice every week. It's fun."

FUN, IN THE end, appears to be at the core of the NOVA Women's Rugby experience. Bolton said the team will cel-

brate wins and mourn losses together at the same bar and they keep in touch during the off-season.

For Fowler, that's exactly what she was looking for in a hobby. "I didn't want to hang out in random bars to find friends. So this gives me a set bar to go to [each week]," she said with a laugh. "This team's very friendly when we're not on the pitch."

When they are on the pitch, rugby remains a physically challenging sport.

"I hit my head on a regular basis, but I usually don't notice until later when I'm like, 'Hey, where did that bruise come from?'" said Fowler.