SPORTS

Try, Try Again

Rugby's freshman scorer Sofie Fella


Sofie Fella

Before she discovered rugby, with its tackles and breakdowns and wild chasing sprints, Sofie Fella '22 was a dancer and a soccer player. She liked both, but neither quite fit. Her ballet instructors kept nagging that her arms and legs were too muscular; and on the soccer field, she was always the teammate getting called for fouls ("And I would be like, 'What? Are you kidding me?'"). Then one day, during her first year of high school, her gym teachers suggested she try out for rugby.

She loved it immediately. Everywhere, there was freedom. With the ball in her hands instead of at her feet, she could run unrestricted, as fast as possible, in any direction. And collisions with opponents weren't fouls; they were a foundational part of the game. And there was another kind of liberation, too: in many sports, the ceiling of achievement is capped by an athlete's biology or body shape or innate talent. "But for rugby," she says, "because you're basically either holding the ball and running or running after someone and tackling them, it feels like the harder you work, the better you get. That relationship was so clear to me. More than, for example, in dance, where it felt like no matter how hard I worked, my body just wasn't right."

Fella joined the rugby team during her sophomore year at the American School in Shanghai, China, the city where she grew up. Soon she began spending summers at rugby camps and tournaments in the United States: Stanford, Seattle, Utah, Las Vegas, Little Rock. She was named MVP of her high-school team two years in a row, served as captain in her junior and senior years, and played on the under-18 national team for Germany, her father's home country.

Then last fall, she arrived at Harvard, joining a team on a rising trajectory. At five-foot-five, Fella plays wing and fullback, two positions that require speed, patience, the strength to stay on one's feet, and an alert awareness of the entire field and what might happen next. The ability to shift an opponent and outmaneuver her one-on-one is important. Wings are usually the team's top scorers, moving the ball downfield and grounding it within the opponents' in-goal area for a "try," worth five points. Fullbacks are the last line of defense against an advancing opponent. "Sophie's one of our speedsters," says head coach Mel Denham. "She's a stepper, very evasive. She's great in the open field. She's a finisher."

Denham recalls an "incredible, try-saving tackle" Fella made in a home game against Quinnipiac last fall. Late in the first half, with the score tied at 7, a Quinnipiac wing had broken away from the pack, slipping through a gap between defenders and blazing across midfield with the ball. For a moment she seemed to have everyone beaten, with nothing but grass and the goal line in front of her, but then from the edge of the field, Fella appeared, closing in like an arrow. She wrapped her arms around the ball-carrier's waist and pulled her to the ground. "There's so much pressure on that fullback position to have to make that tackle," Denham says. "It's a really hard position to be in, and she just nails the tackle every time."

Fella remembers that game too, though the play that sticks in her mind came a few minutes later, with the second half barely under way and Harvard advancing down the field. A series of passes found Fella at the far end of the formation with room to run. Just when she caught the ball, a hole opened in the opposing team's defensive line, and Fella sailed through it, sprinting to the in-goal line just ahead of a tackle, one of six tries she made this season. "That's probably my favorite try that I've ever scored, because it was such a team effort," she says. "It's impressive when an individual player runs through a bunch of people and scores, but this was even better, because it was like everybody touched the ball before it got to me, and that's how I managed to get that open space. So that's the clip we watch all the time. It's on my desktop."

Denham says pride and comradeship run deep on this team. "They play for each other, and they play for those who came before them." Women's rugby began as a Radcliffe club team in 1982, growing quickly from four players to more than 40; in 2013 it was elevated to a varsity sport. Each season now consists of two distinct units: during the fall season, called 15s, the squad plays

Photograph by Jim Harrison

weekly 80-minute games with 15 players to a side. In the spring, they play 7s: 14-minute games with seven players to a side. Instead of weekly match-ups, the 7s season is organized into a series of monthly tournaments, in which teams play four or five games each during the course of a day.

That first season after the transition to varsity was short—there were only a few other varsity squads for the Harvard women to play against—but the Crimson won the Ivy League title. Since then, the sport has grown, and so has the number of varsity opponents. Denham arrived in 2017, a former flanker for the U.S. national team, who'd been an assistant during Radcliffe rugby club days, and under her, Harvard has been evolving into a serious national contender. Last season, Harvard upset perennial rival Dartmouth to win the Ivy League championship, in a late October game under miserable conditions: freezing rain, mud everywhere, the ball slipping from players' grasp. It was so cold that Fella's hands went numb; she couldn't tell if she was catching the ball. At halftime, she wedged a pair of handwarmers into her sports bra so she could tuck her fingers next to them. "It didn't really work." It didn't matter; they won the game. "That was the worst weather I've ever experienced," Fella says. And then a beat later: "It was really fun."

GIL TALBOT/HARVARD ATHLETICS COMMUNICATIONS

Fella sprints toward a Quinnipiac defender during a contest last October in which she made a try-saving tackle and scored her fourth try in as many games.

Fella is only one of several international players on the roster: other teammates come from Australia, Honduras, Germany, Canada, Scotland, and Hong Kong. Fella's parents met as college students in Shanghai. Her father, from a small town outside Frankfurt, was in China as a foreign-exchange student learning Chinese; her mother was a Shanghai native who'd been taking German lessons. "Sometimes we joke around that we speak 'Chinglisherman' at home," she says, in the American accent she picked up from classmates at the American School, which she attended from kindergarten onward.

At practice on a chilly, rainy spring af-

ternoon, two weeks ahead of the 7s national tournament in late May (from which the Crimson would return with a bronze medal), the team was cycling through a series of set plays—passing drills, scrums, line-outs. Again and again, Fella lined up with her teammates, running forward and calling for a pass, sidestepping tackles, shoveling the ball toward the next player when defenders closed in. On the sidelines, she practiced lunging into a scrum with assistant coach Justin Moss, locking her shoulder into his over and over. She had only recently come back from injury—an ankle sprain that kept her out for all of April—and she seemed to be making up for lost time, or lost intensity. "Rugby is a sport where you know you're going to get injured," she says. "It's something you have to expect. If not a big injury, then bruises or a pulled muscle somewhere that's going to hurt. That doesn't bother me." The hardest part of rugby, she says, "is when you're not playing." ~LYDIALYLE GIBSON

Science Dean, Soccer Judge

In an all-volunteer youth soccer league, brave parents must rise to the occasion and create order from cleated and shin-guarded chaos. In the early 2000s, one such parent was Frank Doyle, now dean of the Harvard Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS). He had enjoyed playing soccer in high school and was ready for his next challenge: refereeing small children as they broke the sacred commandments of The Beautiful Game. "It wasn't that you were rigorously enforcing the laws," Doyle explained in his office. "You were working with young kids and helping them learn the game of soccer, but you were keeping it fair, fun, and safe along the way." He was a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, so the teaching role appealed to him. So did the referee's duty not just to call fouls, but also "to manage the game in a very thoughtful and creative way."

What started as a way to keep himself out of the lab and in the company of his kids became a side passion. Within a few years, Doyle earned the highest certification within the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO)—National Referee. That required completion of at least 100 games, a tough exam, three in-person assessments, and a physical test, which included an endurance run and two speed runs. At night, Doyle would scroll through AskTheRef.com, where refs posed oddball questions about unusual situations and the world's best officials would answer. "There are really all kinds of wacky scenarios in a game," Doyle said. "Like, if a substitute player throws a water bottle and hits a player on the field—what's the restart?"

After accepting the SEAS deanship in 2015 and moving to Massachusetts, Doyle adjusted to the new soccer landscape. Because of a novel concept—winter—outdoor refereeing was not a year-round option. And AYSO didn't exist in Massachusetts, so he and his son became certified through the United States Soccer Federation. Soon, Doyle had an idea: why didn't he become a National Collegiate Athletic Association official?

As he moved to the NCAA level, the pace quickened, the stakes rose, and the margin for error shrank. Tiny mistakes, made by either a player or Doyle, could shift a game's outcome. He had to stay close enough to the action to detect a foul, but remain situated in a way that gave him wider perspective on the field. Staying in the moment was crucial for making instinctual calls, but it was just as important to anticipate when stopping play would hurt the team it was meant to help. At NCAA games, four refs work in tandem. "If you do it well, you're completely reinforcing each other," Doyle emphasized. "You can work in a symphony that's really exciting and fun."

JIM HARRISON

Frank Doyle, in full ref attire, is fluent in Newton's laws of motion—and the laws of the game.

He doesn't bring red cards to his lab or faculty meetings, but he said his disparate roles do connect. As a dean, he pointed out, part of his job is managing emotions and personalities. "And that's a big part of the game...how you handle the players on the field, how you handle the coaches on the touch line, all the aspects of the game. I think that does suit my personality." He mentioned referencing, at a recent faculty meeting, the soccer concept of "persistent infringement" while discussing how to handle cases of minor misconduct. "Small microaggressions on the surface—in isolation—are not a huge deal, it's worth a conversation," Doyle said. "But an accumulated pattern? That's different."

While Doyle doesn't ref year-round anymore, he officiated 30 games last fall and a few dozen more throughout the spring and summer. Before a game, he'll check the teams' records and histories of misconduct to get a sense of the potential mood, and he'll throw in a few cardio and core workouts during the week to stay fit. If he's officiating a game on a Saturday, he'll re-review the rules on Friday to get in the right mental mode. After a game, he'll check his GPS watch to check how many miles he ran, how quickly he moved, and how efficiently he covered the field. If all goes well, Doyle will be far from the center of attention.

"I had a good friend in Santa Barbara who once said, 'When Frank does a game, nothing interesting happens,'" Doyle recalled. "I don't have mass confrontations, I don't have brawls, I don't have fights on the field. It's about the highest praise you can give to a ref, right?" ~JACOB SWEET