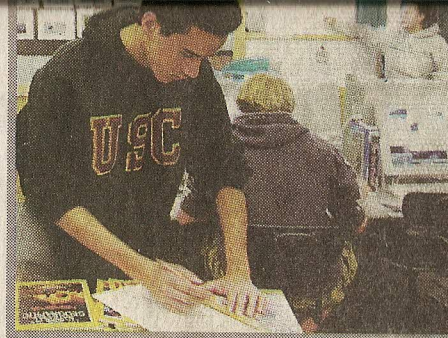


## Cougars pull out a victory

■ Campolindo boys basketball team rallies to win Northern regional opener. Page **13**



## Students share artistic talent

■ Artists put work on display at Orinda Arts Council's Student Visual Arts Competition. Page **20**

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**NATE MILLS HANDLES** the ball during a practice scrimmage with other members of the Lamorinda youth rugby league at Miramonte High School.

KRISTOPHER SKINNER/STAFF



# Rugby club largest in United States

By Meera Pal  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

ORINDA — It's a Sunday afternoon. The wind whips the line markers around the football field at Miramonte High School as kids run around chasing what appears to be a swollen football.

One small blond boy is running with all his might, the ball tucked under his arms, as he makes his way to the goal line. His team members, on the sidelines, are up on their feet yelling as loudly as their young voices will allow, "Run, run, run."

## TO PLAY

■ For more information on Lamorinda Rugby visit [www.lamorugby.com](http://www.lamorugby.com)

The boy with the ball reaches the goal line. Instead of spiking the ball and doing a funky goal line dance, he kneels down and politely sets the ball down on the line, scoring one for his team — Lamorinda Rugby.

This isn't a Sunday afternoon game of football. This is rugby — the gentleman's sport, where players called the referee "Sir."

Lamorinda Rugby, or LAMO, has been around since 1983, feeding top-notch players into the best rugby programs across the West, including Cal, UCLA and Colorado. In fact, 15 of the club's 18 coaches are ex-Cal rugby players.



**MEMBERS OF THE** Lamorinda youth rugby league button up their jerseys as they get ready for a game against the Stanford Seahawks at Miramonte High School in Orinda.

KRISTOPHER SKINNER/STAFF

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# Rugby

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Lamorinda Rugby is broken into several levels. At the high school level, there is a league for freshman, junior varsity and varsity.

Five years ago, LAMO general manager Tony McKenzie realized that the club was overlooking an entire population of younger kids.

In 2002, he established the Under-15 program for 7th- and 8th-graders, the next year the Under-12 program for 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-graders, and finally in 2004, the Under-9 program for 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-graders.

Sandy Gunnett's 16-year-old son, Nick, first joined LAMO as a member of the Under-15 club. Nick had been intrigued with the sport after hearing his Stanley School P.E. teacher talk about it and watching it on television. His family found LAMO on the Internet.

"For my son, it was the combination of wrestling and soccer," said Gunnett, of Lafayette. Nick today plays for the junior varsity.

LAMO has been so successful that the club now includes more than 125 young players from the East Bay — so many that LAMO established an inner league, where the local players compete against one another.

Jacob Stern, a 7-year-old first-grader from St. Jerome's School in El Cerrito, said he joined the Lamorinda Rugby Under-9 program this season.

On a recent Sunday, Jacob was prepping for a game. He crammed in a mouthpiece, yanked up his shorts (which drooped below his knees) and sprinted off towards the field.

Just before the action began, Jacob spoke briefly about his sport. He said he took up rugby because his uncle plays. "I like the running best."

McKenzie said rugby players can run at much as 6 miles during a game, making the sport



KRISTOPHER SKINNER/STAFF

**BOBBY TAYLOR** prepares to throw the lineout ball to Lamorinda youth rugby league teammates as they square off against the Stanford Seahawks in a game at Miramonte High School in Orinda.

"extremely good for athleticism and fitness."

Ten-year-old Hattie Moore of Lafayette is one of few girls in the club, but that doesn't stop her.

"My favorite part is tackling," she said during a break in the game.

Even with the full contact al-

lowed in the Under-12, Under-15 and the high school leagues, "it is a misnomer that rugby is a rough sport," McKenzie said. Players are taught to focus on the finer points of the game, rather than brut force, he said.

Gunnett said she was nervous about her son playing rugby at

first. Then she watched a game.

"It is one of the few sports where I have seen no discipline

problems," she said. "The kids are all so respectful of one another. (My son's) gotten more hurt in soccer than playing rugby."

Coaches focus on the social aspects and the community of rugby, she said. They also emphasize the long history of the game, steeped in tradition, McKenzie said.

Based loosely on soccer, rugby is said to have been named after the British school where the game originated.

It is not commonly known that the United States is the defending Olympic rugby champion. The U.S. won gold medals

by defeating France in both the 1920 and 1924 Olympic Games. Shortly after the 1924 games, rugby was eliminated as an Olympic sport.

Over the years, rugby has grown in popularity, mostly on the East Coast, Northern California and Colorado, said McKenzie, a South African native who grew up playing rugby.

He said that LAMO is the biggest youth rugby club in the United States.

"It is a game of excitement," McKenzie said. "It takes the best ball and running skill of soccer and the strategy of football."