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College rugby gets showcase event

NBC to televise UT on Saturday

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Though June just began, there's a Tennessee football team taking to the field and the airwaves Saturday.

Only it's a different kind of football.

The University of Tennessee Rugby Football Club will participate in this weekend's nationally televised USA Sevens Rugby Collegiate Championship Invitational in Columbus, Ohio.

"It'd be an understatement to say that it's huge," said Butch Robertson, UT's coach since 1977. "It's huge for the sport and it's huge for the UT rugby program."

UT begins pool play in the inaugural three-day, 16-team round-robin tournament today at 5:50 p.m. against Indiana.

The Vols battle SEC rival Florida on Saturday at 10:30 a.m. before a national television appearance at 4 against San Diego State.

The Vols and Aztecs kick off NBC's coverage, marking the first time any college rugby match has been televised live by a major network.

"It's exciting," Robertson said. "The university folks have been very cooperative and recognize that this is a unique opportunity."

NBC airs the tournament Saturday and Sunday from 4-6 p.m. Universal Sports, an NBC cable affiliate, shares coverage, airing from 2-4:30 both days.

"It's going to bring an awareness of the sport to a much wider audience," Robertson said. "Hopefully people will see something and say, 'Hey that looks cool,' or, 'That looks crazy.'"

"I don't see it as a loss for anybody."

Rugby sevens was voted into the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics in October, and this tournament is a showcase of sorts for the U.S. Olympic team's talent pool.

Rugby sevens plays by the same rules as the 15-player game, with seven players a side on the same-sized field.

"The ball is in motion even more," Robertson said.

"The speed of the game up and down the field is significantly different. The athletic ability - it takes a very unique individual to make it all work."

The top two teams from each of the four groups advance to Sunday's knockout rounds. The semifinals and finals of both the championship and consolation brackets will be televised.

Rugby is a club sport at UT, a step above intramurals and a step below the scholarship varsity sports.

"We run it as a varsity sport," Robertson said, "but it's all volunteer staff and student-athletes because nobody gets any money to play the game."

Robertson has one goal for the Vols this weekend.

"We want to represent our program well," he said.

Patrick Brown is a freelance contributor.

