

# Goff leading UT rugby into national spotlight

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2010-04-29 19:39:51

For Tennessee rugby coach Butch Robertson, one game was enough to realize Benji Goff was a special player.

At the tail end of the Tennessee high school rugby season in 2006, Robertson ventured to scout the state's best high school players at a state rugby all-star competition.

Even in an exhibition of talent and skill, Goff, then a senior at Brentwood High School in his native Nashville, lit up the field. And Robertson took notice.

"Benji was on the Tennessee side," Robertson said. "The kid goes out there and scores like six times. I thought, 'This is a man above boys.'"

Now a senior on the University of Tennessee Rugby Football Club, Goff has developed into an irreplaceable component to Robertson's squad. In fact, Robertson is still searching for answers as to what Goff can't do on the field.

Goff has seen action in several different positions for UTRFC during his career on Rocky Top, and Robertson even threw the senior into the flyhalf position —the rugby equivalent to quarterback — during one injury-plagued contest.

"I take a lot of pride in that I am someone they can use," Goff said. "If something basically goes wrong they can throw me in there and we can keep going."

When asked about Goff's position on the field, Robertson said it's impossible to pinpoint.

"You got a basketball player who plays guard and forward, what do you call him?" Robertson said. "Benji's just a player."

All in all, Goff said, it's about playing the game, not the position.

"Once it gets going, you're just a rugby player," he said.

Goff was first turned onto rugby while a freshman at Brentwood. When some friends threw together a rugby team, Goff, regularly a football player, decided to step outside the box and into the scrum.

Soon enough, a newfound sport blossomed into a newfound talent for Goff.

"I realized I was pretty good at it whenever our high school team went to nationals and got fifth in the nation, which was the highest a southern team had ever done," Goff said. "Then we all came to UT."

Goff's career in orange and white is continuing to produce plenty of accolades. This season, Goff helped UTRFC reach at least the Sweet Sixteen of the USA Rugby Collegiate National Championship Tournament for the seventh time in seven years, only one year after snagging individual All-America honors.

This season, during tournament losses to Army and Texas A&M, Goff turned up on an unfamiliar radar: a representative for the USA Sevens Team, a seven-player squad picked to represent the United States in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

“The head coach, Al Caravelli, contacted me and invited me to come to the camp,” Goff said. “On the team, there are actually two or three guys from college. But it’s not many college guys.”

“It’s basically like the biggest honor I’ve gotten.”

Though just a tryout for the team, Robertson stressed that the invitation is impressive in itself.

“It’s quite an honor just to be invited,” Robertson said. “They’re only grabbing 25 or so kids from the nation. That’s pretty good stuff.”

Though Goff’s individual invite could put the senior on the international stage, the entire UTRFC team was invited to participate in the nationally televised USA Sevens Collegiate Championship Invitational this summer. Only 16 college teams were selected for the games, which will feature 38 matches and take place June 4-6 with several games airing on NBC.

“Being able to go and represent our team on the national level, we’ve never had that kind of thing with rugby,” Goff said. “For a club to be around that long, with our reputation, we’ve been invited to this thing. It’s enormous.”

For a club team about to step into uncharted territory, Robertson emphasized the importance of having Goff, a captain of the squad, leading the way.

“He’s actually raising the bar for everybody else,” Robertson said. “I don’t know anybody on the team who doesn’t enjoy playing with him.”

Thus far, Goff’s favorite aspects of his rugby career do not include championships or accolades, Olympic tryouts or national television exposure. Instead, Goff points to his teammates as the most memorable part of his career on the field.

“One of the benefits that come from playing on a club like UT rugby would be getting to know a bunch of the guys,” Goff said. “Some of my best friends I’ve met through playing rugby and playing with UT.”

“It’s more of a community than a club.”