

Severn River Honey Badgers rugby provides inclusive space for LGBTQ+ athletes



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There is nothing, Erin Gallagher-Johnson said, like beating the “crap out of each other” on the field and having a beer after.

It’s how she initially met her wife in college, and it’s how she’s spent the past three years: commuting from Hyattsville to happily smack into people she considers the closest friends in her life under a blazing evening sun on a rugby field next to an American Legion post on Manhattan Beach Road in Severna Park.

“It’s my second team,” Gallagher-Johnson said. “We’re always there for each other. We have each other’s backs. You’re putting your body on the line in rugby, and I wouldn’t do it for any other team.”

Severn River Rugby Football Club, established more than four decades ago, offers several forms of men’s and women’s teams. The Severn River Honey Badgers, which fields teams at the D2 and D3 club level, is just a bit different from the other teams.

When then-Diversity, Equity and Inclusion leader Lexi Decker started having the team march in the Annapolis Pride parade every year, the team started diversifying. After this year’s walk, six recruits joined the team.

About 75% of the Honey Badgers identify as LGBTQ+. They're not technically a team catered to gay people, like other clubs and leagues in Baltimore and DC.

"We're just a team that happens to mostly be gay," Decker said.

That was something the flanker/wing had never found before when she played field hockey, basketball and lacrosse for Broadneck. Though she never considered herself to be very good at her three high school sports, Decker was hardly alone in that. What she did feel "othered" by was her sexuality.

"When I played all those other sports, they were cool, but I always kind of felt like the black sheep — I don't know if that was me being the 'queer kid' or the 'weird kid,'" Decker joked. "But rugby is the home for those people. We're the weird ones. We're the outcast ones. It's nice having that community."

As a native of England, Maria Russo makes it a mission to have everyone feel as included as possible. Back home, the Rugby Football Union, the country's governing organization, banned transgender women from playing women's contact rugby in 2022. In contrast, the team name changed from "women's" team to "Honey Badgers" to be more inclusive of nonbinary folks. When Congress raised the "Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act" in March 2023, the Honey Badgers posted a message defiant to the bill, stating clearly that the team would never exclude trans athletes.

"Here, it's accepted. I appreciate that because you see people coming out of their shells," Russo said. "It's been very good to see."



Emily Gilmore, left, and Maria Russo get ready for practice for the Severn River Honey Badgers rugby team at Germantown Elementary School. (Paul W. Gillespie/Staff)

That level of inclusion pleasantly shocked Jazmin Lawhorne when she joined. At 50 years old, she expected to want to quit two practices in. She hadn't expected a generally younger field of athletes to welcome her so fully and help her learn the sport. Before each practice, everyone introduces themselves, seasoned or new, as well as their preferred pronouns.

"I think if you're not in an environment that is like that, you wouldn't be able to learn as much," Lawhorne said, "or feel like you are part of the family. It's a place where people can feel like themselves and be who they are. It makes people feel safe. There's a sense of care."

Katelynn “McRib” Barkell never felt totally at home in her sport until she found rugby as an adult. In her youth, she was a soccer player in Michigan. Girls collided with her all her life and she hit them, too.

Like in soccer, an opposing player smacked into her during her first rugby match. At a bar social after, that same player came up to her and praised her hitting skills.

“For soccer, if someone hit me, I’d hold that grudge for the rest of my life. Here, it brings you closer together,” Barkell, who commutes from Calvert County to Severna Park three times a week, said. “No matter who you are, or where you come from, or whatever you’ve been through, someone on the team is gonna take you in.”

When Russo moved from England to Baltimore in 2015, she left her entire blood family behind. Now, she said the teammates she made through her three years with Severn River Rugby will be her eventual bridesmaids, she said. Russo suffered injuries three times in her recreational career. Each time, she’s received a set of flowers from the Honey Badgers.

Any time someone on the team suffers the same, or loses a family member, for instance, the team built a committee to come together for exactly that.

Hanging up the rugby gear doesn’t sever ties, either. In Spring 2023, the D2 Honey Badgers advanced to the USA Club Rugby XV’s Women’s D2 national championship game in St. Charles, Missouri. They lost by 10 points, but the experience outweighed the disappointment.

“We had so many alumni come out,” Gallagher-Johnson said. “It was such an incredible experience. We had so many injuries along the way, the fact that we were still even able to get to that game and have so many former players support us was amazing.”

Russo, who took over as the team’s president this year, said the team’s worked to spread the love out, too.

The Honey Badgers raised \$1,200 for the Wellness House of Annapolis, a facility that aids in cancer recovery, and held a Cancer Awareness game.

As new DEI leader as of a few weeks ago, Lawhorne wants to do even more. She’s reached out to local groups that host rec rugby, such as the Green Hornets, to see how the Honey Badgers can grow and welcome more people.

“You don’t see it in public schools. You only hear about it if you know someone who’s doing it and pulled you in, or you played yourself,” Lawhorne said. “And it’s so empowering. It promotes that positive body image too — it doesn’t matter what your body’s like, as long as you can run or get fit, you can play.”



Adam Corder, right, passes the ball during a recent Honey Badgers practice. (Paul W. Gillespie/Staff photo)