

A TOAST TO DR. WATSON AND RUGBY

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The Priory Scholars of New York City,
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The Headmistress has asked me today to toast Dr. Watson and the game of rugby, which we learn from today's story, "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire", was the game he played for Blackheath as a younger man.

This assignment was a challenging one for me, for I suppose I won't shock this American audience by confessing that my knowledge of rugby football was nil. But fortunately, I was able to locate a trifling monograph on the subject – a short chapter in *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes* – that gave me the background I needed.

Rugby is an outdoor game that can be described as falling midway on a continuum between modern American football and the game we call soccer. It is a rough, hard-fought game today and in the nineteenth century, it was rougher, with frequent injuries and reportedly, even deaths occurring during games.

There are two types of plays during rugby matches that may be of particular interest to us. The first is referred to as the scrum, or scrummage (the root of the American football term "scrimmage"). This play serves the same role as a face-off or jump-ball in other sports, that is, awarding possession of the ball to one team or the other. In a scrum, eight members of each team, the forwards, stand close to each other, each man's his arms holding tight to his neighbors. The two opposing forward groups face each other just a couple of yards apart, the ball is thrown in between them, and the forwards try to capture the ball for their team by kicking it behind them to one of their teammates, the halfbacks and the three-quarter backs. Until the ball has been kicked behind and captured by one team or the other, two eight forwards cling to each other, moving and working together.

Another iconic type of play takes place after the ball has gone out of bounds, or in rugby parlance, out of touch. The ball is kicked onto the field from the sideline, into groups of players from each team who will try to gain possession. Each time is entitled to lift one player into the air – shoulder-high – to improve his chances of catching the ball. The lifters must hold onto the body of the lifted player, not merely his clothing – a rule that was introduced after several incidents in which players being lifted suffered serious injuries from choking on their jerseys.

Now, modern historians agree that the Duke of Wellington did not actually say that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. And even if he had said it, it wouldn't be directly relevant to rugby, a game that by 1815 hadn't been

invented yet. But somebody said it, and it has been taken as a Victorian adage that men's personalities can be molded by the games they play and the training they receive toward playing them.

What traits would the game of rugby, with teammates clinging to each other and relying on each other for protection, breed in trained and experienced rugby players – men such as John Watson.

Loyalty – such as the loyalty Dr. Watson displays to Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

Friendship – such as the friendship Dr. Watson feels for Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

Trust – such as the trust that Dr. Watson places in Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

On the other hand, what traits might *not* be emphasized in rugby football? What skills would not be selected for (to use an evolutionary term) on the rugby pitch?

I submit, ladies and gentlemen, that perhaps *attention to fine detail* is a qualification that might not be essential in playing the game of rugby. Attention to detail would not be a defining quality of a man who was trained to think like a rugby player.

... and who was trained to act like a rugby player.

... and who was frequently hit on the head, as a rugby player.

Perhaps our knowledge that Dr. John H. Watson played rugby for Blackheath, against such opponents as “Big Bob” Ferguson, helps explain quite a number of things about the Canon.

Perhaps it is to be expected that a former rugby player might not always be sure exactly what date it is.

... or exactly what year it is...

... or exactly what decade it is...

... or whether he was married at a given time, and if so, to whom...

... or what exactly his full name is...

... or where exactly he was shot.

And so I submit, ladies and gentlemen, that rugby may explain a great deal about the men we all know and love as the Chronicler of the Canon.

Ladies and gentlemen, to rugby – and to Dr. John H. Watson.