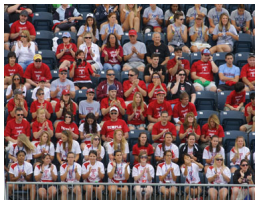
As PPL Park begins to fill with spectators, it's not just the players who are eager to make the USA Sevens Collegiate Rugby Championship a success. A few short years ago, Jon Miller, president of programming for NBC Sports and VERSUS, had little knowledge of rugby, other than it was popular outside of the USA. Now, in 2011, Miller and the USA Sevens have thrown their full weight behind an event with a well of potential.



Temple fans decked out in team gear (Marvin Dangerfield)

In wasn't until 2008 that Miller's interest for rugby 7s first piqued. While attending an international golf conference in Beijing, Miller learned that rugby 7s was also submitting a bid for the 2016 Summer Olympics.

"I was intrigued and began quietly investigating the sport when I came back to New York," Miller said. "I knew rugby was big internationally but didn't really have a footprint in the USA." Miller familiarized himself with rugby, touching base with USA 7s LLC and learning about its annual event in Las Vegas.

In October 2009, when rugby 7s was accepted into the Olympics, "we went into hyperspeed," Miller said. His team met with USA Rugby, the IRB and USA 7s, and looked for a way to get involved.

"We wanted to develop an event from scratch," Miller said "If we were going to own an event, we wanted to be involved at the foundation stage. We have great promotional platforms and a good track record for creating new events - like hockey's Winter Classic, [extreme sports'] Dew Tour, and various golf tournaments."

Miller initially wanted to host the event in Philadelphia, but PPL Park wasn't ready in time for a June unveiling, so the tournament migrated to Columbus, Ohio.

"It was like trying out a new show out of town, and we worked out the kinks," Miller said. "It was a good event, and there was quality competition, but we needed a market that understood international sports, and that's why we're in Philadelphia this year."

One of the most important lessons that Miller and the USA 7s group learned from the Columbus event was that every aspect of the local community - from the print media, to sports affiliates, to local government and social media platforms - needed to be engaged in order to adequetly promote the event.

"It takes a long time to build these kinds of events, but if you believe in the sport and the entity, you can withstand the tough times," Miller said.

NBC Sports is pulling its weight as well, airing 14 hours of live coverage, which is a record for the sport in the USA. Today, Universal Sports is airing the footage from 12 p.m.-2 p.m., then VERSUS picks up the feed from 2-4, followed by NBC Sports from 4-6 p.m., and then back against to VERSUS at 6 p.m. On Sunday, Universal Sports will air live footage from noon-6 p.m.

And those who travel to PPL Park will be equally treated, having access to an even bigger festival with all kinds of activities on the grounds, international beers and food trucks and music groups (including tonight's performance from the Dropkick Murphys).

"I believe the future hold a continued growth in popularity, and I would like to see Philadelphia become the permanent home of the CRC 7s, like the Indy sports races or Omaha's college world series," Miller said. Down the road, Miller believes this Philadelphia event will be a good bargaining chip should the IRB consider the USA as a Rugby World Cup site.

"I love it," Miller said. "When I watch it on TV, I talk to people when I see them playing. I didn't play rugby as a kid, but I didn't play hockey as a kid, and I know love it."

Miller's hoping that his transformation to rugby fan will be equally felt across the country as the

CRC continues to grow and infiltrates more homes on TV.