

## Rugby League Game

by James Kirkup

Sport is absurd, and sad.

Those grown men, just look,

In those dreary long blue shorts,

Those ringed stockings, Edwardian,

Balding pates, and huge

Fat knees that ought to be heroes'.

Grappling, hooking, gallantly tackling –

Is all this courage really necessary? –

Taking their good clean fun

So solemnly, they run each other down

With earnest keenness, for the honour of

Virility, the cap, the county side.

Like great boys they role each other

In the mud of public Saturdays,

Groping their blind way back

To noble youth, away from the bank,

The wife, the pram, the spin drier,

Back to the Spartan freedom of the field.

Back, back to the days when boys

Were men, still hopeful, and untamed,

That was then: a gay

And golden age ago

Now, in vain, domesticated,

Men try to be boys again.

### Glossary:

Dreary – dull, boring.

Edwardian –characteristic of the time of the reign of King Edward VII (approx. 1901-1910).

Pate – head, brains.

Gallant – brave.

Solemnly – seriously; sadly.

Earnest – serious; intense.

Virility – manliness; male sexual capability.

County – governmental division of a province. (*South African-* municipality)

Grope – search with one's hands without the use of one's sight.

Spartan – enduring hardship or pain without complaint; harsh, aggressive; sparse.

Gay – cheerful; brightly coloured, showy; pleasure loving; homosexual.

Satirical – attacking any wickedness, folly or abuse through mockery or sarcasm.

Nostalgia – yearning for what is past or inaccessible; sentimental feelings for past happiness.

### Summary:

The speaker expresses his views about a rugby league match played by middle-aged men well past their prime. He sees them as pitiable and ridiculous as they use the game to recapture their youth and escape the boring routine of their married lives. The poem satirises the importance men place on sport and men who try to regain their lost youth.

### Tone:

Sardonic (mocking)

Critical (disapproving)

Cynical (negative opinion)

Disenchanted (unsatisfied)

Scathing (emotionally hurtful)

### Interpretation:

### Key:

**Green** – domestic metaphor.

### Line:

1. The speaker expresses his opinion, setting the tone for the poem.
2. 'Those' depersonalises the men, suggesting their immaturity.

3. The speaker suggests their silliness by pointing out their strange way of dressing. The contrast of 'long' and 'shorts' again suggests that the men are not being sensible (their rugby game is supposedly opposed to the domestic lives they should be living as grown men).
4. 'Edwardian' suggests that the players look outdated. This suggests that they are out of place (they do not belong on a rugby field).
5. The speaker points out the rugby players' physical signs of aging in order to emphasise that they should not be on the field at their age (sport is best left to the young).
6. 'Huge' and 'fat' is redundant (a description containing words of the same or similar meaning and thus unnecessary). This is for emphasis. That their knees ought to be the knees of heroes' suggests that the players fall short of being heroes.
  
7. The speaker lists some physical aspects of the game of rugby.
8. The speaker then mocks the courage displayed by the team, questioning its necessity.
9. 'Good clean fun' is an essential attitude of sports and sportsmanship which the speaker mocks by contrasting 'fun'...
10. with 'solemnly'. The rest of the line portrays their actions to be violent.
11. The players show such devotion to their violent game for the meagre purpose of honour. This further mocks the rugby players.
12. The mockery continues as the goals to which the players seek are given as pointless. Manliness, their team, their district side.
  
13. The speaker calls the players 'boys' who, in a most humiliating and immature way, roll each other in the mud.
14. That the players do this in public, for everyone to see, suggests their foolishness.
15. 'Blind' suggests that the players are unaware of their pathetic state of existence.
16. The speaker believes youth to be dignified. It is ironic that the players are trying to achieve youth, dignity, by playing rugby, which is seen as undignified by the speaker. The speaker believes that the players are playing rugby in order to escape their domestic lives. The bank is representational of finance and occupation.
17. The wife is representational of married life, the pram of children and the spin drier of domestic chores. The spin of a spin cycle may suggest the never-ending cycle of the routine of domestic life.
18. 'Spartan' suggests that the life that the players seek is one of discipline and aggression and free from responsibility or material concern.

19. The speaker has a favourable impression of youth. The repetition of 'back' in the previous line and this one suggests that youth is something that the players have not experienced in a long time.
20. The speaker describes youth as the ability to have hope for the future, to believe that you were something were not and being free from the responsibilities of domestic life.
21. The speaker expresses the opinion that youth was a happy time of pleasure seeking...
22. and of great worth and achievement (as suggested by 'golden'). The long 'a' and 'o' sounds create a nostalgic tone, suggesting that the speaker is remembering his own youth.
23. The middle- aged players try hopelessly...
24. to regain their youth.