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## Rugby popularity on the rise in post-Qaddafi Libya



Unloved under the former regime for its rough play, rugby is enjoying an increase in popularity in post-Qaddafi Libya.

More than a year after the fall of Dictator Muammar Qaddafi, rugby is building an avid fan base in the country's largest cities - Tripoli and Benghazi - and taking the first step in starting a national rugby league.

Under Qaddafi's rule, a sport could only be promoted with the support of the regime. Now Libya's government has given rugby the stamp of approval to start the first Libyan rugby league and cup.

"The Sport and Youth Ministry recognized the sport of rugby and supported us, and because of this support from the ministry we have initiated the Libyan League and Libya Cup. This one today is the Libyan League," says Mustafa al-Hothi, a member of both the Libya Rugby Technical Committee and the Sport and Youth Ministry's media office.

On a rugby field in the eastern city of Benghazi, fount of the 2011 uprising that ousted Qaddafi, players express hope for the future of the sport. "The game is developing step by step. Before the revolution the game got no attention or prospect, and it wasn't even included in the Olympic committee. The guys were just meeting up with one another to play matches and leagues. Now it is a little bit better. Sometimes the referees from Tunisia come over, and other times the committee from South Africa follows up on our status, and it is improving," says Mohamed al-Haj, a player on the Al Hilal team in Benghazi.

Rugby is still a fairly young sport in Libya, and in order to improve the skill and competitiveness of its players, the Libyan Olympics committee have organized games in the hope of attracting more local, informal rugby clubs to take part in the league.

“Tripoli had three teams, now there are two. For Benghazi there are three, and we will try to create a future for the game. The game has an audience in Europe but not in the Middle East. In North Africa the game is recognized and we took part in the North African Cup 2010 as a Libyan National team, and that was the first appearance of the Libyan national team,” says Mohamed Abu Rass on Tripoli’s Al Shabab team.

Libya has enlisted the help of international experts from the Confederation of African Rugby and Olympics Committee to work on projects that will help upgrade the levels of the game.

“My visit here represents two aspects. The first is to supervise a training course to create first-class referees, and this will be in the next two days. The second aspect is to have meetings with the game supervisors in Benghazi to evaluate the current status of Rugby in Libya and cooperate with them to create strategic plans and programs to support and improve the game,” says Mohamed Abu Shmal, a representative from the Confederation of African Rugby who is in Benghazi inspecting players’ performance.

Rugby advocates praise the sport for its intense teamwork and emphasis on fair play, qualities that are particularly useful in a vast and divided country.