

Alexis Ward knows sports are for more than the elite-level player. A player on the UVA women's rugby team, Ward had the misfortune of tearing an ACL, ending her time on the field.

The injury caused Ward to pivot the direction she applied her efforts and love of rugby. Instead of being in on scrums and tackles, she would teach the sport. What's more, her efforts were beyond teaching rugby to the next generation of players, she wanted to open the game to everyone.

"I want people to enjoy rugby. It's by far the best sport," Ward says.

Ward founded the Charlottesville Cardinals unified rugby team, not to be confused with the men's team called the Virginia Cardinals. A unified team, as the name states, is for all people. Age, gender and ability or special needs do not matter. Unified rugby is touch, ostensibly non-contact. It's safe for people who would not want to be part of a full-contact sport.

"The main purpose is to have everyone integrated, people of all abilities," Ward says. "The rugby community is welcoming. The disability community in Charlottesville is huge. To connect both of them is neat."

Ward says players with physical challenges are paired with fully-abled players on the field during games.

"We do a one-to-one or one-to-two pairing – one athlete who has special abilities and a partner who has played and knows the rules," Ward says. "They are pairs on the field when they play. That's what makes up our 15. Athletes get creative space to maneuver how they want."

Unified rugby is a brand new sport. The Cardinals are the third team founded, just behind the Washington Wolfpack and the Black Thorn Barbarians, from the Washington D.C. and Philadelphia areas, respectively.

Last year the Wolfpack and Cardinals played a game on the National Mall and Ward was there to see it.

"When it was Wolfpack versus Barbarians, there were fully-abled athletes chasing disabled athletes. It's competitive. The athletes themselves going all out," Ward says. "Sometimes when you're paired with a person who really helps, you can truly demonstrate what abilities you have."

A second team from Pennsylvania has come online, as well as a team in Denver. Ward says a tournament is hoped for where all the teams can play each other.

So far, the team has just practiced, with one abbreviated scrimmage against the UVA women's team and an intrasquad demonstration at halftime of a UVA men's game.

Last year, the season ended with a skills competition hosted in Charlottesville by Virginia Amateur Sports. The second annual showcase will be on April 2, at the VFW fields in Charlottesville, with VAS providing the awards.

There will be four stations where players are scored: kicking for distance, kicking for accuracy, passing for distance, and passing for accuracy.

Ward says all participants will be grouped by overall knowledge of rugby to make the competition fair.

“Kicking and passing are different even among skilled players,” Ward says.

Last season the skills competition was the culmination of the season, which consisted of four practices. This year there are plans to play the other unified sides in the summer, so it will continue past April 2.

Ward says VAS was a big help with the skills competition.

“Amanda Mangum helped me out a ton and I’m really appreciative,” she says.

The Charlottesville Cardinals are open to anyone, with no restrictions on residency, ability or any other factor.

To learn more, visit www.charlottesvillecardinalsrugby.com.