

CHAPTER FIVE The Mysterious Case of the Harvard Women's Rugby Team “The feeling was that student athletes bring something special to a community.”

The chapter “The Mysterious Case of the Harvard Women's Rugby Team” explores the intriguing dynamics behind Harvard University's decision to establish a women's varsity rugby team in 2013, a choice that raises questions about social engineering, athletics, and admissions practices. During a rainy day rugby match against Princeton, Harvard showcased a well-rehearsed team with experience and depth, unlike Princeton's nascent program composed mainly of athletes from other sports. Despite the spirited competition, this match led to a reflection on Harvard's motivations for maintaining a robust athletics program.

Harvard offers over fifty sports clubs and competes in a wide range of Division I sports, yet the addition of women's rugby underscores a deeper strategic intent. Recruiting for varsity rugby is a challenge in the U.S. due to the sport's relative obscurity, particularly among women. The team's coach, Mel Denham, emphasized global scouting efforts, highlighting the diverse backgrounds of players, many hailing from affluent areas.

The chapter further delves into the admissions process, distinguishing between standard applicants and a special category known as ALDCs—Athletes, Legacies, Dean's Interest List, and Children of faculty—which encompass 30% of the student body. The admission rates for ALDCs starkly favor them compared to regular applicants, particularly emphasizing athletic recruits who receive a significant advantage despite lower academic qualifications. The superiority of athletes in admissions suggests that sports serve as a means of maintaining demographic balance within the student body.

This phenomenon draws on historical context, recalling earlier admissions biases rooted in anti-Semitism that shaped Ivy League institutions like Harvard. The chapter reveals how Harvard's parameters for admissions and its strategic sports decisions are intertwined, indicating a deliberate effort to control group proportions while presenting opportunities for diversity. It insinuates that the establishment of the women's rugby team serves the dual purpose of expanding athletic opportunities and upholding the institution's demographic balance, ultimately rendering the practices of elite college admissions a form of social engineering .