

Steve Lewis is a Scottish transplant in the US, a mainstay of sevens in the Americas, general manager for Rugby United New York, a stalwart friend and a Lizard, not necessarily in that order.

He can explain the nickname. I can explain why I'm writing about him here. Usually, once a month or so, we meet for breakfast on the Upper West Side, to discuss James Bond and [scrambled eggs](#) – it's a ritual, indulge us – and, more importantly, the game we love in the country that took us in. We can't do that at the moment because Steve's in a bubble with RUNY, preparing for season four of Major League Rugby, which kicks off on 20 March. So when I told him I was writing this column, we did what everyone does in 2021 – we arranged to have brekker by Zoom.

As PG Wodehouse had it, it is never difficult to distinguish between a Scotsman with a grievance and a ray of sunshine. Steve looked pained. Some of it was back ache, from repeatedly clearing a Jersey City training field of the snow that seemed to fall for all of February. But a lot of it was brain ache, from trying to prepare for MLR.

If this column will have an overarching message, aside from that readers should also follow [Pat Clifton](#) and [Alex Goff](#) and other highly qualified Virgils in what Martin Amis slightly unfairly [called the Moronic Inferno](#), it will be that in American rugby, nothing is ever easy. At all.

Ask [Play Rugby USA](#) and [Memphis Inner-City Rugby](#) about taking the game into schools. Ask anyone who ever tried [to turn football players to rugby](#). Ask those who experienced [PRO](#). Ask leagues which tried to plant a flag, the [Premiership](#) and [Pro14](#). Ask mighty AIG about its [All Blacks deal](#).

I've been here eight years. I've written for the Guardian, [the New York Times](#) and [the Washington Examiner](#), I've interviewed [Springboks](#) and [generals](#) and recently, lucky me, landed [a deal](#) for a book. The chief lesson of it all is that the "sleeping giant" thing, beloved of rugby writers everywhere – if only America took rugby seriously, it would rule the world, etc – is bullshit. Americans do take rugby seriously, and a lot of them at that, in all 50 states. But from school to college to club to the military to the international arena, they run on passion, commitment and very little cultural or financial support.

I've seen projects come and I've seen them go. I'm tangled up in [the politics of it all](#) just like anyone else. And next to Steve, I'm an amateur.

For him and the rest of the RUNY staff preparing to face San Diego does not just mean endlessly scraping snow off the turf in Jersey. It means building a gym in a warehouse nearby. It means dealing with the sound studio two floors down whenever a prop drops a weight. It means driving to Secaucus in a blizzard to pick up mats for the gym. Nobody should have to drive to Secaucus for anything, whatever the weather, even people who live in Secaucus. It means driving the mats back south to install.

It means doing all that without the head coach, [Greg McWilliams](#), who stepped down this month for family reasons, taking with him the best wishes of all in US rugby.

It means doing more. For one thing, working out which stadium RUNY will call home. Ten days out from kick-off options are being explored, though as the first four games will be away there's time yet to confirm. RUNY have played at [MCU Park in Coney Island](#), a wonderful place out under the roller coasters, the Atlantic booming next door.

And, of course, season prep means Covid prep. It means scheduling tests and check-ins for players, coaches and staff. It means keeping inside a bubble. It means working out travel. In MLR in a normal year that's eight states plus Washington DC and Canada, though Old Glory DC now play in Virginia. Under Covid, visiting squads must have single hotel rooms. New York City may be crying out for business but it is still more expensive than Texas, Georgia or Utah.

Ordinarily, Steve is a man or lizard happy in his apartment or lair with a tin of beans, a single malt and the [1984 grand slam on YouTube](#). Little time for that now.

Someone writing about Philip Roth said that to New Yorkers, death is Connecticut. Under Covid, the undiscovered country turns out to be Canada. International borders are too much to tackle so the Toronto Arrows will play home games in Atlanta. As California is as strict on Covid as New York, [San Diego will play in Las Vegas](#). At least those two teams will play: Dallas have delayed entry until next year. And despite all that, all could still go wrong in the upwards blip of a case count. Last year did, after just five games.

In normal times, rugby in America is an outsider sport, driven by the zeal of missionary and convert. In abnormal times, if anything drives MLR to its championship game in August it will be that simple desire to reach the promised land. RUNY and the other 11 teams are getting on with the job, which is getting the show on the road.

Steve landed in Colorado in 1990 and played for Vail before moving into coaching. He's seen it all and he has some good advice. At every level, from flag-and-tag minis to college and club, from MLR to the Eagles, 2021 is about getting back on the field. That's it. Win, lose, whatever. If American rugby does not manage that, every foothold will be loosened further. Every new fan will feel less of a pull to come back.

As Jim Telfer, [another great Scot](#), once shouted at the Lions in South Africa, it's time to "make it happen". Everything else comes after.