

For years they battled on the rugby field, first as college students and later as members of an amateur team that traveled throughout the Midwest. As aches, pains, careers and families accumulated, the Black Sheep rugby team faded and the teammates mostly drifted apart.

"Then about 12 years ago I came to see Bernie and we were talking about our children and how our joints hurt in the morning, and we realized that 10 years ago we would have been talking about playing rugby and drinking beer," said Jonathon Burke, a former team member.

Black Sheep Return to the Flock

"Then I said, 'Let's get everybody back together. Let's have a golf tournament,'" said Bernard J. "Bernie" Lears. "After the second year, we decided to have a charity focus on causes for children. So far we have raised around \$300,000 for kids' charities."

One of the Black Sheep's adopted causes is the Footprints program at SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center, which assists children with chronic or life-threatening illnesses and their families in living well through coordinated medical, physical, emotional and spiritual support. The club has generously donated all proceeds from an annual golf tournament to Footprints.

The Black Sheep rugby team was organized in 1978 by former members of club teams at Saint Louis University and Washington University. After graduating, players who had become friends joined forces and picked a team name out of a dictionary. A sketch of a ram's head was selected as the team mascot.

"We spent a lot of time together," Lears said. "We practiced two or three times a week and on weekends we traveled together. We'd be staying in a hotel with four guys to a room, sometimes eight or ten!"

"Rugby is a very hard game," Burke said. "It is very physical and you are very dependent on your teammates to watch out for you. You need to be passionate about it."

The team stayed together until 1985 or 1986. When the members reconnect at golf tournaments, "It's almost like we are 21 or 22 again," Burke said. "Everybody slots in effortlessly, which I guess is the definition of friendship."

As the group's ambitions grew, it formed a Black Sheep Foundation to keep its charitable activities organized. "Every dollar we raise goes to a charitable organization," said Lears, who is president of Potter Electric Signal Company. "Everything is done



Top: The Missouri Rugby Union champions for 1982-83.
Right: John Wolf (left) and Bernie Lears.



voluntarily and we don't have administrative expenses except for what is needed to get the event running."

The focus on children's charities, including Footprints, has brought deeper meaning to Black Sheep reunions. Each of the two annual Black Sheep golf tournaments includes a presentation on children who will be assisted by the event's proceeds. "The idea of the foundation was to help children with disabling or terminal diseases through their tough times," Lears said. "It's been a wonderful thing because people see how real are the needs we are talking about. You see the tears in all the guys' eyes."

"Our theory of a golf tournament is, 'We are going to make you laugh, we are going to make you cry, and we're going to have beer,'" said Burke, a real estate appraiser with L.H. Wisniewski & Associates.

While about 110 men played for the Black Sheep, its current roster of participants has grown to about 350 people. "We have met a lot of nice guys who like what we are doing. A couple of guys, myself included, have had kids who had serious problems," Lears said. "My daughter, Kristen, had cancer when she was 13. She made it and is 25 now. She was a far tougher little kid than I ever thought I had. That is not something I want any child to experience."

"After we became a foundation, we became aware of the Footprints program and fell in love with it," he said. "When you see what these families are going through, you just want to do something for them."

"We have raised far more money for charity than any rugby club in this country," Burke said. "We realize that, but for the grace of God, it could be one of our children. We thought we would be helping make some children better off. In actuality, we have been left better off."

If you would like more information about the ways in which you may become a friend of Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital, please call the Office of Development at 314.577.5605 or 800.269.0552. You also may e-mail us at info@glennon.org. All inquiries will remain confidential.