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Sculptor and painter Jean-Pierre Rives at the restaurant Piperade in San Francisco; one of his paintings is on the wall behind him. Inset below left: Rives in his rugby-playing days.

Jean-Pierre Rives

Renowned French artist and former rugby superstar takes his passion and energy to the Bay Area

By Carolyn Zinko

When strolling the streets of Tiburon or the shores of Stinson Beach with his partner, Sonia Rives-Deleval, and their two young sons, tousle-haired Jean-Pierre Rives looks like any dad hanging out with his family.

But French tourists know different, doing double-takes and asking for autographs.

Rives, 59, was once a superstar flanker in the rugby world — as famous as former San Francisco 49er quarterback Joe Montana was in the heyday of his football career.

Imagine if Montana had spent his hours away from the field dabbling in art. Rives did just that. The International Rugby Hall of Famer is today a renowned sculptor and painter who spends part of the year in France and part of the year in Tiburon, making art and enjoying Bay Area life.

Some might view his two careers as disparate, but he thinks the driving forces behind them are similar.

"Life is passion and energy," he said. "When you have that, you can do anything — art, sports, whatever you like."

Rives' parents were tennis players who wanted him to take up the racquet, but he fell into rugby instead, drawn by the camaraderie and energy of team sport.

He played at the amateur level from age 19 to 31 (professional rugby was not created until 1995) and earned a law degree in college. But he also enjoyed art. Living in the suburbs of Paris, he spent his free time in the homes of sculptor Albert Féraud and painter Ladislav Kijno, who became his mentors.

Rives' works have been displayed at the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris, the annual "Sculpture by the Sea" exhibitions in Australia and the Gateway to the United Nations in New York City. At the Serge Sorokko Gallery in San Francisco, Rives' abstract rusted steel beam sculptures and his canvases painted with oil paint and tar are on display through Oct. 10.

"It's about the invention and the energy," Rives said of his work. "I use metal, which is industrial. I use tar because it's industrial, too. The rust is a symbol of time passing, a reminder that life and time changes you, and that in every moment, there is beauty."

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RIVES' FAVORITE FAMILY HANGOUTS

Piperade restaurant, 1015 Battery St. "I love the people. I enjoy the place. Favorite dishes? I don't have one. I'm too fat, so I need to go on a diet. The food is very good, though."



Paul Chern / The Chronicle

Pixar Animation Studios, 1200 Park Ave., Emeryville. "Cody Harrington (a digital effects artist and technical director) is a friend. The way of life at that company is incredible. If you visit, you can see how the employees share energy, passion and common sense."



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Stinson Beach, Muir Woods and Bolinas. "I love the natural beauty of these places, and we go there for the kids. Do I run around with them? I ran too much when I was younger, playing rugby. Now I walk."

Town Center Corte Madera, 100 Corte Madera Town Center at Tamalpais Drive. "Sonia does the shopping. I do the carrying. There are so many brands we don't get in France, like Juicy Couture and J. Crew. Young people at home are crazy about Abercrombie & Fitch."

Boardwalk Shopping Center, 1550 Tiburon Blvd., Tiburon. "We love to walk on the boardwalk with all the nice people. Everyone is relaxed. And the good thing about Tiburon is that it's not crowded."

West America Tae Kwon Do, 70 Lomita Drive, No. 8, Mill Valley. "Roger Carlson, who founded the school, was a world champion. His daughter is a national champion and teaches there, too. Do I want my kids to play rugby? I want them to follow their passion. They like to golf. My wife plays golf very well. I try. But we took our kids to the tae kwon do, too. It's wonderful."