

Glendale Raptors Look To Maintain Post At America's Rugby Pinnacle

by Marco Cummings

An old mountaineer's proverb says: "Even though you have reached the summit, you haven't reached your final destination."

It's an adage that can be applied to the *Glendale Raptors* men as they enter the 2016 *Pacific Rugby Premiership* (PRP) campaign.

League titleholders following their 25-11 home win over *San Francisco Golden Gate* in the PRP Final, the Raptors still have work ahead, with this year's goal set on pushing for a second-straight league crown.

"Our main goal is to retain the title and just play a brand that's good enough to see us back at the top," said Raptors head coach Andre Snyman. "Our second goal is to keep developing the depth of the club and the quality of the players."

The task of bolstering the club's depth will be a challenge for Snyman with the team losing several key contributors from last season's championship run.

Among the key losses are lock Austin Welch and prop Nick Wallace. Welch, a former Santa Rosa Junior College standout will be returning to his home state of California. Wallace will also make the trip west. The bay area native and graduate of St. Mary's college is rumored to have his sights set on playing club rugby in Australia.

Max Statler retired during the offseason, but the 29-year-old's status remains up in the air as the rugby bug has begun itching.

"He says he misses the game too much," Snyman said of Statler.

The club will also be without prop Ben Tarr, who suffered a season ending knee injury last March.

Despite the turnover, the Raptors coach is confident in his roster: "Those are the main guys that we've lost but I'm confident we have enough depth to replace them."

In their place, the Raptors have brought in reinforcements. The team's most promising new recruit is up and coming USA Eagle scrum-half Niku Kruger. The 24-year-



Photo by Steve Oathout

Glendale Raptors Winger Preston Bryant found space on the side to beat San Francisco Golden Gate tackler to score a try in the Raptors 2015 Pacific Rugby Premiership title victory.

old joins the club after unexpectedly seeing playing time for the *Eagles* in the 2015 *Rugby World Cup*.

"Being new to the team, I have a lot to prove to my new teammates," Kruger said of the Raptors experience. "My goal is to make the No. 9 jersey mine and not only be a great teammate on the field but off the field, too. I would like to bring all that I have experienced through the World Cup and playing for the *Eagles* to Glendale and help us improve as a team."

Snyman has also brought in several other players, but training and grading performances in a pre-season "Battle of Champions" between Glendale and the *Seattle Saracens*, champions of *British Columbia Rugby Union* (BCRU) will determine whether those recruits are of PRP quality.

Explained Snyman, "We've got a few new faces but we're not sure what their qualities are like. They've trained well but haven't played for us yet so it's hard to say whether they're going to have an impact or not."

However, the coach will receive some-

thing more established with the return of veterans like Luke White, Chad London and team captain Zach Fenoglio.

Like Kruger, Fenoglio experienced rugby on the world's biggest stage with a trip to the World Cup in London, England last fall. He too hopes to translate that experience and bring it back to the club level back at *Infinity Park*.

"I am very blessed to have had some amazing experiences in my rugby career and my goal has always been to pass my knowledge on to as many people as possible," Fenoglio said of his World Cup experience. "I look forward to starting another year with Glendale and helping all of us to continue to become the best players we can be."

Strategies, knowledge of structures and live game experience have been boosted for the pair with exposure to world class competition, but Snyman is focusing on one crucial quality that Kruger, Fenoglio and others bring to the squad.

"They've been taking leadership of the training sessions and that's exactly what I



Photo by Seth McConnell

Glendale Raptors Winger Max Statler offloads a pass while cross-town rivals the Denver Barbarians work to bring him down.

would like to see," he emphasized. "Guys like Chad London have also been a part of that [USA Eagles] group. Although he didn't go to the World Cup, [London] is also a leader. We have a good group of senior players with good players around them. I've seen some good signs and I'm happy with how the team is training."

Even with solid leadership in place, winning a second championship and back-to-back titles will be no easy feat, with the opposition locked onto Glendale as its target.

All of the teams provide us with a big game. I think the other coaches will definitely look at our errors from last season and try to analyze us and see how they can beat us," Snyman said.

"I think it's going to be tough. There's no easy game in the PRP anymore. All of the teams are conditioned now and they know what's at stake."

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