

# Glendale Raptors Bullock Passes It Back In Laos

by John Arthur

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Laos is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, a poor nation comprised largely of subsistence farmers, and with the help of Glendale's Mark Bullock, the burgeoning home to one of the world's most passionate and fastest growing rugby communities. Nestled in the heart of the Indochinese peninsula, Laos is bordered by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. Like many of the region's denizens, more than a third of the population of Laos lives below the international poverty line, surviving on less than a dollar and half a day. Though tourism is a growing industry in the small nation (Laos is about 10,000 square miles smaller than Colorado), adequate infrastructure is lacking. The dearth of infrastructure is exacerbated by the fact that much of the population is dispersed in villages along the valleys of the Mekong River and its tributaries.

Poverty, a rural population base, and limited resources are but some of the challenges facing rugby development in Laos — but they are challenges that organizations like "Pass It Back" and the Lao Rugby Federation (LRF) are meeting head on. With the aid of volunteers and professionals like Glendale Raptors Rugby Director Mark Bullock, these organizations are working to make rugby a catalyst that allows impoverished Laotians to discover opportunities for growth out of hardship.

The "Pass It Back" program is centered on employing rugby development as a vehicle for equipping children and young people to dynamically overcome challenges, inspire social change, and ultimately return that invigorating and instructive message to their communities. The program focuses on rugby specifically because of the sport's commitment to gender equality, its values of respect, discipline, and solidarity, and because of its growing and sustainable global popularity. Asia is a specific target because of its enormous youth population, and because of the unique range of threats facing young people in the region. Laos, like other Asian countries in which "Pass It Back" operates, ranks low on the Human Development Index. The organization hopes to improve the ranking by using rugby to inspire confidence, resilience, and knowledge, while empowering young people to understand and exercise their skills and rights as members of both a domestic and international community of athletes and leaders.

For Glendale Rugby Director Mark Bullock, the experience in Laos was an eye-opening one. Invited to assist with coaching by a former protégé and CU alumni now working for the Lao Rugby Federation, Bullock spent four weeks practicing, training, and competing with Laotian players. Traveling and coaching in some of the country's poorest and most remote prov-

inces, Bullock saw first hand the kind of hardship that characterizes everyday life for many Laotian youth — and the dramatic positive effect participation in rugby can have. The "Pass It Back" program has been hugely successful in Laos, with dozens of young coaches trained and more than 600 youth registered for participation. A significant proportion of those participants are females as well, an important point in a region where sports are typically dominated by male players, and where gender-based violence is rampant. Rugby is an empowering endeavor, one that is favored by youth and their parents alike. Across Laos and Vietnam, nearly 40 rugby teams have been formed as a result of the "Pass It Back" program.

Coaching in Laos was a challenge, says Bullock, for a number of reasons. Travel was difficult due to the limited infrastruc-



A young monk playing with a rugby ball after seeing the Lao Rugby Federation youth practice. Photos courtesy of Lao Rugby Federation



Glendale Raptors Director of Rugby Mark Bullock, left, and the Lao Women's Rugby Team after participating in the Kowloon Tens Rugby Tournament.

ture and traffic enforcement, as was becoming acclimated to the accommodations. The Glendale Director lamented the limited availability of safe playing surfaces as well, though he conceded that the Laotian children were so enthusiastic about the game that they would play anywhere there was a clear patch of ground. The hot, humid climate of the region also took some adjustment, as did the difficulty in communicating with players and coaches across a language barrier. Bullock does not bemoan these trials, however, crediting the Raptors' commitment to adaptability as a characteristic of great importance in successfully navigating his experience. Maintaining mental agility, whether competing in sport or in life, was critical, Bullock said.

Following his time in the Laotian countryside, Bullock returned to the capital city of Vientiane to work alongside other national and international coaches in preparing the Lao National Team for competition in the Southeast Asia Sevens Tournament in Singapore. Training was intense, with the coaches focused on preparing the Laotian players to perform under the pressure of international competition. Enduring 10 hot, bumpy hours on a bus en route, Bullock and the team first traveled to Hong Kong

for a separate tournament before the Southeast Asia Sevens — the Kowloon Tens. Comprised entirely of amateur players, both the Lao Men and Women performed admirably against professional teams in the Kowloon event. Traveling from Hong Kong to Singapore for the inaugural Southeast Asia Sevens tournament, both teams again faced professional opponents, and once more performed impressively under Bullock's tutelage. Of 14 teams, the Lao men placed fourth, with the women's team taking fifth place from a field of the same size — a notable showing for a rugby program in its infancy.

Director Mark Bullock's involvement in the "Pass It Back" program in Laos clearly demonstrates the Glendale Raptors' commitment to rugby development — at home and across the globe. The youth being exposed to the sport today will become tomorrow's coaches and ambassadors, reaping the benefits of opportunity that rugby has created in their lives, and spreading the ideals of respect and perseverance that the sport instills. As Bullock says, this program is "about giving young people a chance to participate in a sport and discover that there's more to life than staying in the village and working in the fields. It's about realizing that they can develop positive life skills."

In some significant ways, the story of rugby in Laos parallels the story of rugby in Glendale. Like Glendale, Laos is a centrally located community, composed of hardworking, enthusiastic people, and characterized by its tenacity and its spirit. And if the "Pass It Back" program and the work of passionate people like Mark Bullock is successful, Laos, like Glendale, will have a rich future in rugby.

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