



Photos by Seth McConnell



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Developing Through Rugby

by Kurt Woock

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale
Infinity Park is Colorado's home for rugby. On the weekends, you can find the best players from around the country on the pitch. Throughout the week, you'll find it's just as busy with its burgeoning youth rugby program, the *Glendale Raptors Rugby Academy*.

The youth Raptors Academy at *Infinity Park* is unique among youth athletic programs. The Academy works in conjunction with the Glendale Raptors men's and women's teams, drawing from among their ranks the people who become coaches for the youth program. Children as young as 5 and as old as 18 have the rare opportunity to go to an international rugby tournament and, a few days later, be coached by the same players they were cheering for. Jenna Anderson, the program coordinator for Raptors Academy, said she takes pride in the level of investment that the program makes in the coaches, and that the player-coaches make to become better at coaching. Each coach in the youth rugby program is certified through national programs in order to be equipped to teach the sport effectively and safely. This fall, Anderson sent a few coaches to a higher-level, full-day course through *USA Rugby* that gave them the tools needed to teach advanced tackling techniques.

That long-term view toward coaching is a microcosm of the entire Academy. The individual camps and teams aren't designed to be one-offs. As a young athlete grows up, his or her rugby experience is designed to build on and expand upon years of experience in the program — it's not simply more of the same, year after year, only with taller kids each time. Anderson said this year she saw, for the first time, an age group graduate out of the program having started at its earliest level, age 5. Developing well-rounded athletes takes a concerted effort over time, and the Raptors Academy has a blueprint to do just that.

The program had a successful fall season and has plans to keep that momentum moving forward, through the winter and into the spring. A few highlights:

Fall After School

Fall After School Rugby had about 85 boys and girls from kindergarten through eighth grade participate. Children between 5 and 7 played flag football while older children were divided into two-year groups and learned to tackle.

Practices were held on Tuesdays and Thursdays and, for the first time, offered Saturday scrimmages for anyone in the program. Thanks to a new partnership with *Rugby Colorado*, youth participants from many programs were able to apply what they learned in practice in a fun, new environment.

Anderson said many outgoing eighth graders have plans to continue playing rugby in high school with the skills they've developed at *Infinity Park* over the years.

Winter Indoor

This will be the third year for winter indoor. The program, which meets on four weekends in November and December, is

all non-tackle and held in the gymnasium at the onsite *Glendale Sports Center*. Anderson said the winter indoor program helps athletes develop specific skills and improve conditioning during a time when the weather usually doesn't permit outdoor play. The program can be a boon to young athletes looking for the boost they need to meet goals, like moving from a B team to

an A team, or moving into the starting lineup. "Kids are already thinking about playing at next level, in college, in high school, and this program will help them.

Anderson said the program is also a good opportunity for a player new to the sport to pick up a few rugby basics before joining a league in the spring. "We work on a lot of movement skills," she said. "Many kids can't run and catch at the same time. Kids love making plays. Being able to catch and run will make the game infinitely more fun."

School Visits

In order to bring the sport to as many

people as possible, Anderson tries to make at least two "field trips" every month to neighborhood schools. While there, she runs mini clinics that give students an opportunity to try out some of the skills and learn the basic rules of the sport. She said that since the Summer Olympics, where rugby sevens made its Olympic debut, more and more students are already somewhat familiar with the sport and are certainly intrigued. "Seeing how fun it is, how fast-paced, how fit everyone is: It's really capturing the imagination of families and kids."



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