

Elite Rugby Club Built With Role Models

by Marco Cummings

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale
Great teams are built on great players and the Glendale Raptors Women's Premier League (WPL) team is no exception.

The Raptors are current back to back WPL Champions and are in process of seeking a third title (results of the current WPL season are yet to be determined at the time of publication). It should be no surprise that the team has been built with a number of players with USA Eagles and international experience.

Team captain Sarah Chobot, scrum half Jenny Lui, fly half Hannah Stolba, forward Kristen Shalosky and flanker Joanna Kitlinski are just a few of the many names you'll find wearing both the Blue and White of the Raptors with the Red, White, and Blue of the USA Eagles.

"The Eagle Raptors bring a sense of pro-

fessionalism and dedication to the club," said Lui. "Our top players are great role models."

The group is headed up by head coach Kittery "Kitt" Wagner-Ruiz, a gaffer who's grown in rugby as a player for both the Raptors and the USA Eagles herself. With such close ties to the team, Wagner-Ruiz feels the pressure to produce another title first-hand.

"There's definitely a lot of pressure [to defend the championship], more so as a coach than a team," said Ruiz, who was promoted to head coach in the spring. "It's my first fall as head coach, and it comes after winning national championships as a player and then as an assistant coach. There's pressure, but the chips will fall where they fall. I just want this group to have a good experience and play good rugby."



Photo by Seth McConnell

Carmen Farmer, Rugby 7s Olympian, is raised up to win a lineout at Infinity Park for the Glendale Raptors Women's Premier League team.

Under Ruiz, the culture and camaraderie at the club has been allowed to flourish.

"We're lucky to have Kitt as a head coach," said Lui. "She's a real players' coach and believes that the coach's work is doing practice and that by kick-off time we should feel empowered to take the game into our own hands. It's growth mindset-oriented. We are free to try new things, make our own mistakes, and then learn from them. I really appreciate that as a player because overall, it creates smarter individuals and allows us to express ourselves on the field."

Lui, who's continued to develop since her first international cap in 2009, is an important piece to Wagner-Ruiz's system, a player which the coach lauds as the "chess master."

"Jenny Lui is a very dynamic scrum half and a brilliant rugby mind," said Wagner-Ruiz. "She is a player that is always thinking about the game, watching film to figure out what's next and how to counteract it."

The addition of new and valuable pieces to the team continues. This season, the Raptors have further bolstered their roster with a resident Olympian in Carmen Farmer. Farmer joins the Raptors after a stint with the Eagles squad which qualified for the quarterfinals at the Rio Olympics this past summer.

"I've been coming to practices and games whenever I was in Colorado over the last few years," Farmer said of the move. "The camaraderie and culture of the club was a huge draw. I really liked how the men's and women's clubs supported each other and how there really was a strong community aspect to the club as a whole."

Easing the transition for Farmer has been the welcoming arms from both coaches and teammates.

"She has been a great addition to the team," Wagner-Ruiz said. "Carmen has been flanking for Glendale this season and is a threat with the ball in hand as well as in the air at lineouts. Carmen is a huge asset, she can play in the pack as well as with the backs."

Added Lui, "You see Carmen out there working hard and playing with a certain relentlessness and it makes you want to do the same. She brings a lot of speed, power, and physicality to our team. Plus, she is so humble and a real stand-up teammate. We're really happy to have her on the team."

Despite her prized skill-set and illustrious experience, Farmer is humble, ready to contribute, and happy to be part of the group.

"I don't know if there is much I can bring other than just another player looking for a good club to call home," Farmer said. "There's already a bunch of girls here with vast amounts of international experience and a great group of young girls hungry to make that next step."

"So for me, I'm hoping I can fit in and play some small part. At this point in life, I'm looking to enjoy what little rugby I

have left, and thus far Glendale has offered that to me in spades."

Another important cog in the Raptors' success has been forward Kristen "Shilo" Shalosky. A forward by trade, Shalosky has shown versatility by slotting into a number of roles during her time with Glendale.

"She's played multiple positions during her stay here: prop, lock and No. 8," explained Wagner-Ruiz, who first met Shalosky while playing in Boston seven years ago, saying that the now 26-year-old has come a "long way" since her early playing days at the age of 19.

"She moved herself from the developmental team up to starting on the WPL," Wagner-Ruiz added. "Most of the moves that Shilo has made are for her to better herself as a person and a rugby player. Her desire is to get better herself and put herself in a position to follow her dreams and become an Eagle."

But perhaps the most important piece is the club's captain, Sarah Chobot. Like her head coach, Chobot has practically seen it all on the rugby pitch, spending time alongside Wagner-Ruiz and Farmer as teammates on the USA Eagles side which participated in the 2014 Women's Rugby World Cup.

"She has been a big help as captain and has really stepped into a leadership role on Glendale," Wagner-Ruiz said of Chobot. "She really got the players together before the season to start prepping and started a Wednesday night skill night. It was a great help starting the season with all the basics under our belt."

With a good group assembled, the Raptors current task at hand is to add more silverware to their already illustrious trophy case. But the long-term goal is surely to continue to grow as one of the best women's rugby clubs in North America.

"The expectations here are obviously high and I think it's safe to say that the goal at the start of each year is a National Championship," said Farmer. "I personally have never won a National Championship, so it's definitely a goal for me. I'm in the twilight of my rugby career so you don't get too many more of the opportunities."

"But at the same time, we are very keen to continue to develop the strength and depth of the Club. This is the first year we will have a Division 1 team competing as well. So we definitely want to continue to grow the game and develop our newer players and in general spread the 'rugby gospel'."

Added Lui, "Right now, we're focused on playoffs and taking one game at a time. But long term I think we would all like to see Glendale continue to build as a premier rugby club."



Photo by Justin Purdy

Glendale Raptors Scrum Half Jenny Lui is about to put the ball in for the Raptors scrum against conference rivals San Diego Surfers.

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