

Come One, Come All – A Rugby Story

by John Arthur

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

Every rugby game at *Infinity Park* is an event. Players and fans alike experience the electricity of pre-game nerves, anticipating the action and competition, the challenge and camaraderie. Each match is laden with the promise of exhilaration.

The competition on the last Saturday of February was no exception. A brisk but sunny afternoon, the *Glendale Raptors Elite Men* took on the *Austin Huns* in their second home game of the Spring Season, a match that was anticipated to be one of the most challenging for Glendale this year. Both teams started the game with undefeated records, but the Raptors emerged victorious with a hard-fought 41-10 win.

Part of what makes Glendale's rugby program so special (and so successful) is the presence of a passionate, involved community, one that takes pride in itself and in *Infinity Park*. In speaking with a number of game attendees, a thoughtful, diverse fan base was revealed — one that reinforces Glendale's position as the epicenter of rugby in the U.S., and of the sport's continued growth in national popularity.

Just outside the entrance to *Infinity Park* I met Mike and Dylan Anderson of Denver, who were attending the game

with friends and family. I asked Dylan, 10, what it was he liked about rugby: "Everything," he replied, lobbing a ball to himself as he answered, "It's fast and competitive." Mike, who played rugby in college, says that he has been a fan for decades, introducing Dylan and his friends a few years ago. "They've really taken to it," he says. It's clear from the boys' jerseys and game balls that Dylan and his friends have indeed embraced the sport. Asked if he'd like to play rugby, Dylan gives an emphatic nod, though Mike cautions that mom may have the final say: "She knows I used to play back in the '90s," he chuckles, "that was vintage rugby." Mike admits that the conditions he played in during college are nothing like the facilities the Raptors have at *Infinity Park*, "We love this place. It's second to none."

Anyone who has enjoyed a Raptors game at *Infinity Park* would be hard-pressed to disagree. Inside the facility every seat offers a great view of the pitch, and the excitement from fans on game day is palpable. As the Raptors match was getting underway, I spent a few minutes speaking with Denver resident Daniel and his father Gary. When I asked Daniel, who has been following the Raptors for several years, why rugby instead of soccer or American football,

he replied confidently, "It's just fun. It's fast-paced, non-stop action." While Daniel explains that he prefers 15s rugby, Gary interjects that, "Sevens is pretty cool too." Gary, who grew up in South Africa and formerly played 7s himself, notes with a smile that while rugby is growing in the U.S. the sport is still "a bit more popular" in South Africa.

After a close first half against Austin, the Raptors went on an offensive tear late in the second, piling on points to the cheers of the crowd. Amid the excitement, I met Ankita Laghari (19, of Minneapolis), who attended the game with her parents. The Lagharis are considering buying a condo near Glendale, and wanted to experience some local attractions while visiting the area. All three reported being very impressed with the *Infinity Park* complex. Ankita explained that this was her first time experiencing rugby in person, though she'd seen the sport televised during the 2016 Olympic Games. A soccer and lacrosse player in Minnesota, she quickly picked up the rules of the game. Asked what she thought of rugby, she mused, "It's much more strategic than I imagined... these guys are really fit." She went on to admit that even with the tackling and physicality of the sport, the players displayed poise and sportsmanship. After a moment's thought, she suggested that rugby was like "football with manners."

Rugby's distinction as a gentleman's game is long lived and well deserved, and is likely a contributing factor in the sport's surge in U.S. popularity in recent years. Demographics reveal that rugby's burgeoning American audience is largely an educated, modestly affluent one — and that it is steadily growing. In fact, for the past several years rugby has been the fastest-growing sport in the nation, showing particular popularity among high school and college age players and fans. Part of the attraction for young participants is likely rugby's emphasis on technique and safety, attractive qualities to a U.S. audience that has become increasingly fearful of American football's hazards. Parents appreciate rugby's non-contact youth programs for the same reasons.

USA Rugby reports over 1.1 million participants in the sport as of 2016, a number that continues to increase. The return of 7s rugby to the 2016 Olympics, as well as in-network rugby coverage from both NBC and ESPN has helped to fuel the sport's meteoric revival in the United States. With major networks and sponsors staking claims, rugby is poised to truly enter the mainstream nationally.

As rugby's popularity increases, and the national perception of the sport shifts, fan experiences at *Infinity Park* will remain steadfastly positive. The heart of rugby in the United States, Glendale's impassioned community, its state-of-the-art facilities, and its talented players and coaches will usher in a new era for the sport — one that embraces and engages all participants and fans.

Colorado Can Do Better

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and don't be silent — let your elected officials know you too want the Missouri model adopted for Colorado kids, for the staff who work at DYC and for the taxpayers. How long must kids, staff and taxpayers wait for a more thoughtful, constructive model of youth corrections to be implemented by DYC? Asking for a treatment model for our kids in DYC which forbids abuse is long overdue.

Dr. Kathleen Hynes is a speaker with the American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado. After receiving a PhD in Sociology from the University of Denver, Dr. Hynes held a faculty appointment at the University of Colorado School of Medicine teaching medical ethics and researching health care delivery systems. She left the University and began her own research business, which she pursued for over two decades. She works with the ACLU because she says there is no better way to ensure social justice than by working to protect, defend and extend the civil rights and civil liberties of all people.



By Seth McConnell

At 6-foot-9 Casey Rock, a Lock for the Glendale Raptors, rises above the competition at *Infinity Park* to win possession at a line out.

#RugbyRising

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RUGBY ACADEMY

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make friends, be competitive, join the pathway to the raptors.

April 25 - June 24

Tuesdays and Thursdays at *Infinity Park* @ 5:15-6:45pm

Saturday Games: 9am-2pm *see website for details



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