

Rugby Athletic Helps Foster American Rugby Identity

by Kurt Woock

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

You'd be hardpressed to beat Chris Babiash's perspective on U.S. rugby. His Minnesota-based company *Rugby Athletic* provides teams across the country with equipment and apparel. From a fan's perspective, seeing the ranks of fellow rugby fans swell is evidence enough of the sport's rapid growth. From Babiash's point of view, however, tracking growth is done in two columns. In one, the increasing number of fans and participants. In the other, business development. A strong business model creates an environment that can support the growing fandom of rugby and foster even more growth. Without it, that growth can flounder as fans are left wanting more. In other words, a typical rugby fan gauges rugby's success by looking around the stands on game day and comparing the present to the past. Babiash looks at a team's business plan and thinks about the future.

U.S. rugby is in a transitional state, from loosely organized weekend clubs scattered across the country to a network of teams and leagues that are operating with the mindset of a professional organization. Babiash said that today's environment is markedly different than the conditions that existed even 12 months ago. The world is taking notice. "The biggest battle we have right now is dealing with everyone who wants a piece of the U.S. market," Babiash said. "The people that have been in the U.S. business as long as we have are trying to grow, but there's a ton of brands that are global — from China, the U.K., Australia, Ireland — that are now trying to sell direct into the U.S. market." While an influx of people entering a market can be a challenge for those already doing business, it's also a sign of a market's potential. For those looking for hard evidence that rugby's growth is real, this is it.



Glendale Raptors Center Chad London, sporting the 2017 Rugby Athletic produced dark kit, passes the ball at Infinity Park in a match against Rocky Mountain rivals Rugby Utah.

As the business model of rugby continues to mature, some similarities to other professional sports emerge: A more robust game-day stadium experience, increased team engagement with the community at non-rugby events, a lively social media and Internet presence that lets fans follow the team between games. Those similarities notwithstanding, Babiash said that U.S. rugby has diverged in many ways from the template followed by most major sports in the U.S. "One thing we see as the sport grows is that the US is starting to take on a Euro model of rugby structure," he said. "That means you have a team like the Glendale Raptors elite men's team, but alongside that you also have a women's elite team, multiple development teams, a youth program: It's club structure." Babiash said other teams are adopting that model, which has propelled success at *Infinity Park*. "As a supplier, we see that overseas. We've seen a lot more organizations like this in the U.S. over the last 18 months as teams develop. Your better teams across the country are starting to have high school, middle school,



Glendale Raptors Flanker John Quill sporting the Rugby Athletic produced white kit, breaks tackles against the NorCal Pelicans at Infinity Park.

Photos by Seth McConnell

youth, and women's programs. That all funnels into the success of the same club instead of each branch trying to make it on their own." That model offers an enticing alternative to the traditional major sports model. While experiences with the latter can be expensive, exclusive, and passive, rugby's club model is affordable, inclusive, and participatory.

Babiash said that maintaining a distinct U.S. flavor within that global model will help shape an identity that is distinctly "U.S." As an equipment provider, one of the ways Babiash contributes to that U.S. identity is by offering a line of products made stateside, called *Ameruckan Made Rugby*. Rugby Athletic is deeply involved with developing U.S. brands and currently provides equipment and apparel to hundreds of teams in 49 states (Hawaii: you're on notice). Rugby Athletic is also the exclusive provider of apparel for Glendale men's and women's elite teams and has been a sponsor of the *Glendale Raptors* and *Infinity Park* for over six years.

Babiash's passion doesn't lie in shipping

shirts to teams. After all, it doesn't take much to play. "It's a very simple sport," he said. "You need a rugby ball and a mouth-guard. You don't need all the pads and gloves." Instead, with each box of equipment his company produces, Babiash sees an opportunity to help a team tell its story. "I think the biggest mistake that most clubs make is that they see themselves as just a rugby club. The premier teams understand the value in their brand. At that higher level, it's not just about the guys on the field — it's about what you are doing in the community, what else you're doing to market your team to grow your audience." For Babiash, differentiation is key. "Don't devalue your team by looking like every other team. Too many rugby teams choose a color and put their logo over the top left chest. That's it. How weird would it be if other teams wore the NFL's Denver Broncos jersey, just with different colors?"

This problem might not be evident to Raptors fans. Babiash calls the Raptors "the most professional team we have in the U.S."

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Trivia Night To Support The YMCA And Youth Rugby



Photo by Justin Purdy
Trivia Night will benefit local youth like this young athlete participating in the YMCA's summer rugby camp in partnership with the youth rugby programs of the Glendale Raptors at Infinity Park.

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Name the only two days each year when no teams from any of the four major sporting leagues play.

Who was Tom Cruise's first wife?

If you know the answer to either of those questions, consider attending *Trivia Night*, a fundraiser for the YMCA of Glendale and for the Glendale Youth Rugby programs, which will be held on July 22 in the International Ballroom of the Infinity Park Event Center.

Trivia Night began 851 miles away in St. Louis. Mike Boese grew up there. As he puts it, "On any given weekend, there's probably 20 different nonprofit trivia events going on." There's a website dedicated to keeping track of them. The events are a true community effort. "Most of these events are in a Catholic school gymnasium," he said. "It's a potluck evening."

Boese and his family moved to Denver about five years ago. He works as a financial advisor with *Country Financial*. He joined the Glendale Chamber of Commerce to meet people, and soon found himself on the local Y's board of directors. Last year, he pitched the idea of hosting a trivia event for a fundraiser to Nicole Limoges, executive director for the YMCA Sports Branch & the Glendale Sports Center at *Infinity Park*. She told him to run with it. "From my point of view, I owe so much of this to Mike. He really threw his expertise into this. This was all his idea."

Following the St. Louis template, last year's Trivia Night was a potluck event,

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right now." The Raptors have spent years developing an identity through effective visual branding, social media outreach, stadium experience, community outreach, and more. Babiash said the Raptors also excel at working with companies to achieve mutual success. "There's immense value for me to work with them," he said. "They understand it's not just about taking, not just 'what will you do for us?' Glendale understands that we'll do things for them. But in order to create a return on investment for us. They're willing to expose us to people. I'm not interested in advertising, I'm interested in partnering." It works for Glendale, but in order to develop a true national rugby culture, more teams need to adopt a similar mindset.

Most rugby teams in the U.S. aren't at the same level as the Raptors. Most are trying to graduate from weekend warrior status. For that majority of the U.S. rugby market, Rugby Athletic provides a place where teams can help build out an identity in addition to getting equipment. Rugby Athletic provides logo design, writes press releases, and develops social media and e-commerce outlets. "In essence, we provide all those services for free for clubs that are ordering their gear from us," he said. "We aren't the cheapest guys on the block, but the people that understand see the value in what we're doing." A few minutes on their website quickly reveals that Rugby Athletic doesn't simply drag and drop team logos on different color shirts. Each uniform is built from the ground up. Each tells a story.

with Boese as MC, and was held in the Denver Jewish Day School gym. Boese even recruited his Aunt Colleen to travel from St. Louis to help keep score. It was a success, as 65 people brought dishes to share and took their shot at trivia glory. "Not only are you able to give back, but you have a pretty good time doing it."

Giving back is at the core of the event. Limoges said the goal is to raise \$20,000, which will be split between the YMCA and the Glendale Youth Rugby programs. "The YMCA serves the Glendale community, and there are families in need," Boese said. "They need scholarships, otherwise they couldn't take advantage of these programs."

A few changes are in store for this year's event. First, the event won't be in a school or church basement or gym: The City of Glendale has donated use of the International Ballroom at *Infinity Park Event Center*. "This year, a lot of credit goes to Linda Cassaday (Glendale's Deputy City Manager) for getting on board and saying 'we're going to step up and make a difference.'" Also, the potluck has been replaced by a catered dinner from one of the night's sponsors, *Biscuits & Berries*. Guests will also receive two drink tickets, and a cash bar will be available all night. Tickets for the night costs \$40 for an individual, \$75 for couple, and \$300 for a team of 8. People or companies can sponsor the entire night, or even just a round of questions.

After an hour of food, drink, and socializing, the trivia begins. If all goes well, Aunt Colleen will again be on hand. "She and I have been working on putting together questions," Boese said. Boese will lead the crowd of up to 300 in 10 rounds of 10 questions each. He said for each round, he tries to include two questions that nearly everyone can answer and two questions that are unquestionably difficult. The rest of the questions are where the night is won or lost.

Traditionally, each round has a theme. For some rounds, each clue involves a video, photo, or audio clip; a good pairing given the International Ballroom's A/V capabilities. Short breaks between rounds are an opportunity for other entertainment. This year, there will be a silent auction, with opportunities to bid between rounds. Last year, guests had the option to participate in a "last person standing" type game in which Boese reads the name of a public figure, and participants guessed whether that person was currently living. After each name, those who guessed incorrectly sat down. Those who guessed correctly played another round. The last person standing won half of the total one-dollar entry fees collected (which that person ended up donating to the night's total proceeds).

In the end, though, the main competition is for the trivia crown. Each table of 8 works together. Last year's winning score was in the low 80s out of a possible 100 (though tables are able to purchase one mulligan per round).

In just its second year, Trivia Night has the markings of an annual tradition.

Two more important pieces of information: The day before the MLB All Star Game and the day after are bad days to watch sports: Nobody is playing. And on May 9, 1987, Tom Cruise married Mimi Rogers.

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