

Raptors Academy Highlights Community Commitment, Bright Future Of Rugby In Glendale

by John Arthur

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

Glendale Raptors Rugby Academy

Quietly launched in the Spring of 2016, the *Glendale Raptors Rugby Academy* (GRRRA) is the cornerstone of *RugbyTown USA's* vision to be the future of the sport in the United States. Critical to that future is the participation of community youth, who will comprise the next generation of rugby fans, coaches, and players. Those young fans and players will also facilitate the spread of rugby to the sport's ever-widening audience. The Raptors have a long history of community investment and involvement, and the GRRRA further demonstrates the

organization's focus on maintaining deep ties with families and youth.

Previously comprised of numerous, if not directly connected curricula, the GRRRA expands upon existing Raptors youth programs with a more comprehensive, focused approach. The result is an impressively robust, European-style academy program that offers a pathway of development players can follow from kindergarten to the pros. Each successive stage of academy programming builds upon the last, insuring participant development and the full realization of potential. The GRRRA promises a cohesive host of values-driven programs, giving young participants the op-



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Seth McConnell
In the Glendale
Raptors Rugby
Academy
the athletes
learn to push
themselves and
how to properly
recover through
instruction on
nutritional
support.



portunity to learn everything rugby: from fundamentals to high-level skills.

The Academy is the result of years of coaching development and expertise, but Glendale's *Infinity Park* adds still more to the program. The world-class training facilities, renowned national and international coaches, and excellent conditioning and nutrition staff will further the immersive nature of the GRRRA.

Extensive Programming

The Raptors' Academy is best defined by the wide array of programs it offers participants. An assortment of clinics, camps, leagues, and teams make up the GRRRA offerings, all tailored to age and ability, and all building upon one another as players progress through the Academy.

Clinics are the backbone of instruction for sports participants, teaching fundamentals and basic game tactics. GRRRA clinics focus on the four tenets of rugby: tackling, passing, kicking, and conditioning. Tackling clinics emphasize the importance of safety, instructing players on proper body mechanics, developing skills, and building confidence. Clinics for passing and kicking hone technique and develop coordination. Conditioning teaches players discipline through the use of both aerobic and anaerobic exercises. The athletes learn to push themselves, and how to properly recover through instruction on nutritional support.

Spring and Fall are important seasons for rugby, and the GRRRA hosts programs during each. Participants of all ability levels, from kindergarten through 8th grade are included in practices, drills, and scrimmages. From May to June the *Try League* takes center stage, and youth organizations from across the metro Denver area compete during Saturday games. The arrival of the summer months means the *Summer Flag League* in the GRRRA. With an emphasis on teamwork and sportsmanship, the four-week, non-contact, co-ed program, promises to hone the skills of players ages K-8. For the winter months the non-contact skills work

is moved indoors, and players begin to prepare themselves for the activities of the coming spring.

Director of the K-8 portion of the GRRRA program Jenna Anderson says the most important aspect of youth rugby is getting kids to their first practice. "Once they come, they're hooked. Exposure through the school and community is really important, and the GRRRA is committed to showing the game to students and their teachers," Anderson says. Glendale's welcoming, supportive culture is paramount to the program's success.

High school players have plenty of opportunities in the GRRRA as well. Intensive four-day camps are offered for both girls and boys in the age group. With *USA Rugby National Team* players, and *Glendale Raptors Premier League* players acting as coaches, participants work on high-level skills development and training. A low player to coach ratio (10:1) ensures an intimate, individual focus for any player requiring additional instruction. The camps even incorporate rugby training into downtime, through the analysis of video, nutrition seminars, and training education. From September to October, the *Glendale Girls High School team* competes locally in games and tournaments during *Rugby Colorado's* Fall season. Open to players of all skill levels, the team promises a spot on the squad for anyone interested in participating.

The forthcoming *Under 20 League* (U20) will offer local high school grads not competing for a university or college rugby program the opportunity to complete the pathway from youth sport to the professional or national level. Debuting in August 2016, players in the program will compete against local and regional collegiate teams. Glendale Director of Rugby and U20 Head Coach Mark Bullock says the team "fills a gap that's been present in USA Rugby for some time — it's one that the organization is aware of, and so we have their support." Bullock also expressed the importance of guidance at this stage of the development process, noting that, "The jump from high school to adult men's rugby is a big one physically and mentally. The U20 program is the final stage of the GRRRA — this is the channel to higher-level play."

Rugby's Bright Future

The myriad programs offered through the Raptors Academy mean that players of all ages and skill levels have opportunities to experience the passion and prowess of Glendale's rugby elite, advancing their own skills along the way. With the backing of the long-developed Academy program and its staff, along with the unmatched facilities at *Infinity Park*, success in the sport seems a foregone conclusion.

As the *City of Glendale* and the sport of rugby grow together, the GRRRA offers community families and youth a focused, skills-driven pathway from childhood to the highest level of competition. From after-school and summer programs to skills clinics and collegiate-level play, the GRRRA fosters the results-driven development of America's next generation of rugby fans, coaches, and professionals.

The GRRRA, in addition to creating exceptional athletes, reinforces rugby's inclusive nature, its ability to encourage fitness through participation, and its character-developing values of self-discipline, teamwork, and challenge. With the Raptors' Academy as a foundation for rugby-inspired youth, those values promise to have a lifelong home in Glendale.

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