

Raptors Take Rugby Into Local Schools

by Eiden Hughes

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

Perhaps you have heard of the Glendale Raptors' Youth Rugby programs put on at Infinity Park, but did you know that the players volunteer at local schools and community events to share the sport of rugby as well? It's true — and this year has already been a success bringing rugby into schools around the Denver Metro Area.

Led by Youth Program Coordinator Jenna Anderson, the Rugby in Schools program is off to a great start in 2014. The program has been around since 2008, but word of mouth between kids, parents, teachers and administrators has helped it grow.

Rugby in Schools takes place over the course of one to three days (depending on the size of the school), and gives students the opportunity to learn the basics of the game in their gym classes. Anderson, along with volunteers from the Raptors men's and women's teams, teach kids rugby fundamentals through a series of no-contact and flag activities and games.

"Teaching rugby in schools in Colorado is an incredible experience," Anderson said. "There are so many kinds of schools and the number of participants varies quite a bit from site to site. Also, we have such great weather that we are almost always taking the program outside — that's when the kids really let loose!"

While indoor rugby is absolutely doable, Anderson says she notices the kids have a little more fun in the outdoors. The kids are able to kick the ball further, run faster and have more room to spread out.

So far this year the Raptors have brought rugby to Park Hill Elementary and Denver Lutheran. Additional dates include March 10-12 at University Park Elementary, as well as several field days and community events throughout the Metro Area.

The Park Hill event was one of the program's largest in recent history. Over the



Glendale Raptors Jack Haward and Christian Wiessing on site ready for the Rugby in Schools program to start.

course of three days, 550 kids in grades K-5 participated in the program. Anderson and her volunteers taught six gym classes per day over the course of the event.

"Introducing kids to rugby at an early age is crucial for developing the sport in the U.S.," said Raptors' Women's Premier League forward Mary Pezzulo, who was on hand for the Park Hill event.

Her sentiments were echoed by men's player Crawford Miller who was also at the event, "Volunteering for events like this is a great way to give back to the sport, and for me it feels like a very natural thing to do. The future of rugby really lies with getting young kids to play."

While this was one of Miller's first events volunteering for the Raptors, he had a lot of previous experience working with kids in his position as Youth Rugby Director for his college team at the University of North

Carolina — Greensboro. Pezzulo has been volunteering with the Raptors since she joined the team in 2012.

Both find the opportunity to teach rugby to Denver's youth highly rewarding.

"It's really cool to see the excitement the kids have as rugby begins to click for them," said Miller. "I also enjoy seeing them so excited about something I have so much passion for."

"I didn't know what rugby was until college, and I always wished I had known about it sooner," said Pezzulo. "The most rewarding part for me is being able to introduce such a great sport to kids at an early age, and watching them enjoy it so much."

A program like Rugby in Schools is not without its challenges. Getting the word out that the program exists, and then getting buy-in from schools can be tricky — and there's always the matter of managing

a sizeable group of kids who are all excited to be learning something new in gym class.

"It's a little easier to keep the kids' attention indoors, but it's a lot more fun overall if the weather is nice and we can spread out outside," said Anderson. "I find that I always want to teach the kids more about rugby than our time together allows."

Fortunately, Anderson and the rest of the Raptors sometimes get that chance. Anderson says that the schools are great about letting her pass out flyers on Glendale's other youth programs. The flyers are typically placed in the students' weekly folders to take home to their parents, creating an easy avenue for continuing the child's participation in rugby.

"Jenna does a great job with giving her volunteers lots of ideas for different drills and games," Pezzulo said. "Variety is really the key to keeping the kids engaged in what's going on. I've coached everything from four-year-olds to high school-aged kids, and the key is to be able to adapt quickly to the kids, having a lot of variety and getting everyone involved in what's going on."

Miller's strategy is slightly different from Pezzulo's. "If the kids do get distracted, I've found that if you're loud enough, smiling and have a great attitude, they come right back to paying attention. Keeping the ball in their hands and the games running is also key."

The City of Glendale and the Raptors RFC are dedicated to growing the sport of rugby within the Colorado community. The Rugby in Schools program is just one of many geared toward cultivating the future of the game with young athletes. Kids get a great workout while trying something new, and parents, teachers and administrators can rest easy knowing that the Raptors bring a wealth of rugby experience into the schools.



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