

Raptors Turn To 7s Rugby Season

by Marco Cummings

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

Just as the seasons change from spring to summer, so will the seasons change for the Glendale Raptors.

The team will have had little time to rest on the laurels of their first Pacific Rugby Premiership (PRP) championship, as the focus now shifts to summer and the start of the competitive Rugby 7s season, which will culminate with the Serevi RugbyTown Sevens (SRS) Tournament hosted at Infinity Park Aug. 14-16.

Nevertheless, within the Raptors' camp, the team's first PRP championship in two seasons continues to be celebrated within the walls of RugbyTown USA. Capping a season of ups and downs for Glendale, the team successfully avenged last year's finals loss to San Francisco Golden Gate (SFGG) by bringing home the city's first title via a 25-11 win on May 16.

"You've got to show a lot of grit when it comes down to it," Raptors captain Zach Fenoglio said. "I really felt that we put our hearts on the line and it led to a PRP championship."

One of the biggest challenges for the Raptors during the 2015 PRP campaign was injuries. The biggest blow came when USA Eagle Ben Tarr went out with a season-ending knee injury which required surgery for the prop. Additionally, center Armandt Peens dealt with an ankle injury down the stretch, but made a return in the final.

Another major challenge for Glendale was the constant shifting in and out of the lineup by Fenoglio and fellow USA Eagles Chad London and Nick Wallace, who were often away on international duty. Those who stayed behind with the Raptors fared well however, securing a spot in the PRP final and paving the way for the trio's triumphant return.

"All of the guys with Glendale truly ap-



Photo by Seth McConnell

Glendale Raptors Men's 7s player Jake Wrobel in the 2014 Serevi RugbyTown Sevens Plate Final match.

proach everything with a professional attitude," Fenoglio said. "I give a huge credit to the team getting the job done while we were away."

A huge help to the cohesiveness of the group was veteran Mose Timoteo. The 38-year-old scrum half was signed from SFGG in the offseason and helped a second club to a PRP championship in as many seasons.

"That's the great thing about rugby. When you lose a brother, you come into a new environment and gain brothers," Timoteo explained. "You have guys that you fight with and will fight for you. To win two [PRP finals] is a dream."

The PRP season offered a chance for veterans like Fenoglio and Timoteo to step up and shine on a regular basis. In the 7s format, young players often have an oppor-

tunity to shine and hone their game for the PRP. Last year Cody Melphy proved to be one of the summer's standouts who later found himself in contention for playing time in the PRP.

"[The 7s format] gives us an opportunity to see new players in different positions, try new combinations, and look at new structures and game plans," Glendale head coach Andre Snyman explained. "We've got local guys like Cody Melphy. He's always steady, a good young player."

The Pacific Rugby Premiership provides a structured and traditional 15-a-side format with a strong focus on defense and structure. Rugby 7s proves to be perhaps a more fluid, dynamic and offensively based game.

Last summer Glendale competed in tournaments including the Denver 7s, Heart-

land 7s and Omaha 7s in their quest to qualify for Club 7s Nationals, but fell just short of the goal. This year, the Raptors will once again look toward a Nationals berth.

Capping the 7s season will be one of the nation's premier 7s tournaments, the Serevi RugbyTown Sevens hosted at Infinity Park. For the fourth consecutive year, 17 teams from around the world will come to Glendale to compete for a \$10,000 winner-take-all purse.

"The SRS tournament continues to grow in stature as we enter the fourth year of the competition," Raptors director of rugby Mark Bullock said. "There are more international teams competing and the USA military teams have raised the standard of their play."

In addition to the overall purse and SRS Championship, teams representing each American military branch — the Marines, Navy, Air Force, Army and Coast Guard — will look to compete for both the overall tournament and military championships.

"We would not be fit to call ourselves Marines if our goal was anything less than winning the Armed Forces Championship," said USMC coach Major Russell "Bubba" Strange.

A high school tournament has also been brought on as a new addition to SRS, with clubs such as Atlantis, Utah Lions, Serevi Selects, Rogue River (Canada), Rocky Mountain Rebels and the Raptors Academy being featured.

"I think this tournament is great. It brings some international players and some great national players together to play against each other and compete," added Snyman. "[SRS] gives the players an opportunity to compare themselves against the best and show off their skills."

So no matter what time of year it is, spring or fall, summer or winter, 15s or 7s, it's always the time of year for rugby in RugbyTown USA.



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