

Glendale's Women Raptors — The WPL Team To Beat

by Brent New

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

If the daunting challenge of being the *Glendale Raptors Women's Premier League (WPL) team* is winning a second consecutive championship in the fall — the first one without an asterisk if you're asking all the crusty critics on the matter — at least the script has gone accordingly up to this point.

Following a Women's Premier League championship in the fall and an undefeated developmental season in the spring, seven Raptors players — primarily from the WPL team — were invited to the first ever *National All-Star Competition* at *James Madison University* (Harrisonburg, Virginia) last month.

By the end of the six-day tournament, Raptors captain Laura Miller and teammate Joanna Kitlinski were named to the USA roster for the *Super Series*, an international tournament that squares the United States off against the best players from Canada, England and New Zealand — the titans of women's rugby.

(The Series took place from late June to early July. Results, recaps and analysis should be available at infinityparkatglendale.com/raptors.)

It was savvy veteran Miller's third time being named to the Team USA roster for an international tournament and Kitlinski's first.

Kitlinski said the news buzzed through her phone only hours after the tournament came to a close.

"It was a little unexpected, but very exciting," Kitlinski said. "I got an email and just couldn't believe that I had made it. I knew I had played well that week, but you have no idea if you are what they are looking for. It really is an honor."

Sarah Chabot, who did not travel to Vir-

ginia for personal reasons, also made the 26-player traveling roster for the Super Series. Rachel Ryan, who devoured opponents in the spring season, in the meantime, was named as a team reserve.

"They knew Sarah was great without even seeing her over there," Miller grinned. "And Rachel is such a dominant player. It's not surprising to see her on that level."

The importance of making it into the Series should be felt well past this summer.

Miller and Kitlinski believe the opportunity to play in an international tournament will not only help elevate their game, but said it is an experience they can bring back to Glendale too.

"A lot of us are playing in tournaments and clubs that get us ready for the fall season," Kitlinski said. "I think this is another opportunity to grow and help our team out."

On an even bigger scale, the invite is also thought to be the first step toward making the *World Cup 15's* squad in 2017.

"It doesn't mean you'll be considered for the World Cup, but I definitely think it is like that first step toward making it onto that roster," said Miller, who was named a captain at the National All-Star Competition. "I think this is a really great step and opportunity for us. Playing against the best players in the country, and then the world, well, that is just amazing."

The competition, "not camp" as USA coach Pete Steinberg stressed on the *U.S. Eagles* team site, featured four senior rugby teams made up of the best players across the country, as well as two collegiate teams and two U20 (players that are 20-years-old or younger) teams.

Miller played alongside teammate Ryan on the "Falcons" in the senior rugby class, and the one-two Glendale punch led their



Photo by Seth McConnell

Glendale Raptors Joanna Kitlinski evades tackles by the Twin City Amazons defense.

team to the NASC title.

Elsewhere, Jeanna Beard, Mary Pezzulo and Jessica Sexauer also played well in senior rugby class. Maya Learned, meanwhile, was a standout on the U20 team.

"All of us have played against each other and with each other before," Miller said. "I think the biggest challenge of the competition was getting on the same page with these players from different parts of the country. In every region they play rugby a little different, so just getting everyone to work as one was a good test."

Glendale Raptors assistant coaches Kittery Wagner-Ruiz and Jamie Burke also took part in the All-Star Competition. Wagner-Ruiz helped coach the U20 class and Burke helped with the collegiate all-stars.

"It was an amazing experience," Wagner-Ruiz said. "We learned a lot from some great rugby coaches from around the country and got to help out some very talented players."

If you ask them, though, the main focus for the Raptors players and coaches is still

squarely on the fall season. And why wouldn't it be?

Beating the *Twin Cities Amazons* 16-15 in the women's finals two days after their loss in the semifinals was negated by a disqualification last year, the Raptors will return with a strong core and seemingly more young talent in a repeat bid this season.

The Raptors, for the first time, are the "team to beat in the WPL."

"We're up for the challenge," Beard said. "It's going to take a lot of hard work, but we're excited about our growth."

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