

Rugby In The United States Is Just Getting Started

by Brent New

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

Rugby continues to be America's fastest growing sport and those participating can attest to this.

Both the USA Men's and Women's rugby teams recently qualified to participate in the 2016 Rio Olympics, where the sport will be re-introduced for the first time since the USA took gold the last time rugby was played as an Olympic sport in 1924. Participation in youth rugby is growing exponentially, outstripping popular sports like football, hockey and lacrosse.

The Glendale Raptors are letting the numbers speak for themselves, though, as its youth program continues to bring in large turnouts in 2015.

After nearly 100 youth players took part in the eight-week Spring After-School Program a few months ago, TRY League Rugby reached 110 players in the six weeks it ran over the summer.

"It's great to see after some kids aged out of playing with our youth league that more

followed right behind them," Raptors Youth Manager Jenna Anderson said. "We had a lot of new faces and a lot of returning faces in Try League this year. Our teams won some, they lost some, but everyone I talk to says their child absolutely loves it. So we're very excited to hear that feedback."

Kudos for the program came easy to parent Nea McKeehan who says, "I love the Glendale Youth Rugby Program because it teaches kids about the great sport of rugby, including its history and tradition as well as the rules of the game. The coaches at Glendale do an amazing job of teaching the physical and mental aspects of the game and always emphasize the importance of teamwork and sportsmanship. Glendale has a great community of families, and we have made many great friends over the years as our kids have played and competed together in rugby. The Glendale Youth Rugby Program has been an incredibly positive experience for all of us!"

The Raptors' TRY League teams were

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Photo by Seth McConnell
Boys and girls enjoy learning and growing through the sport of rugby during the Spring After-School Program with the Glendale Raptors.

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made up of kindergartners through ninth grade boys, and K-eighth grade girls, who attended practices and played games across the Denver metro area in *Rugby Colorado's TRY League*.

Following a Tuesday and Thursday evening practice, the Raptors teams played Olympic-style rugby, or sevens rugby, against other TRY teams in Jamboree tournaments on Saturdays. The tournaments went from May 5- June 23.

"Rugby is played and taught so differently around the world," Anderson said. "Getting the viewpoint from a bunch of great coaches of the sport is so beneficial. We have All-Americans and all these great rugby minds teaching skills and technique. I think that is one of the big reasons that this camp is so cool and beneficial for these girls."

The Raptors' youth program works together with *Concentra*, a trusted healthcare company that helps put on stretching clinics at youth events as well as donate prizes

to youth rugby players.

Sports Authority, O'Brien Rugby and *First Bank* also donate time and effort to put on first-class youth rugby events.

Turner Construction, Butler Rents and *Applebee's* also sponsor the youth programs and help with the sport's continual growth.

Other Youth Programs In 2015

Summer Flag Rugby — Aug. 3, 10, 17 and 24: Coed teams of K-eighth grade boys

and girls get the chance to learn rugby as well as have fun in a laid-back four-night program. Flag rugby mirrors flag football, stressing teamwork and fun without all the physicality. The sessions will include warm-up, practice and flag rugby games at *Infinity Park*. The players consist of beginners who are just learning the game and experts who are taking a breather from the physical dynamic of the game.



Photo by Seth McConnell
Glendale Raptors players train with flag rugby while preparing for the TRY Rugby League games with Rugby Colorado.

Self described "rugby mom" Carmeliza dela Paz summed up her children's experience in the sport, "My sons have been playing in the TRY League for six seasons. As each season begins I get excited because I have seen how the talent in the league has grown. The coaches spend time recognizing each player's talent and helping them develop as players. I have seen my sons' athletic skills grow as the seasons go by, but more importantly, I have seen their confidence explode through TRY League.

"Being a rugby mom, what stands out the most are the kids' fierce competitiveness on the field and true honor and respect off the field. My sons have developed great friendships with their teammates, but also with other boys they have met in camps. The players' parents are great role models for this. Rugby parents are quick to compliment players of the opposing team because they know talent is talent, no matter who the child is."

Next up on the youth docket was the *Girls High School Rugby Camp*, which took place July 27-30.

There, between 20 and 50 high school girls from around the country got the chance to work with international and national coaches and players. Over four days they fine-tuned proper technique and skills, and the girls had the chance to work in the state-of-the-art *High Altitude Training Center* as well as play in *Infinity Park*.

"This gives the girls the chance to learn from a lot of national rugby players and great coaches," said Lauren Daly, a USA national player who coaches at the camp. "You get so many viewpoints and a lot of information from rugby experts, which makes the experience a great one." She went on to say "Glendale is so unique in itself because of the facilities, which are the best in the nation. This is a great opportunity for all players, but especially ones who are hoping to play at the next level."

Headlining the coaches at the fifth-annual Girls' High School Rugby Camp were Kittery Wagner, a former USA and Raptors player and now a USA U20 Forwards Coach and Raptors WPL coach; Robin Roberts, a high school coach and WPL coach; Mollie McCarthy, the CU-Boulder Head Rugby Coach; Mark Bullock, the Raptors' Director of Rugby; Andre Snyman, the Raptors Men's Coach and former South African Springbok; Anderson, a WPL player and the Youth Program Manager; and Maya Learned, a USA Junior Rugby All-American.



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