

Behind The Scenes At Infinity Park, This Is Raptors Life

by Kurt Woock

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

The final score was 85-3. The 1,300 people in attendance came to watch rugby but soon found that the day would double as a chance to take off their winter jackets and enjoy the April sunshine. Smoke curling out from underneath the lid of a grill carried with it not only the smell of brats but also the promise of summer ahead. Halcyon scenes like these at *Infinity Park* are commonplace, and they keep people coming back for more. But that surface belies the underpinnings beneath, the hundreds of people who make producing a major sporting event seem easy and the years of planning and practice that have laid the foundation for the consistent experience people have come to expect at *Infinity Park*. Piecing together a half dozen perspectives of people who work to produce each *Raptors* rugby game reveals a fuller sense of what goes on during game days. It's not a hidden chaos underneath, but instead a lively community that works quietly and for one another.

Laying The Foundation

The most defining moments or features of ambitious projects often stem from decisions that, when they were chosen, seemed innocuous. But, looking back, it's often those decisions that provide the environment for spontaneity to take hold and create something better than could ever have been planned. It's a tool employed in countless romantic comedies — chance encounters in supermarkets and elevators that lead to happily ever afters. But it happens in real life, too. In the case of *Infinity Park*, it began with a modest budgeting constraint during the stadium's design process, and it couldn't have been less noteworthy at the time. In short, planners needed to choose between installing high definition lighting — big racks of flood lights high

above the playing field like you'd find at a baseball stadium or football stadium — or chairs.

This choice wasn't trivial, but it was just one of a laundry list of decisions planners needed to make. Linda Cassaday, Glendale's deputy city manager and finance director, was part of the planning process. Her office, which sits overlooking the western end of the field, is filled with evidence that she has been part of countless planning meetings. "We are city workers," she said. "We needed to learn how to build a stadium and run an event, so we brought in an event specialist. At the beginning, we went down this list that just blew my mind." Hundreds of decisions, down to where garbage bins would be located, needed to be made. So, when planners decided to forego seats and install stadium lighting, nobody was calling the newspaper. Linda said the architects made concrete platforms wide enough to eventually accommodate seating but that, in the meantime, could also serve as amphitheater-like seating.

What started out as a stopgap measure quickly became a defining feature of the *Infinity Park* experience. The open areas created a picnic-like setting. Without assigned seats, fans were more likely to explore the stadium and talk to their neighbors. Perhaps most importantly, families found the unique seating arrangement helpful when bringing children: The kids could walk around easily, wouldn't get antsy in their seats, and they could even get right next to the action if they wanted. In the end, the simple decision of choosing lights over seats helped cultivate the open, family atmosphere *Infinity Park* is known for today. Linda said that, while families certainly were thought about during the planning process, everybody was surprised by just how much families gravitated to



Glendale Raptors Number 8 Zac Pauga carries the ball upfield with Winger Max Statler running support and waiting for the offload in a match against Old Mission Beach Athletic Club at Infinity Park.

Photos by Seth McConnell

rugby games. Now, families are an *Infinity Park* cornerstone, and much of what people like Cassaday work on from game to game are addressing the needs of those families coming in.

A sentiment about structures was captured best by Winston Churchill: "We shape our buildings. Thereafter they shape us." *Infinity Park* illustrates this idea perfectly. Countless hours of planning went into building a structure that could be embraced by the entire community. But once it was built, it went to work, shaping and forming a community that continues to grow. As it grows, it continues to build an identity, one based on family, fun, and community.

Turning On The Lights

On game days, nearly 100 people come to work at *Infinity Park*. Some serve beers and sodas, some direct parking, others work security. Nearly everyone working a game is part-time. Some work at other stadiums in Denver. But on any given week-day, a handful of people work full-time to

make sure the next game gets off the ground. Michael Hoff is one of them. His eyes are alert, and he's quick to smile — the mark of a person who is used to scanning an area, looking for people who need help. One of his primary duties is to ensure the ticketing system runs smoothly. But, as the manager of stadium operations, much of what he does boils down to one theme: Whatever it takes. He orders postgame sandwiches for players. He ensures that roster information is accurate for the streaming video. When a snowstorm hit Denver and blanketed the stadium a couple of days before a game, he spent the day with a shovel in his hands. Kieran Nelson, the director of stadium operations, said that the all-hands-on-deck, team-oriented ethos permeates the culture at *Infinity Park*. While many of the game-day employees are part-time, most have been working rugby games for years. "It's just fun to work here," Nelson said. "Everybody takes pride in *Infinity Park*."

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Glendale Raptors Rugby Academy youth players get to play at halftime of the Raptors matches at Infinity Park and showcase how rugby is rising in the United States.



Glendale Mayor Mike Dunafon speaks with Glendale Raptors Head Coach, and former South African Springbok, Andre Snyman, post match during the ceremony that honors the players and thanks the community and supporters.

More Than A Coach

Raptors coach Andre Snyman is an international-level coach. He's played in the Rugby World Cup. He's been a Pacific Rugby Premiership coach of the year. But he's not above filling water bottles the night before a game or ensuring that balls are pumped up. Rather than seeing those various tasks as disparate or disjointed, consider instead that the two are connected; that, in the simple-yet-necessary step of filling water bottles and then going on to lead a team to a championship, the mettle of an ideal coach can be seen.

Fiercely competitive and sharing roughly the same body type as an action hero, Snyman is nevertheless down-to-earth and cognizant of the realities of everyday life, a quality that is essential in order to connect to players. Raptors players have full-time jobs in addition to practicing, playing, traveling, and volunteering — itself a full-time occupation. Many players have families to think about, too. "It's not easy," Snyman said, "But the fact that we're winning helps a lot." Until American rugby can support players entirely, a coach must recognize that players make sacrifices to compete at the top level. Understanding the player as a whole person is more effective than solely focusing on Xs and Os. "They do it for the love of the game," Snyman said. "I'm trying to make it enjoyable. I want to make it a release for them."

Snyman's own Saturday routine begins at home, with designated family time. By noon, he'll be in game mode, finishing up rosters, and prepping game notes on a whiteboard in the locker room. By 2:15, he's leading players in warmups. He's found a template for success: Molding a group of players into a team, and then molding that team into a family.

Sharing Success

As big as they are now, Ford, Apple, and Coca-Cola all began as unknowns. It took people like Diana Anderson and Drew Anneberg to share the inherent value of those good ideas. Anderson is the president of DES Marketing, a firm with a longstanding relationship with the City of Glendale, Infinity Park, and the Raptors. She's been sharing the rugby vision since the beginning. While standing over the corner of the in-goal area, she thought about how her job has changed in the decade since she first learned for herself what rugby is. "Is it hard to line up sponsors? Five years ago, I would have said yes. Now, they call us."

The Denver rugby market is now large enough to support three separate merchandise vendors at Raptors games. Thousands follow online. Anneberg said that in addition to continuing introducing rugby to new fans, his job has grown to include reaching out to a large number of fans who aren't satisfied with casually catching a game a few times each year. People are invested and want to experience Raptors rugby between matches. Being able to produce videos and connecting fans to players through social media on a daily basis are just two ways the Raptors organization continues to evolve.

The progression from tending to a newly planted seed to managing the growth of a plant shooting skyward is indicative of more than just local success. The Raptors are a leading force for rugby in the U.S. Other people are watching. Students from DU have been studying the rise of Raptors rugby. Watching the game, Mayor Mike

Dunafon said that Glendale wants to be the best organization in the country, but achieving that will require more than championships. Integral to the team's success is the growth of rugby throughout the U.S. "This is the beginning of a movement. We have offered our plans to other cities. We need more of these. One fax machine does no good."

From The Crowd

At halftime, close to 100 children took the

field, scrimmaging on the same grass their rugby heroes were playing on minutes before. During the second half, the wonder and pride was evident in 100 red-cheeked faces. As the day's dominant Raptors performance moves toward the final whistle, the crowd doesn't dwindle. Despite a spring shower moving west, they stay to cheer. You can't get this anywhere else.

Seth McConnell, a photographer, has been documenting the Raptors for three

years. Looking through his viewfinder, he is hyper aware of what takes place at Infinity Park, perhaps more aware of the subtle, constant changes than anyone else. "The Raptors players are more accessible and engage the fans on a more personal level," he said. "There is not that barrier that most teams create between us and them."

That sums up the approach to Infinity Park's success: In it together. Whether it's players, fans, or employees, everyone feels they're on the same team. Unlike the serendipitous decision to put in the lights first, instilling a sense of ownership was part of the plan from the onset. "When you're a city and build something as out of the norm as Infinity Park, you need buy in," Cassaday said. To be successful, fans needed to feel that a rugby game is something to be part of, not something to watch from afar. Or, as Dunafon put it, "you're not expected to come buy mementos; you're here to be part of the game."

That ethos permeates Infinity Park. The 85-3 final flashing on the screen at the end of a game speaks for itself. But the ear-to-ear grin of the 6-year-old girl who just scored a try at halftime, long ponytail sailing behind her as she runs, says even more. The Raptors are her team in every sense of the word. And that's why she'll be back.



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