

Raptors Women Finish Successful Season In All But Title

by Marco Cummings

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

Another strong campaign came to its conclusion for the *Glendale Raptors Women's Premier League (WPL)* even while it may have fallen just a few tries short of the season-long goal of achieving a third-straight title — defeated 26-16 by the *San Diego Surfers* in the WPL Final.

Nevertheless, Glendale's season was graded as another success by first-year head coach Kitt Ruiz.

"I'm very proud of these women," Ruiz said of her team, "They grew so much over this season and I am so proud of all of them. The outcome was not what we had hoped for, but the whole experience brought us together as a team. Some of our fundamentals let us down [in the final], but all in all it was a great season to be a Glendale Raptor."

Through six regular season games, the Raptors only suffered one defeat — a 45-15 loss in the regular season finale on the Surfers' home pitch in San Diego. But the Raptors were undefeated within the confines of *Infinity Park*. Glendale received a successful addition in Olympian Carmen Farmer, who showed an immediate impact in her debut season for the club.

"She has been a great addition to the team," Ruiz said of Farmer. "Carmen has been flanking for Glendale this season and is a threat with the ball in hand as well as in the air at lineouts. Carmen is a huge asset; she can play in the pack as well as with the backs."

Farmer came to Glendale seeking her first WPL title, but is hungry for another in 2017 after the Raptors fell short in the title game — their third against the Surfers after splitting the regular season series in the *WPL Blue Conference*.

"The outcome was definitely tough, but we are super proud of how this team played and how a lot of the newer and younger players have stepped up," said Farmer. "I'm definitely looking to support the D1 team this Spring and then focus on getting back to the National Championship in the Fall and bringing that Cup back to Glendale."

Despite the regular season loss, Glendale started off the postseason strong with a 37-13 win over WPL *Red Conference* regular season leaders New York in the opening round of the National Championship, an opponent bolstered by the likes of *USA Eagles* Phaidra Knight and Kate Daley.

"New York really tested us with a high-pace attack and tremendous skills," said Raptors forward Kristen "Shilo" Shalosky. "Their forwards came at us hard, especially Alycia Washington and Phaidra Knight. In turn, we stepped up our game. I think that we played our most consistently cohesive and aggressive defense. Our backs were clinical on attack — moving the ball quickly, exploiting space and taking hard lines. Overall, we really played for each other and with intensity."

The growth of the team's overall depth including the expansion of the Raptors' Division I team was also a highlight for



The Glendale Raptors Women team for the 2016 Women's Premier League rugby campaign.

the Raptors' women, which leaves the club excited as it heads into the Division I season this spring. During the WPL's regular season trip to San Diego, Glendale was also able to field a full side against cross-town rivals *Black Ice* and leaving with a sound 42-12 victory.

"It's been a great year," said Ruiz. "We have consistently had 45 plus players at practice. We now have a D1 and WPL teams vying for top spots. This is a team

that is filled with talent and heart. Selections were never easy, which is a testament to the talent on the team.

"We as a staff have worked to help these ladies to become decision makers, so that once they are on the field they can just express themselves. We have built a strong foundation for this club and are so excited to watch it grow and grow."

Despite winning back-to-back titles in two of the past three seasons, and once

again reaching the final in 2016, the Raptors know there is still more work to be done. Ruiz has stressed the importance of defense throughout the campaign in her first WPL season as the team's gaffer and will be looking to continue installing her defensive system and tradition for seasons to come.

"Our fundamentals let us down [against San Diego] and as a coach I know that I need to work more on tackling and defense in seasons to come," she explained. "We were not fast enough in building our defensive wall or launching and we were unable to dominate the contact piece as well as we would have liked to. We had a big focus on possession for this match and we were not consistent with that either. We were stripped of possession at key times and in key situations."

Sure enough, the Raptors' 2016 season left them with a taste of heartbreak, defeat and unfinished business for the 2017 WPL campaign. But there won't be time to dwell — the Raptors already have their eyes on the road ahead — the spring season and the Division I team.

"The offseason is short for the Raptors as the D1 season will start off early next year," said Ruiz. "The WPL team will take some time off and rest, recover, and rejuvenate so that they can start working on strength in the offseason. The D1 team will start practicing early next year and will continue to train to be fit for that. I really want the players to take some time off and away from rugby as we all need to refuel ourselves so that we can come back in the spring ready and raring to go."



Glendale Raptor Juliann Tordonato takes the ball into contact against Blue Conference rugby rivals the Berkeley All Blues at Infinity Park. Photo by Seth McConnell

New Season

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are all improving and making the club stronger and more competitive as a whole."

Bullock was likewise optimistic from the results of the combine, saying, "The quality of our team, we think, will be on par with the quality of last year's team. Most of those players will be returning for the spring schedule. Additionally, the combine allowed us to identify a number of players that have the qualifications to compete on the Premier side."

A new season for the Glendale Raptors marks a new era with a changed schedule, coach, philosophy and players in 2017. But the levels of excitement and enthusiasm will remain the same.

"The Premier team has already begun training in December and January for our kickoff on Jan. 28," said Bullock. "We will play a go forward, don't step back brand of rugby and be an aggressive attacking team."



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