

Raptors Rugby A Winner To Market

by Kurt Woock

Writer for and on behalf of the City of Glendale

Denver is decidedly a sports town. It's one of only 13 cities in the United States that has a franchise for each of the four "major" sports leagues. And that just scratches the surface. Last year, soccer fans filled *Dick's Sporting Goods Park* to 90 percent capacity. Denver is a hotbed for lacrosse. A handful of universities in or near Denver have several high profile teams. And if the above roster isn't enough, outdoor sports provide an entire universe of options.

With that in mind, exactly how a rugby team in Glendale fits into the sporting ecosystem in Denver can be puzzling. What does rugby offer that makes it stand out? What is it about the team or the gameday experience that makes a person with every sporting option at their fingertips choose

to put on a *Glendale Raptors* shirt and head to *Infinity Park*? A few area media professionals considered that question. Their jobs require them to be plugged into the needs and wants of their particular market segment, which gives each of them a great vantage point.

Die-Hard Denver

James Merillat and his business partner, Doug Ottewill, started *Mile High Sports* in 2002. Today, the media company produces print publications, a website, a newsletter, and a radio show. They are a major part of the Denver sports landscape. Fifteen years ago, however, *Mile High Sports* was simply a way for Merillat and Ottewill to pursue what they wanted to do. "Essentially, we were trying to combine the three things we like: Sports, writing, and starting our own business," Merillat said. By Merillat's



Glendale Raptors, including Martin Knoetze, left, and Lynton Mare, kneeling right, take the time after every home match at *Infinity Park* to talk with fans on the pitch and sign autographs.

Photo by Seth McConnell

own account, their origins were humble: "Our only experience we had was a *Sports Illustrated* subscription." But they had passion for Denver sports, and they had it in spades.

The aforementioned "experience" as a *Sports Illustrated* subscriber might garner laughs, but it is an important piece of the story. "I really liked it when John Elway or Larry Walker was on the cover," Merillat said. "[So we thought], 'let's just do that from cover to cover.'" They did just that. Every issue is about Denver, and hometown heroes are on every cover and on every page after that. The coffee table publication is rich with full color photos and is full of stories that are told by people who are lifelong Denver sports fans, and unabashedly so, which sets them apart from national publications and websites.

The duo finds pride in being the go-to source for the entire Denver sports scene — not just for the biggest teams. "Media is getting more and more national, and what's getting lost is local. 'Preps to the pros' was our motto, and we've stuck to that." In 2007, that coverage expanded to include *Mile High Radio*. Again, Merillat jokes, "Our only experience we had was that we were sports talk listeners." But the perspective of die-hard, full-time fans is a recipe that works. "On the radio, it's a local, noncorporate flavor," Merillat said. "We are owned by two guys who went to Northglenn High School. We have passion. We're unapologetic about the fact that we're fans. We're just like our listeners and our readers."

When a new rugby team appeared in Glendale nearly a decade ago, Merillat was intrigued. "We've seen a lot of teams come and go. But you could tell from the outset, this team had some long-term plans. It's rugby played at the highest level." They've been covering it since the beginning, and Merillat sees a parallel in lacrosse. "We've seen growth in lacrosse. It was basically nonexistent when we started, now it's booming. I saw rugby and thought, 'it could go in the same direction.'" So far it has, but keeping that momentum going will require more and more people in the U.S. giving the sport a shot. Merillat said that shouldn't be too difficult: "The Raptors have always been excellent. They always were in it to be the best team. There's nothing like having a winner to market. It makes life easier."

Appealing To A Broad Audience

Jill Merriam has been a sales and advertising specialist for nearly a decade, the past four with *KSE* radio, which operates multiple stations in the Denver area — *92.5 the Wolf*, *Mix 100.3*, *Kool 105*, and *Altitude Sports*. Her job requires her to know who her listeners are and what they are interested in. Soon after she came to *KSE*, she knew that many of her listeners would be interested in rugby, even if they didn't know it yet. "I've always been a rugby fan. I live in Glendale, work by the park, and can see the park from our office." She said the ease with which people can attend a game (easy access, free

parking), the facility (low-cost tickets, open seating), and the experience (great rugby, friendly environment) make it a no-brainer for almost any type of person.

And, if you're more than just a casual sports fan, many find the experience to be unique compared to almost every other option. "The players hang out afterwards," she said. "It's an intimate experience. You can grab a Guinness and sit with them and watch sports. It's just fun."

Merriam can list off a variety of different types of listeners that her stations reach, and why they've come to enjoy Raptors games. "92.5 is the country station. That station reaches younger, active people in the Denver market. It's a good mix of men and women." Rugby is a fun date idea — exciting yet inexpensive. It's also ideal for the same reasons for people who live near downtown: "What's going on this weekend? Oh, a rugby game!" *Altitude Sports* is *KSE's* newest station. It broadcasts local sports 24/7, catering to die-hard Denver fans. They're the radio home for the *Nuggets*, *Avalanche*, *Mammoth*, and *Rapids*, but it's not uncommon to catch Raptors coaches and players being interviewed on air, talking about rugby.

Infinite Possibilities

Bo Jaxon is the program director on the *Mix 100.3*. He also is the voice behind many of the videos that play at *Infinity Park* during Raptors games. Jaxon said the *Mix* is a go-to for women between 25 and 54 years old. The station partners with *Infinity Park* to promote and produce *Monday Movie Madness*, the annual summer outdoor movie series. You'll often find Bo at the *Mix's* promotional table before the movie begins. "It's a great family fun environment," he said. "It's just cool to see a movie outside on the big screen, plus there's good food and drawings" he said. And his listeners have discovered that rugby isn't just a spectator sport: It's becoming a popular youth sport. Jaxon said children of listeners are playing in youth leagues, which makes attending Raptors games that much more fun — many of the youth coaches play for the Raptors. "It's cool to be in on the ground floor," he said. The family-friendly nature of rugby is something his listeners are keen on. "People are very busy nowadays," he said. The variety of programming to find at *Infinity Park* makes it easy to have "dedicated family time."



Bo Jaxon and *Mix 100.3* set up at every movie night and enjoy interacting with moviegoers of all ages during *Infinity Park's* summer Monday Movie Madness.

Photo by Justin Purdy



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