

Rugby In The Schools: Community Commitment Spurs Growth In 2016

by John Arthur

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Since the club's founding more than a decade ago, the *Glendale Raptors* have been a pillar of community involvement, most notably through their extensive involvement with Glendale youth. Raptors team members and coaches spend time volunteering at *Children's Hospital* every year, offer free and low-cost youth rugby clinics and programs, as well as a *Rugby Academy* where local youth can build rugby skills from kindergarten all the way to the professional level. The Raptors' commitment to involvement with Glendale is an especially important aspect of the club's overall mission, and not simply because it engages young people with positive mentors and promotes fun and fitness. Youth rugby programs have the added benefit of increasing awareness for the fastest growing sport in the United States, creating a new generation of players, coaches, and fans.

One of the most successful youth programs in 2016 was *Rugby in the Schools*, an offering spearheaded by Raptors Youth Programs Coordinator Jenna Anderson. Rugby in the Schools introduces the game through *Rookie Rugby*, a non-contact, educational format, specifically designed for presentations and instruction in school PE classes. Playing games and running drills, Anderson, alongside Raptors players and staff, introduces local schools to rugby's inclusive nature, ensuring every child participates for the entire program period. Because rugby is often unfamiliar to local youth, everyone starts on an even playing field; as Anderson puts it: "We go in and it's a clean slate. Everyone participates. Everyone is interested and every single child plays. Learning something new, as a group, is really important and really special." Students experience the fun and ex-



Men and Women of the Glendale Raptors demonstrate a rugby restart, called a line-out, to children of a Metro Denver school.

citement of rugby, as well as the importance of inclusion and good sportsmanship.

Anderson has led youth programming for the nine years since being brought into the Raptors club in 2008, but notes that

2016 was an especially busy year. The Raptors worked with 16 different local schools, and also held eight separate sessions elsewhere, including clinics at Glendale's *Infinity Park* and for local nonprofits, as well as field days at local summer camps. According to Anderson, "2016 has really taken off. Teachers have shown a lot of interest in having rugby as part of their curriculum." In addition to the host of benefits *Rookie Rugby* offers participating schools and students, the programming is and always has been entirely free of charge.

Rugby in the Schools is focused on communities surrounding Glendale, although demand exists all along the Front Range. In 2016, Anderson and the Raptors were a presence across metropolitan Denver, in both public and private institutions, though she admits the popularity of Rugby in the Schools has forced her to turn down requests from institutions located outside of the metro area. Working in physical education classrooms from kindergarten through 8th grade, she and players from the Raptors Men's, Women's, and Under-20 teams interacted with as many as 500 students per school. Engaging every interested student at each school, Anderson and her assistant volunteers spent between one and four days per location completing programming.

It's difficult to point to any one reason why Raptors youth rugby programs blossomed in 2016. Clearly there are significant benefits for both the young participants and the schools they attend, but there is also something more. Rugby's meteoric rise in popularity stateside in the last several years has been incredible, with Glendale at the epicenter of the sport in the United States. The reemergence of rugby in the 2016 Olympic games, combined with the Raptors' successes on and off the pitch, have played a role as well. What is clear is that rugby is, in Glendale and the rest of the country, a sport that's here to stay — and one that players and fans of all ages take great pride in.

Asked about her favorite part of Rugby in the Schools, Anderson says, "I love going and seeing kids who already play for the Raptors. They know we're coming and they wear their Raptors shirts and it's obvious that they're really proud to be rugby players. It's wonderful to see kids passionate about the sport." The growth of rugby's popularity in the United States shows no signs of slowing, and the work that Anderson and the Raptors are doing in community classrooms demonstrates that the next generation of players and fans is here to stay as well.



Glendale Raptors share how rugby is inclusive as every player gets to run and play with the ball.

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