

Colorado XOs And RugbyTown In The Spotlight

Two Players Signed By MLR Teams And New Docuseries Slated For Worldwide Distribution

by Laura Lieff

In January 2021, Glendale formed the biggest, fastest, and most athletic rugby team in the world called the *Colorado XOs*. But instead of populating the team with athletes who have been playing rugby their whole lives, this team was comprised of elite American players from other sports. What these players lacked in rugby experience they made up for in size, strength, and speed as some played in the *NFL*, *XFL*, or *CFL*. The athletic prowess was definitely there but the question was whether or not these men could learn to play and excel at rugby.

“The US rugby player pool is pretty limited, so we believe the only way to add depth to that pool quickly is to recruit players from other sports,” explains Glendale City Manager Linda Cassaday. “That was the idea behind our Crossover Academy — find the best athletes from other sports and teach them the game of rugby.”

With the goal of finding American athletes whose talent outweighed their lack of experience, Glendale signed 30 players who showed enough potential to ultimately help the United States win the *World Cup*. When Glendale made the controversial decision to leave *Major League Rugby*



Athletic Prowess: Former XFL defensive tackle Gelen Robinson plays hooker for the Colorado XOs and has been signed to the LA Giltinis for the summer.



Standout Player: At 6’8”, Shawn Clark shows off his natural aerial skills in the line-out. Clark will also play for the Giltinis this summer.

(MLR) — due to the organization’s choice to use foreign players rather than American players — many naysayers scoffed at the strategy.

Introducing New Faces To Rugby

Now, just a few months later, two of the crossover players — Gelen Robinson and Shawn Clark — have signed with the *LA Giltinis*, an MLR team based in Los Angeles, California. Giltinis General Manager Adam Freier says he was delighted to sign two promising American talents and strengthen the club’s links with the Colorado XOs.

“Gelen has a unique skill of multiple disciplines as an athlete, from wrestling, football and basketball, while Shawn is one of those athletes that has an incredible engine, who could play multiple positions,” Freier explains. “They are both great signings and young men, which is a real credit to the Colorado XOs coaching staff and officials.”

Both Robinson and Clark took their first strides in the game over the past 19 weeks in this unique crossover experiment to coach talented football, basketball, and track athletes into potential professionals for the *USA Rugby* player pool.

“We at the Colorado XOs and the City of Glendale are extremely proud of both Shawn and Gelen,” Colorado XO Director of Recruitment Peter Pasque says. “They’ve done everything we’ve asked of them and more. We also would like to thank the LA Giltinis for taking an early interest in our program.”

Although Robinson and Clark will be playing for the Giltinis this summer, Pasque makes it clear that the players are only on loan. “The reason we are releasing these athletes to play for other teams for two months is because it will be a positive experience for them which will work out in the

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Documenting The Action: Slated for release this fall, RugbyTown will showcase how Glendale broke new ground by training elite American athletes how to play rugby.



Film Crew: A behind-the-scenes look at the making of the docuseries that will be released to a global audience in the coming months.



Frontline Footage: Rugby Factory's film crew has been documenting the Crossover Academy's progress over the last few months.

long run for our team." After spending two months in Los Angeles, both players will return to Glendale in August to train, practice, and play for the Colorado XO's.

Successful But Challenging Experiment

While a 5-5 record may not sound impressive on paper, the XO's spring season record is admirable considering this group of men had never played together before nor had they ever picked up a rugby ball.

"We're trying to bring in the best athletes and teach them the fundamentals," Pasque explains. "The fact that we have only been working with these guys for 19 weeks and already have interest from the United States National Team speaks for itself."

But there are still a few issues to address. While many individual players are thriving, others have succumbed to various injuries that Glendale did not anticipate.

"Overall this recruiting experiment has gone well, but there have been some unexpected challenges," says Cassaday. "The injury rate was astounding and definitely took a toll on the team but we've learned from that, analyzed the injuries, and are understanding how to avoid them in the future."

One of the most significant adjustments

some XO athletes, especially those who are former football players, had to make was learning how to play without a helmet or pads. Cassaday says that aspect has been a major part of the learning curve when it comes to tackling and overall movement.

"Initially, all we could evaluate was their physical stats," she explains. "Some players were not invited back because they weren't able to make the change to rugby so there are definitely recruiting changes that will be implemented for the fall season."

Pasque adds that individually the majority of the athletes are doing well but there is significant work to be done in terms of the team as a whole. Of the 30 players recruited, he says that approximately one third were cut, one third are serviceable, and the rest have the potential to develop into elite rugby players that can make a difference in the World Cup.

"At the moment we're seeing more individual successes than team successes but we're going in the right direction and learning quickly," he explains. "This whole thing, which was sponsored by the City of Glendale, has a great mission and purpose and we are taking steps to make it even better."

Worldwide Docuseries Release

Further exemplifying the significance of Glendale's crossover experiment is the attention it has garnered from *Spring Media*, an international full-service sports media agency, along with *Rugby Factory TV*. The two entities have partnered in the worldwide distribution of a new documentary series about Glendale's crossover program. Slated for global distribution this fall, the first season of the docuseries (appropriately called *RugbyTown*) will show how the *Crossover Academy* has been recruiting NFL-quality American athletes and training them full-time in a residential high-performance environment.

"RugbyTown USA's mission is to help the United States win the Rugby World Cup within the next decade," says Glendale Mayor Mike Dunafon. "The rugby world has long seen America's greatest athletes on the football field or the basketball court, but now the RugbyTown Crossover Academy is training those athletes to play rugby at the highest levels internationally."

He continues, "We are delighted to be working with Spring Media to offer the RugbyTown series to the world so that viewers can get to know the players and coaches who have set out on this incredi-

ble life-changing and historic journey."

According to Spring Media Commercial Manager Craig Neilson, the docuseries is "tailored to both the global sports audience and those looking for high-quality entertainment in general." The premiere season will feature 10 episodes ready for distribution on August 1, with season two dropping at the end of 2021.

"With our embedded production team, we've captured the players' transformation from individual athletes into a cohesive rugby squad," says Patrick Guthrie, Co-Founder & Chief Content Officer at Rugby Factory TV. "RugbyTown is the story of these extraordinary young men, their coaches, their families, and their mission to win the World Cup, all told by the players and coaches themselves."

Upcoming Season

Looking ahead to the fall, the focus of the XO's will be competing against teams in South Africa — a country where rugby is extremely popular and the competition is intense. The plan is to do a three-week tour, play as many games as possible, and train with high level clubs — especially the *Sharks* and *Blue Bulls* which are two of the top South African rugby teams.

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COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Where To Go, What To Do Near You

Mile High Music Series, July 1 — Enjoy live music by the Journey Girls plus cocktails to benefit *Medicine Horse* at *Mile High Station*, 6:30 p.m. Information: 720-946-7721.

Midsummer Night's Tour, July 1-2 — *Botanic Gardens* tours celebrate the edible, healing, and other properties of plants in old England. Information: 720-865-3500.

Four Mile Park Independence Celebration, July 2 — Event returns with live music, crafts, games, food trucks, plus fireworks, 5-9 p.m. Information: 720-865-0800.

City Of Glendale Fireworks, July 2 — The jaw-dropping fireworks — considered Valley's premier display — flicker across the skies at dusk. Information: 303-639-4701.

Junk In The Trunk, July 3 — Neighbors, artists, others shop-sell in garage sale twist at the *Owl Saloon*, 5026 E. Colfax, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Information: theowlsaloon.com.

Stars & Stripes Forever, July 3 — Enjoy *Arapahoe Philharmonic* concert and fireworks at *Breckenridge Brewery*, Littleton, 8-10 p.m. Information: 303-781-1892.

Carousel, July 3-Aug. 1 — *Central City Opera* does the *Rodgers & Hammerstein* musical live at *Hudson Gardens*, 7 p.m., matinees at 3 p.m. Information: 303-296-6700.

Central City Opera Festival, July 3-Aug. 1 — See outdoor performances of *Carousel*, *Rigoletto*, plus *Dido and Aeneas* in Central City. Information: 303-296-6700.

Colorado Fresh Markets, July 3-Oct. 30 — Buy local produce, products, and fresh food at 1st. Ave. & University on Sat., 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Information: 303-442-1847.

City Park Jazz, July 4 — Celebrate July 4th to the tune of Purnell Steen and the Five Point Ambassadors at their 35th Anniversary return to *City Park*, 6-8 p.m., Free.

Zeds Dead, July 4 — The 2017 electronic dance music duo from Toronto ring in July 4th at the *Mission Ballroom* on Wynkoop St., 9 p.m. Information: 720-577-6884.

Aretha, July 8 — Vocalists Capathia Jenkins and Ryan Shaw perform alongside the *Colorado Symphony* at *Red Rocks Amphitheatre*, 7:30 p.m. Information: 720-865-2494.

Riverfront Park Summer Session, July 8 — Enjoy late day live music, art, food, booze at the historic 19th St. Bridge, 4-8 p.m. Information: riverfrontparkevents.com.

Girls High School Rugby Camp, July 8-11 — Open to incoming 9th through 12th grade girls with previous rugby experience. Information: glendaleyouthrugby.com.

Van Gogh Alive, July 9-Sept. 26 — DCPA brings global arts event to the *Hangar at Stanley Marketplace*, 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Fri.-Sun. to 9 p.m. Information: denvercenter.org.

Denver Jazz Club Youth All-Stars, July 10 — Featured on pro bands, the youth play New Orleans jazz at *Dazzle@Baur's*, 12:30 and 2 p.m. Information: 303-839-5100.

At The Park, July 12 & 26 — Free movies *Spiderman: Into The Spider-Verse* followed by *Raya & The Last Dragon* at *Infinity Park*, 7 p.m. Information: infinityparkglendale.com.

Paris To Hollywood, through July 18 — View the fashion and influences of Veronique and Gregory Peck at the *Denver Art Museum*. Information: 720-865-5000.

Summer Brew Fest, July 24 — Taste brews at *Mile High Station*, GA 12-3 p.m. & 7-10 p.m.; VIP 6-7 p.m. Bands *River Arkansas* & *Elder Grown* play. Information: 720-946-7721.

Colorado Symphony, July 25 — Joined by chorus and four vocal soloists, Brett Mitchell directs live at the *Red Rocks Amphitheatre*, 7 p.m. Information: 720-865-2494.

Raya & The Last Dragon, July 26 — Glendale hosts free movie night on *Infinity Park's* pitch, gates open 6 p.m., movie at 7 p.m. Information: infinityparkglendale.com.

Alan Jackson, Aug. 6 — Ranked by *Billboard* as one of the Top 10 Country Artists of All-Time, Jackson sings at *Ball Arena*, 7:30 p.m. Information: 303-405-1100.

Run For The Ring, Aug. 7 — 7th Annual 5K Run/Walk and Kids Fun Run, *Anschutz Medical Campus*. Reg. 7 a.m., Run/Walk 8 a.m. Info: childrensdiabetesfoundation.org/event/.

Thrown Down Show Down, Aug. 7 — The state's largest talent competition returns to *Infinity Park Event Center*, 6 p.m. Information: infinityparkeventcenter.com.

The Big Lift, Aug. 7 — Join groups of volunteers on projects from cleaning area gardens to cleaning trash in community parks. Information: coloradoulift.org./big-lift.

My Fair Lady, Aug. 13-22 — Great theatre returns to DCPA as *Lincoln Center* brings the musical *My Fair Lady* back to the *Buell Theatre*. Information: 720-865-4220.

Dancing With The Stars, Aug. 14 — *Cleo Parker Robinson Dance's* in-person and live-streamed *Fundraising Gala* date is set, details pending. Information: 303-295-1759.

Vinyasa, Violins & Vino, through Aug. 17 — Enjoy yoga, live violin music, and a picnic on Thursdays at *Denver Botanic Gardens*, 6:30 p.m. Information: 720-865-3500.

Luttrell, Aug. 19 — Unique melodic techno tunes from *Lucky Ones' Album* released on lockdown comes to the *Bluebird Theater*, 8 p.m. Information: 303-377-1666.

Salvador Dali: Gardens Of The Mind, through Aug. 22 — See series of rarely seen lithographs from the *Dali Museum* at *Botanic Gardens*. Information: 720-865-3500.

Each Other, through Aug. 22 — View Marie Watt and Cannupa Hansha Luger's joint sculpture-tapestry exhibit at the *Denver Art Museum*. Information: 720-865-5000.

Sing With Colorado Choir, Aug. 24 & 28 — Auditions, Tues. evening and Sat. morning. Vaccinations completed two weeks prior to audition. Info: thecoloradochoir.org/auditions.

Kavod Senior Life 50th Anniversary, Aug. 26 — Dinner, drinks and Skiar Brothers comedy act livestreamed to watch parties, 6:30 p.m. Information: 720-382-7819.

Happy Together, Aug. 27 — Tour group of the *Turtles*, *Vogues*, *Buckinghams*, and the *Cowsills* entertain at the *Paramount Theater*, 8 p.m. Information: 303-623-0106.

Denver Day Of Rock, Aug. 28 — A one day music festival with five stages of live music along the *16th St. Mall* to help fund *Amp the Cause*. Information: 303-605-2885.

Summer Art Market, Aug. 28-29 — *Art Student League's* event offering wide selection of art returns to Grant & 2nd St., 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Information: 303-778-8990.

Adult Men's Basketball, through Aug. 31 — Join Tuesday nights adult Men's Summer League Teams of 10 at *Glendale Sports Center*. Information: 303-639-4711.

Cherry Creek Arts Festival, Sept. 4-6 — The 30th art fest moves Creekside at the *Cherry Creek Shopping Center* from July 4th weekend. Information: 303-355-2787.

A Taste Of Colorado, Sept. 4-6 — Event moves to the *16th St. Mall* downtown with live music, vendors, and participating restaurants. Information: atasteofcolorado.com.

Bill Maher, Sept. 11 — The July *Buell Theatre* appearance by the comedian, political commentator, and TV host is rescheduled 8 p.m. Information: 720-865-4220.

All The Cosmos A Canvas, through Sept. 15 — *New Wings Over the Rockies* exhibit lets you drift into space to experience our universe. Information: 303-360-5360.

Denver BBQ Fest, Sept. 17-19 — The 3rd event is at *Empower Field at Mile High* on Fri. 6-8 p.m., Sat. 10:30-7 p.m.; and Sun. to 4 p.m. Information: DenverBBQFest.com.

Looking Forward/Looking Back, through Sept. 19 — *Molly Brown House* exhibit displays *Historic Denver's* 5-decades of saving sites. Information: 303-832-4092.

Colorado XOs And RugbyTown In The Spotlight

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Stateside, Glendale is working on compiling a fall schedule for rugby enthusiasts to look forward to at *Infinity Park*. Cassaday says they are hoping to play against D1 programs, MLR academies, and teams like the *Blue Bulls* who are willing to travel to compete.

Although rugby is clearly a significant part of the Glendale culture, Cassaday says that ultimately the program is part of the City's economic plan to put Glendale on the map. By attracting visitors to enjoy all the bars, retail, restaurants, and hotels Glendale has to offer, she hopes that other rugby teams will want to visit and train here as

well. Additionally, Cassaday says that the idea is that if Glendale invests in travel to play and train with foreign teams, the foreign teams will reciprocate.

Fans can look forward to watching the XOs play in the *RugbyTown 7s* tournament August 20-22 at *Infinity Park*. For more information and updates, visit www.infinityparkatglendale.com/colorado-xos.

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