

Driving force behind Aurora Barbarians honoured



By Jeff Doner

John Reich has spent a great deal of his life playing, watching and overseeing the growth and development of rugby programs in York Region.

Since the Aurora Rugby Club merged with the Barbarians program in Toronto in 2002, Reich has been a driving force in the development with one of Ontario's biggest and most successful clubs.

Last week, Rugby Ontario announced he would be inducted into the Rugby Ontario Hall of Fame for his tireless efforts for the sport.

'It's a bit of a surprise,' Reich told The Auroran. 'I was nominated by the club and I didn't know that was happening until I got the call from Domenic Scuglia [President of Rugby Ontario] to tell me I had been accepted as an inductee. I was surprised and, of course, thrilled to pieces. It's not something that I've ever really contemplated.

'I'm so pleased and the group of guys that I'm going in with. I know we're all in the builder category, so it's a rather august group and I'm tickled to be a part of it.'

Reich first joined the Toronto Barbarians in 1977 and has held executive roles since 1979.

Originally from Montreal, Reich played football for Concordia University. He then moved to Toronto to complete his MBA at York University, where he also played varsity football.

'I really didn't know anybody here,' he recalled. 'School was all-consuming, but I had a guy in my class who was a Barbarian player and we became friends and he asked now that football is over, what my plans were for physical activity. He mentioned that he was with a rugby club and asked me to come give it a try.'

Reich said he wasn't sure about the sport at first, but said it wasn't long before he was right into it.

'I really wasn't interested to be honest with you. I really did not have any affinity for rugby at all,' he said, noting his friend convinced him to try a game with the York Old Boys.

'I just walked on the field and I was pretty clumsy out of it, but I watched games and learned things about it ? pass backwards, run forwards and tackle anything that moves. It was so much fun for me; I was just delighted to have that opportunity.

?I became close to the guys there and they really became my family in the Toronto area and I just really liked the camaraderie and the goodwill that was expressed by virtually every player at every level of the club. It was really more of a community sport than anything I had been involved in before.?

He hasn't looked back and since turning his focus to the Aurora Barbarians, the program has groomed some of the province's finest players with plenty of championships and accolades to boast.

?The development in Aurora has been outstanding. The growth in numbers for men, women and juniors has just been spectacular and we're the second or third largest club in Ontario by design. Aurora is a fantastic sports-minded community and the acceptance has been great.?

The senior men have finished first six of the last 10 years and the women have played in the last two finals. This year the under-18 Ontario Junior boys also brought home a championship.

With the success he has been a part of in Aurora, Reich said he's not sure it is translating across the province and country at a similar rate.

?The grassroots development has been left to the clubs like ours,? he said. ?While we have been fortunate to have a great group of volunteers, other clubs that I grew up playing against have kind of withered and, in some cases, disappeared, because there isn't that support for them coming down from the Ontario body.

?There really hasn't been that focus on grassroots that there was 20 years ago.?

Reich's contributions, however, will continue to reap rewards for rugby in Aurora and Ontario.

He will be officially inducted into the Hall of Fame on December 7 at a ceremony in Toronto.