

Aurora Barbarians RFC hosts 530 youth rugby players in 'Minis Festival' at Sheppard's Bush and St. Max



The Aurora Barbarians Rugby Football Club hosted their '2023 Minis Festival' at Sheppard's Bush and St. Maximilian Kolbe CHS on Sunday morning.

Over 530 U6-U14 players enjoyed the ideal July conditions on the 11 fields deployed for the Festival.

Visiting teams included Balmy Beach, Ajax Wanderers, Toronto Nomads, Barrie Rugby Club, Georgian Bay Titans, Caledon Cavaliers, Brock Rugby Club, Peterborough RC, Guelph RC, and Toronto City Rugby Club.

John Reich, who was inducted into the Rugby Ontario Hall of Fame in 2013 and is the Past President of the Aurora Barbarians, said he was pleased by the number of participants the tourney attracted this year.

'We send out invitations across the province. We've got 350 kids from the U6-U12 divisions, 60 U14 girls playing on the artificial turf field here at Sheppard's Bush, and 120 U14 boys playing up at St. Max.' The Hall of Famer was most excited about 'the kids' exposure to the sport and just getting them out to play.

'We're happy they could meet Archie the Mascot of the Toronto Arrows and to meet Arrows players at the event. We're also grateful to and appreciative of the Town of Aurora for releasing the soccer fields for today's Festival.'

According to Reich, the Barbarians are working on a plan with the Town of Aurora to build a new rugby field at Sheppard's Bush to help house their growing program.

'We're committed to building a new field—a second artificial turf field just north of the existing one. As an organization, we've committed \$1.75 M to the building of a rugby complex that would include the much-needed field, a clubhouse, public access change rooms, and public washrooms.'

Equally committed to growing the game is the Toronto Arrows RFC—Canada's professional rugby franchise that competes in Major League Rugby.

Brock Smith, the Manager of Communications for the MLR squad, noted that, 'The Arrows have attended four festivals so far this season to build rugby at the grassroots level. We've got our mascot—Archie the Raccoon—here today to meet the kids and parents. Our season has now ended and nine of our players have been selected for the Internationals being hosted in Fiji and Tonga.'

'The Arrows now supply the Canadian National Team with the most players,' Smith added. 'We want to demonstrate to Canadian

players that there is now a pathway to pro rugby and that Canada has a pro rugby team.?

One of those pro rugby players in attendance at the Festival on Sunday was Travis Larsen, a flanker for the Arrows and a member of the Aurora Barbarians Senior Coaching Staff. The 6'3", 240 pound forward, who played the 2022 MLR season with the Seattle Seawolves prior to being rostered by the Arrows, observed that the best part of the Barbarians' Mini's Festival was "getting kids playing rugby and enjoying the best sport in the world."

"It's fun for the kids, it's great to see them trying rugby, and getting exposed to the sport at a young age. It's a global game with so many opportunities to travel."

Larsen, a well-travelled 31-year-old veteran who has played for a number of international clubs in Europe, was born in Canada, but raised in the rugby hotbed of New Zealand. He summed up his season with the Arrows: "We had a rough year. We were struck by the injury bug, but, as a result, lots of Canadian players had opportunities to play because so many veteran international players got hurt. Brendan Black from Oakville really stepped up for the Arrows and became the youngest player to ever start in a Major League Rugby game."

Sunday's outstanding "major league" event attracted over a thousand visitors to Sheppard's Bush and St. Maximilian Kolbe CHS, all celebrating a great international game organized by an excellent local rugby club.

The Aurora Barbarians' Mini's Festival was a stirring on-field success and it makes one wonder, which of the 530 kids on the eleven fields on Sunday morning could be the next Brendan Black and don a Toronto Arrows jersey in the future??

According to Khalil Ajram, the Co-President of the Aurora Barbarians RFC, nine Senior Women players from the local rugby club represented Canada Women and U20 this weekend in Ottawa. Specifically, McKinley Hunt, Claire Gallagher, and Tyson Beukeboom competed for Team Canada Women versus New Zealand and Australia.

Madi Thompson, Maddy Donnelly, Taylor McKnight, Victoria Stanley, Reese Morgan, Maia Swemmer, Tatty Jackson, and Eden Kilgour competed for Team Canada U20 Women versus the USA and Wales.

Additionally, Andrew Quattrin of the Barbarians will be competing for Team Canada in Fiji and Tonga in August while U18 Barbarians Adam Doane and Briar Barron will be competing in the Netherlands and the Youth Commonwealth Games, respectively, in July and August.

By Jim Stewart