

Aurora Sports Hall of Fame 2024 - Inductee Sandy Townsend: OUA Rugby champion at Queen's; legendary coach of Barbarians, CDS Cyclone

Sandy Townsend saunters into the Tim Hortons on a Tuesday afternoon in his blue GW Williams Wildcats t-shirt and it's clear that he's coming from a place he loves: the rugby pitch.

The legendary coach, whose Aurora Sports Hall of Fame enshrinement takes place on November 7 at Aurora Town Square, explains his newest connection to a local community rugby team.

Currently, I'm coaching at Seneca Polytechnic and the mother of one of my Sting players asked me if I could deliver a coaches' clinic to some local coaches. They asked about my availability to coach the Wildcats and guess who was available to coach?

Townsend chuckles at how he moved seamlessly from coaching Seneca to adding the Wildcats to his t-shirt collection and resume.

I was asked to coach the Girls' Rugby 7's and here we are in the semifinals tomorrow against Sacred Heart.

It is the latest in so many successful coaching gigs for Townsend, who described the feelings he'll experience when he's inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame next month.

It is so satisfying that my efforts and accomplishments have been in the Town of Aurora, especially seeing so many of my Barbs players playing for the local high schools. My raison d'être was to grow the game in Aurora. We built a Barbs program, that consisted of 40 players and two teams at Boys U16 and U18, to a program 20 years later comprised of 450 players that is co-ed at every level.

I enjoyed the regular cycle of the rugby season, coaching from April to August, my favorite five months of the year.

His own successful career as a player started at Oakville Trafalgar High School, spurred by the inspirational coaching of Gary Turnbull.

He was an enthusiastic supporter of rugby and his players. Coach Turnbull had a lot of faith in me. He encouraged me to play rugby in Grades 9, 10, and 11 and the seed was planted for my love of the game.

Although Townsend and his family moved to Edmonton for his Grade 12 year at Strathcona Composite High School, his love of the sport developed by Coach Turnbull at OTHS was not diminished by distance.

In fact, as he adds with a wink in his eye, I actually played for a high school down the street from Strathcona that had a rugby program. Not sure if that kind of 'player transfer' would fly today.

Likely not, but Townsend was grateful for the opportunity to play in Edmonton and build on the skills he learned from Turnbull in Oakville. In one of those charming twists of fate, he was so pleased to meet his mentor coach decades after being introduced to the game at Oakville Trafalgar: I bumped into Gary Turnbull when we were doing volunteer work over thirty years later. My hero remembered my name. I loved that moment.

Townsend also reflected on his memorable moments as a player when he embraced the Brotherhood of Rugby.

It's a physical sport. It's a great sport where everybody touches the ball. I played Scrum Half and I loved making people miss. There aren't too many people who want to play a contact sport without equipment, but after the game you're all hurt, your opponents are hurt but the fifteen guys you've been tackling on the field are your brothers off the field, too.

His love of the game is evident, especially when describing how he played for two teams that were situated across the country.

?I played in the summers for the Alberta Junior team based in Edmonton and played during the school year for Queen's University in Kingston. We won the OUA Rugby championship in 1979 and we're still getting together. There's a special connection, even though we don't sing as loudly or drink as much beer as we used to. Most rugby players want to give back and it comes from the teamwork that is needed on the pitch.?

Townsend gave back to the game through coaching and his long and decorated career kicked off in Montreal. However, his greatest contributions and achievements came from the sidelines at Country Day School and with the Aurora Barbarians. The distinguished CDS coach discussed the humble beginnings of the rugby program at the King City private school.

?I arrived at Country Day School in 1997 after teaching and coaching in Montreal. Within two years, we had enough players for both a Senior Boys team and a Junior Boys team. It was truly enjoyable to coach in the CIS for 27 years. The Country Day School rugby program produced many fine players, including Claire Gallagher and McKinley Hunt who played for the Barbarians and Team Canada. They're both playing professional Rugby 15's in England and recently won a silver medal for Canada at the world championships.?

Coach Townsend's historical connections to the Barbarians run even deeper.

?In the summer of 1998, I started coaching the Toronto Irish and coached George Azar who has won many YRAA championships at STL. We moved to Aurora in the Fall of 1997 and when the Toronto Barbarians merged with the Aurora Rugby Club, I was sharing a beer with the Barbs, sitting on the Shoeless Joe's patio, and was asked to coach in 2000. The next season, I coached the Barbs U18's and enjoyed my 16 years in that role. We won the Provincial Gold Medal in 2013 and just missed another championship in 2003 ? we won the silver medal in a very close final game.?

He was also pleased by the recent success of Aurora Barbarian Chloe Daniels who captured an Olympic silver medal with the National 7's team in Paris, France.

?Her story is a great one for a young person like Chloe and now she's back at Queen's University as an unassuming regular student. It's such a small-town story. She's put in a ton of work and lived out of a suitcase for years playing for the national team to achieve her Olympic goals.?

Townsend's expression of joy regarding the success of Barbs' alumni is dyed in the wool and he feels a sense of accomplishment through his years of service to the local rugby club both as a coach and an administrator.

?I was happy to help the Barbarians grow by serving on its Board as the Director of Junior Development. I also helped create the Queen's University Rugby Booster Club in Kingston to support the team and grow the sport.?

Despite all of Townsend's accomplishments, he expresses a wee bit of remorse during our chat about the decommissioning of Fletchers Field this Fall.

?I think it will be a big transition for local rugby programs that played so many games at Fletchers Field. They're putting the money gained from the sale of the complex into the clubs, but reinvesting the funds earned on the deal, especially in terms of creating fields, is very urgent. The loss of Fletchers will take away from the history of the place and I lament the disappearance of this space with all of its cherished memories for our coaches and players.?

However, it seems that hope springs eternal. Despite the closure of this legendary space that was the setting of so much local rugby history, Townsend takes heart in the partnership between the Barbs and the Town of Aurora in developing Sheppard's Bush into a multi-pitch rugby complex.

?I'm happy that Aurora is helping the Barbarians to build a facility and create fields that will be so urgently needed by the rugby community.?

When asked about the most rewarding aspects of coaching, Townsend notes, ?It's been so nice to connect kids to the game.?

?I love when they re-join the Barbs to play at the next level and continue playing the game as an adult. One of the most satisfying aspects about coaching was my roster retention. I always judged my success by how big my roster was at the end of the season. The smiles on their faces told me what I needed to know: that they experienced a game that was enjoyable, fun, and safe.?

Townsend's contributions to rugby?especially at the local level with the Country Day School Cyclone, Aurora Barbarians, Seneca Polytechnic Sting, and, most recently, Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School Wildcats?reveal his deep connection to the sporting life of the King/Aurora area and the hundreds of players he has mentored in his illustrious career.

Coach Townsend's story of selflessness and success is a great tale so worthy of enshrinement in our Town's Sports Hall of Fame.

By Jim Stewart