

Homegrown players aim for success as Ontario Blues



By Jeff Doner

The Ontario Blues senior men's rugby team has shown a great degree of success, winning three consecutive MacTier Cups in 2011, 2012 and 2013 in the annual Canadian Rugby Championship.

This year, two homegrown players ? Eric Selvaggi and Paul Ciulini ? who have come up through the Aurora Barbarians system, are hoping to factor in Ontario's squad.

The two players have joined the Ontario Blues for preliminary games before the final roster is chosen in June.

This past weekend, Selvaggi and Ciulini played in the first ever development match against the Atlantic Rock, with both teams featuring young rosters. The Blues walked away with a 38 ? 33 win.

The match was the first start for the 18-year-old Ciulini with the Ontario Blues and so far he is impressed with that he has seen and is happy to soak it all in.

?This team is really, really good,? he said. ?From the veterans that I have practiced with, they are a very sound team. The caliber of players there is really good. It's what you dream about doing when you first start the sport. It's really amazing.?

Ciulini is currently studying chemistry and playing varsity rugby at the University of Toronto. He started playing rugby with the Barbs in the U12 program, has played in the Ontario system for four years and has had two tours with Team Canada, playing for U17 and U18 teams.

Now he's hoping to make a mark and stick around with the Ontario Blues U19s, while also continuing to play for the Barbs, which has been instrumental in his development.

?In both rugby and the social aspects, the Barbs organization has been really important,? he said. ?There are great coaches and great players that have not only helped me on the field, but the friends I have made off the field have been great.?

At 21, Selvaggi has followed a similar path through his rugby career.

He first started playing with the Barbs in 2006 when he was 14 and was also thankful for its strong program.

?It has been great. That's the grassroots level,? he said. ?I have the most fun playing with the Barbs. It's not as intense as Ontario, but I have a lot of fun, I've made a lot of good friends and it has definitely helped with my development, especially when I was younger in my first year in the men's program, I was 17 or 18 playing against 35-year-old men.?

He is studying business at the University of Western Ontario, where he also plays on the varsity team that has made it to four OUA

finals, winning one championship.

Selvaggi also came up through the Ontario junior program from U15 up to U19 and is now looking to get playing time with the senior men's team.

‘It’s always a great honour to play for your province and that can lead to playing for your country, but it’s really good to play at the top level of domestic rugby in the country,’ he said. ‘Playing with better players against tougher competition improves your skills dramatically.’

Looking ahead, Selvaggi is playing for three teams [Aurora, Western and Ontario Blues] that have had a fair share of success over the past few years and he’s confident that will keep going ahead.

The Ontario Blues schedule will resume at the end of June, but Ciulini and Selvaggi will both be working hard back in Aurora with the Barbs in the meantime.