

Ready to Walk the Hall: Marco Di Girolamo humbled to show his children what his father has accomplished



It was a routine kind of day at work for Marco Di Girolamo.

The Aurora resident, who recently ran for Ward 2 Councillor, answered a phone call in his office earlier this year. It wasn't a friend or a work colleague. It was the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, notifying him he had been inducted as part of the Class of 2022.

"I might have even shed a tear," Di Girolamo recalled. "It's a humbling experience to be recognized in the Town you live in. My kids are in hockey and we go to the rink and we see the Hall of Fame. We've walked through it and seen all the names on the walls and the displays. To know that my kids will be able to walk in there and see what their dad has done, it's a great humbling experience."

Along with his wife Pam, who he had met after a rugby match while with Team Canada, and with his three children Roman, Ruby and Rocco, Di Girolamo will have his story shared at the Induction Celebration Dinner on November 10.

It is quite the story in fact. Born in Toronto, Di Girolamo moved to Maple, ON, at 11-years-old.

Without a high school in the area, he attended St. Elizabeth in Thornhill.

He didn't have a clue what rugby was, nor had he ever seen it. All Di Girolamo knew was hockey and soccer, but with rugby lessons offered in gym class, he didn't turn it down.

The instructor was former conditioning coach for the Detroit Red Wings and the Toronto Maple Leafs Peter Renzetti.

"We did our rugby lesson in high school and he said, 'I think you should play rugby.' So, I tried out for the rugby team. We played rugby that season and he said, 'Hey you're good at this. You should go try out for Ontario,'" Di Girolamo recalled.

"I tried out for Ontario, made the Ontario U15 team, we ended up going out east and winning the Eastern Canadian Championships. We went on a tour that winter to northern England."

In England, Di Girolamo said that was the best time of his life. He stayed with a billet family and immersed himself in British culture. It was the first time he had been on a plane and that was one of the best trips he had of his life.

At 16 years of age Di Girolamo had to switch schools. St. Joan of Arc, which did not have a rugby team, had been built, so he decided to join the Toronto Barbarians (before the merger with the Aurora Lions occurred).

Di Girolamo continued playing with Team Ontario U16 and U19 and played exceptionally well with the Barbs, Di Girolamo was selected to play for Team Canada U-19 team and went to Wales in 1996 for a month-long tour. Canada took on Wales in the final game at Cardiff Arms Park.

Upon his return, he attended York University for Kinesiology and while playing rugby for the school, he met John McMillan (an Aurora resident and SAC Grad). McMillan, convinced him to apply for the Pacific Pride, a U23 Canadian Developmental team based in Victoria, BC.

In 1999, Di Girolamo packed up and headed out west to live his rugby dream.

In his young and ambitious career, Di Girolamo made his first 7's appearance for Canada in November 2000 in Durban, South Africa. A few months later, he made his first 15's appearance against Uruguay in the summer of 2001; all told Di Girolamo has 21 caps in the 15-man version and 34 Tournaments in the seven-aside game.

"Hong Kong holds a special place in my heart. First, Hong Kong 7's, is the biggest tournament there is. People fly in around the world. You have all worlds of rugby colliding. 7's is a party sport, not for the players but for fans in the stands," Di Girolamo said.

"There's 32 different nations there competing. It's a great atmosphere and a cool place to play. To win the plate that year and that was my first year as captain, to go out and win in front of that kind of stage, it was a memorable experience."

Di Girolamo returned back to Ontario after meeting his now wife. Pam formally played rugby herself at the University of Western and was inducted into the school's Hall of Fame in 2021.

He led the Barbarians Rugby Club to five-straight league titles and three provincial cups. He was named player of the year 10 times as well.

But, alongside all of these accolades, Di Girolamo recalled it was love at first sight since he suited up for rugby. Normally playing in the back end, as he was an amazing runner and handler of the ball, the one thing he loved the most was the culture. He has made a tremendous number of friends through the sport that were both his teammates and foes on the pitch.

Because in the eyes of many rugby fans, there is no animosity like in other games. It is an amazing atmosphere night-in and night-out, no matter who you support and who you might dislike.

Everyone is your friend; and in Di Girolamo's eyes, he sees everyone around him as that. To all who will be seated for his induction, he most certainly will appreciate everyone in attendance from the bottom of his heart.

By Robert Belardi