



## WEST PEMBROKE PINES OPTIMIST TRACK AND FIELD ATHLETES RISE TO THE TOP

By Debby Teich

The West Pembroke Pines Optimist Track and Field Program has been gaining notoriety, as it continues to produce champions. Team members have won over 400 medals at the local, state, national and world levels and many have received full athletic scholarships to universities.

The athletes are trained by experienced coaches, some of whom were former track and field champions themselves. The head coaches - Jonathan Carter, Jessica Carter, Marvil Tatham and Mazel Tatham - understand what it takes to win.

"The focus of the program is not just to develop great athletes, but also to make sure they understand the importance of hard work, good sportsmanship, strong character, and discipline," said Coach Jonathan Carter. "These qualities will help them achieve their future goals both on and off the field."

Registration for the 2015 season starts in December. The regular season begins on March 1 and ends with the league championship in April. The athletes practice three days a week and compete on Saturdays against other local track teams throughout South Florida. The team also travels to meets outside the area.

Approximately 65 athletes participate in the program each year and most of them are from the Pembroke Pines area. It is open to male and female athletes, ages 5 to 17, from beginner to advanced. Some excel at sprinting, while others are better at long jump, shot put, high jump or middle distance.

Coaches find the niche that is most appropriate for each athlete and develop a plan to help him or her reach their fullest potential. They start with basic drills to help the athletes develop a strong foundation and build self-confidence. Carter says that many of the kids cannot even run a lap when they join the program. Ultimately, the players learn the skills they need to compete at the next level - whether it is high school, college or professional -

and have a lot of fun along the way.

"It is a family-oriented atmosphere," said Carter. "We encourage all of the kids to support each other and they develop a real camaraderie. They grow to love the sport."

Many of WPPPO's former athletes have received athletic scholarships to colleges and universities, including Kendall Ellis, who is currently attending University of Southern California on a full scholarship. Other athletes have received scholarships to University of Miami, University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Central Florida, Florida State University, Harvard University and more.

Several of the athletes currently in the program are headed in that direction. Two athletes competed at the 2014 Club Championship in Orlando this summer. Isaiah Taylor, 17, placed 2nd in the 100 meters (10.68 seconds) and 200 meters (21.20 seconds). He also broke the record in the 100 meters in the semifinals (10.55 seconds). Vegas Burnett, 8, won 5th place in the 100 meters (14.76 seconds) and 8th in the 200 meters (32.35 seconds).

Ten WPPPO athletes competed in track and field events at the AAU National Jr. Olympics this summer and the team took home seven medals. Jassani Carter, 11, won 3rd place in the 400-meter dash (60.8 seconds) and 7th place in the 200 meter (26.97 seconds). Jaydea Carter, 12, placed 5th in the 80-meter hurdles (13.40 seconds). Isaiah Taylor, 17, finished 3rd in the 100 meters (10.58 seconds) and 2nd in the 200 meters (21.52 seconds). Chanele Williams, 13, placed 7th in the 400-meter dash (59.77 seconds). Randy Smith, 9, won 8th place in the 800 meters (2:35 minutes).

"The key to winning is persistence, desire and consistency," said Carter. "The athletes need to believe in themselves."

For more information, visit [www.westpinestack.com](http://www.westpinestack.com) or send an email to [westpinestack@gmail.com](mailto:westpinestack@gmail.com).

## OKAPI WANDERERS RUGBY FC MEETS IN PEMBROKE PINES

By Debby Teich

Rugby is a fun sport that just about anyone can play, regardless of size, speed, strength or gender. It continues to grow in popularity throughout the world, as well as right here in Pembroke Pines. The Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC offers kids, ages 9 to 16, an opportunity to play the sport.

Derived from a game of football (American soccer) at Rugby School in England in 1823, rugby players use strength, speed and strategy to move a ball into an opponent's territory. The free-flowing game is fast-paced and action-packed, with few stoppages and continuous possession changes. Players must work well together as a team.

Although the Okapi Wanderers Rugby Club was formed recently, most of the club's coaches and players have been involved in the sport for many years. The players chose the name after they discovered the Okapi, an endangered animal from Central America that is a mix of a zebra and giraffe. They thought it was fitting, since the team is comprised of so many different cultures, backgrounds, and religions.

From October to May, the club compete against other players in the South Florida area as part of the Florida Youth Rugby Union. Players, from beginner to advanced, can join at any point in the season.

Each game ends with a winner and loser, as well as a big celebration. Unlike most sports, the players and families from both teams stay for a traditional gathering after the game finishes. It is an opportunity to build camaraderie among teammates, as well as in the rugby community.

"Rugby is more than just a game; it is a lifestyle," said Mariana Gallo, one of the founders

of the rugby club. Three years ago, she moved to South Florida from Argentina, where rugby was an integral part of her life. Her two sons, Franco, 13, and Tomas, 16, play on the team and hope to become professional rugby players.

"We want everyone in South Florida to have an opportunity to experience rugby, which is why we helped to start the Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC," she continued. "We welcome kids of all sizes and shapes. Once kids try it, they always fall in love with the sport. All they need to get started is a mouth guard and a pair of cleats."

Over the summer, the players gave back to the community. They taught the game of rugby to some younger kids at a school in Pompano. They also helped to restore a sand dune in Sunny Isles by picking up garbage and planting native trees. After they finished, they played a game of rugby on the beach.

"We are always looking for ways that the kids can enjoy activities together, while helping others," said Gallo.

The kids also give back to each other. The older players work with the younger ones to teach them the game. When players grow out of their cleats, they give them to other players on the team to use.

"We are like one big family," said Gallo. "We always have a great time together both on and off the field."

The Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC is a nonprofit organization. For information, visit [www.okapiwanderersrugby.com](http://www.okapiwanderersrugby.com), send an email to [info@okapiwanderersrugby.com](mailto:info@okapiwanderersrugby.com), like "Okapi Wanderers Rugby" on Facebook or follow "@okapiwanderers" on Twitter.

