



# Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC MEETS IN WESTON

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 Weston. The Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC offers kids, ages 8 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 competes 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.

