

Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC enjoy successful season with two state championships



The Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC's under-17 squad celebrates after defeating West Pines to take its age-group title at the Florida Youth Rugby Union State Championships at the Hobe Sound Polo Club. (photo/courtesy)

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The Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC organization in Weston is enjoying a breakout season, and that recently reached a climax as all of its age-division teams qualified for the Florida Youth Rugby Union (FYRU) State Championships at the Hobe Sound Polo Club.

A rare feat indeed for the Tequesta Trace Park-based program, which was the only youth rugby club in the state to have all its squads — under-9, under-11, under-13, under-15, under-17 and under-19 — involved in that competition.

The older clubs are setting a winning precedent for the younger clubs to emulate.

The under-17 squad, coached by Robert Jarvis and Ruben Alvo, captured the state championship with a convincing 32-5 victory over West Pines. The title spotlight also shone on the under-19 team, coached by Fabian

Pourrain and Joaquin Neira, as it defeated Key Biscayne, 45-19.

The under-17 Wanderers have won the state championship before, but the Florida title was the first for the under-19 group. Andres Villarreal was selected the Most Valuable Player in the under-19 level of states.

Other members of the under-19 champions are Diego Loyola, Joaquin Rodriguez, Andres Wulff, Juan Vera, Daniel Barsan, Franco Gallo, Luciano Malvicino, Pedro Fernandez, Teofilo Blaquier, Speroni Santiago, Conor Porter, Juan Vera, Thomas Montgomery, Facundo Castro, Jose Gregorio Pintar, Nicolas Zarramera, Francisco Miguel, Danill and Erik Vento.

The under-17 Florida title holders are Luis Perez, Ryan Vento, Dominic Brigantty, Juan Pablo Leon Letelier, Enea Sabadini, Pedro Van Thienen, Carlos Berdon, Gianni Bolognini, Josh Braun, Conor Brown, Logan Fontirroche, Pedro Jarvis, Thomas Kieckbusch, Jonathan Lawdan, Facundo Lorant, Juan David Salazar, Jeronimo Cotes, Mateo Freixa, Felipe Giordanino, Pierce Griffin, John Hays, Tomas Lorant, Francisco Morano Peccoud, Joaquin Penaloza, Pablo Villarreal, Juan Castro, Manuel Giordanino and Braulio Garcia.

Okapi Wanderers Rugby FC includes over 200 players, 26 coaches and seven managers in the growing program. Regular season games began in January, and all six teams enjoyed winning seasons in the FYRU league.

With approximately 50 rugby programs in Florida, there is always plenty of competition during the season as well as tournament play. South Florida is a popular area with the highest concentration of rugby enthusiasts in the state.

There are four founders of the Okapi Wanderers: Gavin McLeavy, Matthew Hayden, Mariano Gallo and Mariana Gallo.

Mariana Gallo was thrilled to see the team come away with the state championship hardware.

"We are all very proud of the hard work the coaches and players did during the whole season, no matter what the results were," Gallo said. "We're very happy that all our youth divisions played the finals at the state championships. The parents were (very supportive) at every practice and game."

Developing youth for positive results both on and off the field is important to the Okapi Wanderers.

"We teach the players an amazing sport, and we teach them rugby values like respect, sportsmanship, teamwork, discipline and enjoyment. We really care about our players being happy on and off the field," Gallo continued.

Gavin McLeavy, who is a native of England, wears many hats with the Wanderers.

"We've sent a few kids away to college and abroad to play rugby in other countries," McLeavy said. "They know how to play the game now. We have players here who are under the age of 7, so 10 years from now they will have experience and know how to play the game and hopefully we'll have a few future USA national teams members."

Before the state finals, the Okapi Wanderers hosted the Youth Rugby Festival as an opportunity to get all the youth teams together. Okapi members and other rugby clubs got to enjoy some friendly competition and pick up some pointers of the sport. The family style atmosphere was a big hit for everyone in attendance.

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