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SECTION E



The Winnipeg Wanderers clashed with the Winnipeg Assassins during the club's centennial anniversary weekend this month.

Rugby club's storied history a tale of Winnipeg's sports landscape

WANDERERS CENTENNIAL transcends the pitch

BEN LITTLE

A LOCAL rugby club's influence on Winnipeg's sports scene impacts thousands of Winnipeggers every day. Their story is one of the city's best kept secrets.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Winnipeg Wanderers Rugby Football Club. The Kildonan-based Wanderers storied history reflects the core values of a global community, rooted in camaraderie and fuelled by a burning love for the sport.

The Wanderers' influence on both rugby and football has built stadiums, shaped families, and pioneered the way for Winnipeg's beloved professional gridiron football team.

Last month, Manitoba's oldest rugby club celebrated the milestone with the communities it helped build. The club hosted a weekend of festivities at Maple Grove Rugby Park and were honoured on two separate occasions at Princess Auto Stadium.

Longtime Wanderer Joey Potter said support away from the pitch was essential to the club's longevity.

"To keep a nonprofit organization running for that long is a testament in itself," Potter said. "It's a testament to so many volunteers, so many people

who have a passion for just being around — not just playing the game, but making sure that everything around the team functions."

Potter grew up playing football, but had never played rugby before joining the club. In 1998, attending a social, Potter found all the motivation he needed to start.

"Good old Gordy Den was talking to some of my huge friends about coming out to rugby. He wasn't talking to me because I'm five-foot-nothing, right?" Potter joked. "And none of those guys came out. I came out by myself and never left."

Twenty-eight years later, he's still playing.

Potter's unique venture into rugby is one of a million stories that make up the club's history, immortalized through conversations over a pint after the final whistle.

"Tradition, right? That's what we're celebrating," said Potter, the longest-serving player on the team. "There's not a lot of things in Canada that make it to 100 years."

Potter now gets to pass those traditions on to a new generation of Wanderers, serving as a player coach with the men's team. On match days, they wear the same green and white colours they wore 100 years ago. After games, they sing the Wanderers song over drinks at the clubhouse, just as their captain John A. Bulloch sang in 1929.

But perhaps the most important Wanderers tradition is their devotion to growing the game. It's certainly important to the near 33,000 fans at



Winnipeg Wanderers president Brad Hirst (right), receiving the City of Winnipeg Community Service Award by Mayor Scott Gillingham, said the Winnipeg Blue Bombers allowed Wanderers green on the field when the club was honoured during the July 10 home game.

Princess Auto Stadium during Blue Bomber home games or the tens of thousands who watch from home — even if they don't know it.

The Blue Bombers are born

In the late 19th century, a new game emerged in Canada featuring modified British rugby rules. In 1909, Earl Grey donated the Grey Cup, to be awarded to Canada's best rugby football team. Popularity skyrocketed for the new game, which eventually became Canadian football.

In 1913, the Winnipeg Tammany Tigers were founded to compete for Earl Grey's trophy. After 16 years, the club folded.

Winnipeg was eager to field a new team, but short on players. That's when they called on the Wanderers.

The Wanderers answered the call, supplying enough players to roster a team. In 1930, the Winnipeg Football Club was born. Five years later, they became the first team from Western Canada to win the Grey Cup, beating the Hamilton Tigers 18-12 and inheriting the Blue Bombers nickname from journalist Vince Leah.

On the July 10 home game, hosting the Toronto Argonauts, the Blue Bombers paid their respects, inviting the Wanderers to carry the Canadian flag onto the field for a pre-game ceremony.

One hundred and thirty Wanderers players and alumni carried out the nine-by-18 metre flag before being honoured by the Bombers organization. The Wanderers were the first group with enough people to carry the flag by themselves.

According to club president Brad Hirst, they were also the first team allowed to wear green.

"Wade Miller gave us that distinction because of — obviously — the resemblance to Saskatchewan," Hirst said, laughing.

On July 18, the Wanderers returned to Princess Auto Stadium where Canada hosted Zimbabwe in a World Rugby Nations Cup match.

At halftime, in front of 6,712 rugby fans, Mayor Scott Gillingham presented the club with the City of Winnipeg Community Service Award. Rugby Canada also presented an award commemorating the club's 100th anniversary.

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