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## SPORTS



The Force under-11 rugby team of Great Falls has competed this summer against clubs from Vienna, Alexandria, and Springfield.

PHOTO COURTESY  
OF THE FORCE

# Grassroots Rugby Hits Great Falls With Force

## New youth team competes first summer of play.

BY THERESA COETZEE  
SPECIAL TO THE CONNECTION

This Spring the signs were all over the area: “PLAY RUGBY, RugbyVa.org.”

They were probably ignored by many. They probably did not catch the eyes of those involved in youth soccer or lacrosse, the established local youth leagues, or those not interested in a foreign and ‘dangerous’ sport. But this writer’s family noticed, and so did quite a few others. Rugby was born to Great Falls.

The man behind the signs is Buzz McClain, a rugby enthusiast and columnist for NBC-Universal and Rugby Magazine USA. With his initiative, ‘The Force,’ Great Falls’ most recent, grassroots youth athletic team was born of passion for a sport that the former member of the USA Rugby board has played, championed and refereed since 1981. In September, McClain will travel to New Zealand for the Rugby World Cup with plans to report on 10 different matches.

Thanks to McClain, Gary Coetzee, a volunteer parent and former South African and French club rugby player, and other supportive parents, including Jim Dallas, who shows up to every practice despite being a novice to the sport, a team was born.

The Force now competes against other Northern Virginia area teams from Alexandria, Springfield, and Vienna as well as others that are affiliated with known adult rugby clubs. The little known, well-organized, coed summer league concluded last weekend with a 36-team tournament held on Springfield’s home pitch, Hooes Road Park.

For those fearing for the safety of youngsters taking part in the sport, there need be no concern — the under-11 division of players do not yet participate in the tackle version of rugby. Instead, they compete in touch rugby. A two-hand touch allows a player to make two steps to pass the ball, and after a few minutes of their first practice, the kids are hooked.

**THE FORCE TEAM** is small and growing. Able to field a full under-9 squad, it hopes to build its un-

der-11 and under-13 ranks. Perhaps in time, the metropolitan area’s growing prep school rugby presence, U.S. participation in the Rugby World Cup, and the addition of ‘7s Rugby’ to the Olympic Games in 2016 will help fill in the ranks. Coach McLain has a vision for the team.

“I coached Great Falls baseball for six years and thought I was through,” said McCain. “When I put up the 18 yard [rugby] signs around Great Falls I was hoping to tap into the football, lacrosse and soccer kids who might be under 17 and eager for a contact sport.

“So imagine my surprise when the vast majority of our players were under 11,” he said. “I had to change my mindset to cultivating a team that will grow into rugby. The Springfield coach told me he started the same way and now he has 120 players and they are hard-core rugby players, with a U11 program that continues to feed the bigger, contact teams.”

**SO, HOW HAVE** Great Falls’ newest representatives fared so far? Early in the summer it felt a bit like ‘The Bad News Bears.’ But, just as in the iconic 1970s movie about a makeshift youth baseball team, The Force has pulled together. The team won a match and saw its passing line spread out and work together more consistently each week.

Coetzee calls rugby “The School of Life.” The sport teaches the values of camaraderie and teamwork. There is little place for individualism. Without working together, success is not achieved. In fact, when a receiver is ready to catch the ball he calls out, “With you, with you!” That is why McClain named the team ‘The Force’ — because it is with you!

The Force practices on Tuesdays and Thursday from 6 p.m. until dusk throughout the summer. The league tries to purposefully schedule practices and games when children involved with other area sports are free.

Coaches Coetzee, McClain, and Dallas look for continued interest and support for their team next summer. For more information, visit [www.rugbyva.org](http://www.rugbyva.org) or write to Buzz McClain at [RugbyBuzz@gmail.com](mailto:RugbyBuzz@gmail.com). Follow his exploits in New Zealand at [www.UniversalSports.com](http://www.UniversalSports.com).

*Theresa Coetzee is an attorney at Marriott International, a Great Falls resident and, most importantly, a “Rugby Mom.”*