The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Rugby Set to Make World Cup Debut

By Howard Amos

September 12, 2011



The Russian rugby team's best chance of victory is against the United States in its first match on Saturday.

Most people within Russian rugby can agree on two things. While Russia's debut in the Rugby World Cup is a landmark moment for a sport first introduced by foreigners building the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the 19th century, there is also little hope that the team will progress beyond the pool stages.

The Bears will play what is likely to be a closely fought match against the United States in their opening game in New Zealand on Thursday, but then the side's odds become steeper as they take on Italy and championship contenders Australia and Ireland.

"We are afraid that our lack of experience might have a psychological effect on the players," head coach Nikolai Nerush said. "But we have to show people that the Russian team didn't end up at the World Cup by chance."

To progress to the quarterfinals of the competition, the team would need to be ranked in the top two spots in their pool.

“Above all, it is our spirit that should make us stand out,” Nerush added.

British-based betting agency William Hill has the odds of Russia being crowned overall victors in New Zealand at 5,000 to 1.

But the team’s captain, Vladislav Korshunov, said that whatever their results, the Bears might offer some entertaining rugby. All games will be shown on Russian national television. The side favors a fast, attacking style of play, Korshunov said.

Since the 1960s, Russian rugby’s spiritual home has been almost 5,000 kilometers east of Moscow, in Krasnoyarsk. Even in low winter temperatures, clashes between the city’s top teams can draw crowds in the tens of thousands. Seven of the 30 players in the Russian national squad play for Siberian clubs.

Support for the game is less strong outside Krasnoyarsk, but there are currently eight top-flight teams in Russia. The professional league was founded in 2005.

Thirteen members of the Bears come from VVA-Podmoskovye, the 2010 Russian league winners and formerly part of the Yury Gagarin Air Forces Academy. Gagarin, the first man in space, was a keen rugby player.

The Russian side’s team director Kingsley Jones, a Welshman and former coach at Manchester-based club the Sale Sharks, said the current state of rugby in Russia reminded him of British semi-professional rugby in the 1990s.

Jones was brought in to prepare the side before the World Cup. He said one of his principal concerns had been to eliminate sloppiness in the defensive game. Russian players, he added, suffer from a lack of high-level competition and his training regime had been a wake-up call.

“It’s a massive culture shock for the players, making them work from 8 in the morning to 8 at night and finishing the day with yoga,” Jones said.

Winger Vasily Artyemyev, who speaks fluent English with an Irish accent picked up during seven years studying and playing rugby in Ireland, concurred that the standard of the game in Russia differed sharply to that in other countries.

“The main difference is probably in the intensity. … It’s really difficult for players to keep improving [in Russia],” he said.

Artyemyev has just finished a two-year stint with VVA-Podmoskovye and signed for Northampton Saints this summer. He said the World Cup could prove a catalyst for foreign teams to snap up Russian players — a tendency that would strengthen the national side.

Although highly unlikely to meet them on the pitch in New Zealand, Russia’s nemesis in the rugby world, Georgia, has dozens of players who belong to professional French sides.

The Bears began their preparation for their World Cup debut in June. They have since spent

three weeks at a training camp in Sochi where the facilities, Jones said, were on a par with the best in the world.

The side also completed a tour of England, where they lost all four of their matches against professional British sides — the Ospreys, Northampton, Gloucester and the Newport Gwent Dragons.

But even if victories remain scarce for Russia in New Zealand, the team's very presence at the competition is a boost to the sport in the country.

Frowned on under the tsars, who considered rugby conducive to rioting, the sport was also not encouraged in the Soviet Union.

Perhaps the most renowned Russian rugby player of all time was Prince Alexander Obolensky who scored two tries for the first English side ever to beat New Zealand's All Blacks in 1936. Obolensky's aristocratic family fled Russia after the 1917 Revolution.

Russia's debut at the World Cup is an important milestone. After the conclusion of the Bears' glorious or inglorious tournament, the international rugby spotlight will turn to Russia, which will host the 2013 Rugby Sevens World Cup. The country's sporting authorities are also planning a bid for the 2023 Rugby World Cup.

Kingsley Jones has no intention of returning permanently to Britain once the team's New Zealand campaign is over.

"Russian rugby is in the healthiest state it's ever been," he said.

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