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Australian Speaks on Playing for Russia

By Howard Amos

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U.S. lock John van der Giessen pushing the ball out from a maul last week during the U.S.-Russia match, Russia's first ever in the Rugby World Cup. **David Gray**

Russia will play its second-ever match in the Rugby World Cup against Italy on Tuesday after losing 13-6 to the United States in its tournament debut. Before the start of the competition, The Moscow Times spoke to **Adam Byrnes,** who plays in the second row of the Russian scrum. Though he grew up in Australia, plays for the Melbourne Rebels and dates an Australian swimming champion, his ancestry got him a place on the Russian squad after he e-mailed the team's coach.

With your very un-Russian name, how do you qualify for the Russian squad?
My mother's side of the family is Russian. She and her family moved out to Australia after World War II.

How do you rate the Bears' chances in the World Cup?
Realistically, if we can win one game we will be doing well. At the moment, rugby in Russia is tiny in comparison with other sports, and just to have qualified for the World Cup is an

achievement. The exposure of the World Cup and the fact that rugby will be an Olympic sport from 2016 means Russian rugby has huge potential for improvement in the near future.

How much time have you spent in Russia? Do you have any living relatives in the country?
I don't have any relatives left in Russia who I know about. Those left alive following World War II moved out to Australia as refugees. I went to Russia for the first time with my mother and my family in 1996.

You grew up and play in Australia. Will Russia's match against Australia on Oct. 1 raise any conflicts of interest for you?
Playing in a World Cup is every rugby player's goal, and ever since I was a little boy all I wanted was to be a Wallaby. I never realized that playing for Russia was an option, but once I knew there was an opportunity to do so, I didn't hesitate. I'm half Russian.
The reaction from my Australian friends so far has been very positive. Many people have wished me well and are now supporting the Russian Bears as their second team. Australian support is a dream for me and a bonus for Russia.

What is the future of rugby in Russia?
I see a great future for rugby in Russia. Russians are a tough people — you only need to see what they suffered and overcame during World War II to see the character of the nation. That sort of mental and physical toughness is ideal for rugby.
It is good news that there are now a couple of promising Russian players who have signed with top British teams. These guys will get the feel of how professional rugby teams operate and will be able to bring that knowledge back to Russia.
With a population of 140 million, Russia could be a world power in rugby within 10 years if they have the right management.

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