

Russia Prepares to Take On Uruguay for Place in 2015 Rugby World Cup

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New Zealand's All Blacks Aaron Cruden (C), Ma'a Nonu (R) and Aaron Smith perform the "haka" with their teammates before their Rugby Championship match against South Africa's Springboks at Westpac Stadium in Wellington, New Zealand.

Will the Russian Bear outsmart the small Uruguayan Tero on its own turf when they battle in Montevideo on Saturday for the last vacancy at next year's rugby World Cup in England?

The Bears edged the first leg of the repechage 22-21 in Krasnoyarsk but will have to overcome Uruguayan passion on the pitch and on the terraces of the 14,000-capacity Charrua stadium if they are to keep that narrow advantage and reach their second successive tournament.

The Teros — a small, long legged but resilient bird of the Pampas — have been working under former Stade Francais and Uruguay prop Pablo Lemoine to try to reach their third finals after earlier appearances as minnows in 1999 and 2003.

The winners after the second leg, where the William Webb Ellis Cup will be on show, will play in Pool A against England, Wales, Australia and Fiji at the Sept. 18 to Oct. 31 tournament.

Russia's Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko would like rugby to be less marginalized and better promoted at home and hopes reaching the World Cup will contribute.

"The second leg against Uruguay is very important for us. I really want to wish our players the best in Montevideo and that they can qualify for the World Cup," Mutko said in a telephone interview.

"Of course, not as much as I would like is being done for the development of rugby in Russia. However, it is an Olympic sport and we will try to give it more attention as we have a good relationship with the federation.

"Our national team won the Student Olympics in 2013, and we have good training facilities in Krasnoyarsk. We are also building a training base in the Moscow region, so we are definitely making progress."

"Fantastic Finish"

Uruguay are the second-strongest team in South America after Argentina's Pumas and — like their soccer team — punch above their weight internationally, picking from a small domestic club championship.

"What's very important is how the public identifies with the team. Over there in Russia we felt well accompanied by the fans, in the media and on social media," said Lemoine.

"What Uruguayan rugby has done is incredible, the people feel identified because it's a story of suffering, of fighting for things," he told the Montevideo daily El Observador.

"I think it's important they [Russia] are made to feel like visitors ... For that it's going to be very important for the fans to respond actively, as they have been doing in the last qualifying matches," said lock Rodrigo Capo of 2012/13 French champions Castres.

"It's a fantastic finish to a long and widespread qualifying campaign," said Mark Egan, the International Rugby Board's Head of Competitions and Performance.

Egan said both countries have been making good progress developing players at high performance centers and a place at the World Cup should help boost their programs.

"Getting into the World Cup will help all that. There has been a rejuvenation of rugby in Uruguay in the last few years," he said.

"In Russia, it's a different model, a huge country with a professional league with 12 teams and players from Romania, Kiwis, Georgia, South Africa. They sometimes have to travel six hours to play a match."

Looking specifically at Saturday's clash, Egan said: "There's no foregone conclusion ... Uruguay have home advantage and they have a good front five, they're a bit like Georgia.

"But they must be careful because Russia have very exciting backs. Russia played very well at the 2011 World Cup and they scored eight tries."

A try by prop Grigory Tsnobiladze, the only one in the match, helped Russia edge the first leg.

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