

Rugby's New Global Calendar – The Most Significant Development Since 1999

Article By:

Sports & Entertainment - Squire Patton Boggs

The men's Rugby World Cup (“**RWC**”) 2023 will be remembered for its nail-biting knockout games, not least the heavyweight quarter final clashes between the northern and southern hemisphere. The tournament also saw the emergence of Tier 2 teams, such as Portugal and Uruguay.

Amidst this backdrop and four days prior to South Africa being crowned World Champions for a record fourth time, on 24 October 2023, [World Rugby announced](#) a transformational reform to the men's and women's global calendars. This aims to grow the game and align the international and club game. World Rugby Chair Sir Bill Beaumont described the reform as “*the most significant development to the sport since the game went professional [in 1995]*”.

Much of the reform is centred around adjustments to World Rugby Regulation 9. These adjustments will clarify windows of player release for international duties and develop so-called “Player Load Guidelines”.

This article will outline the changes World Rugby announced on 24

October.

New global men's competition

From 2026, a new men's global competition (yet to be formally named) will be launched. The competition will consist of:

1. a Top Division of 12 teams – formed of the Six Nations Unions, the SANZAAR Unions^[1] and two further Unions selected by SANZAAR;^[2] and
2. a Challenger Division of 12 teams – to be confirmed.

Promotion and relegation between the divisions will be considered from 2030.

The new competition will take place every other year. Therefore, global matches will follow a four-year cycle from 2026 as follows:

1. new global competition in Year 1;
2. RWC in Year 2;
3. new global competition in Year 3; and
4. British & Irish Lions Tour in Year 4.

The Top Division will feature:

1. three matches between Six Nations teams and SANZAAR teams hosted by the latter in July;
2. three matches between Six Nations teams and SANZAAR teams hosted by the former in November; and
3. a 'final' between the leading Six Nations team and the leading SANZAAR team hosted by a Six Nations team at the end of November.

As such, the new competition will replace the July tours which

traditionally involve a Six Nations team travelling to a single SANZAAR team for three matches.

Some have [speculated](#) that the SANZAAR teams could be split into two geographical blocks to reduce the travel that Six Nations teams undertake in July.^[3] For example, New Zealand, Australia and Fiji (“**Block 1**”) could be grouped together and South Africa, Argentina and Japan (“**Block 2**”) could be grouped together. In this scenario, the three Six Nations teams who travelled to Block 1 in July could host the Block 2 teams in November, and vice versa.

The competition will primarily utilise existing global release windows, where clubs are required to release their players to national teams. However, the November release window will be expanded from three to four weeks to allow for the final. The Six Nations release window will be reduced from seven to six weeks by removing a rest week to accommodate this.

The concept behind the competition is to add meaning to the July and November matches which are currently “friendlies” (to the extent that you can call them that!) and only have tangible relevance in relation to World Ranking points. Adding structure to the July and November matches also aims to maximise player availability to enable teams to field their strongest line-ups.

Additionally, World Rugby states that there will be regular matches between Tier 1 and Tier 2 teams in the British & Irish Lions Tour year (i.e. Year 4 in the cycle, as set out above). This is important for the sport because it is generally dominated by the ‘traditional powerhouses’. Since the men’s RWC began in 1987, only eight teams^[4] have reached the semi-finals (and only four teams have won it). By comparison, 17 teams have reached the men’s FIFA World Cup semi-finals since 1990. World Rugby will be hoping

more experience against Tier 1 teams will allow Tier 2 teams to develop and progress further in future RWCs, in turn growing the game globally.

Women's global calendar

From 2026, there will be dedicated international release windows for women's matches for the first time. These will take the form of:

1. a seven-week regional release window^[5] and
2. an eight-week global release window^[6].

Significantly, and in contrast to men's rugby, this will ensure there is no overlap between international and club fixtures. This is particularly important as women's club teams often have fewer players to select from than their male counterparts.

This change is part of efforts to make women's rugby more commercial and accessible to fans. World Rugby believe it will allow certainty of planning and investment for the women's game. In 2020, [they announced](#) that the women's RWC would be expanded to 16 teams and include quarter-finals from 2025.

Player Load Guidelines

World Rugby's recent announcement referred to new Player Load Guidelines, although it did not include details. It is likely these will relate to minimum rest periods and restrictions on the number of matches a player can play in a season. It is also likely these will develop the existing [Contact Load Guidelines](#) which recommend weekly limits for full contact training, controlled contact training and live set piece training.

The Player Load Guidelines will aim to combat player fatigue and reduce injury risks by ensuring players have sufficient time to recover between matches. This will be necessary to ensure the sustainability of rugby and produce the highest quality and most competitive matches.

Men's RWC expansion

From 2027, the men's RWC will be expanded to 24 teams and the tournament length will be reduced from seven weeks to six weeks. This entails a reconfiguration of the format with the following changes:

1. there will be six pools of four teams,^[7] and
2. a last 16 round consisting of the top two teams in each pool and the four best third-placed teams will be added.

World Rugby also want to complete the pool draw as late as possible. This follows criticism of the early pool draw for the men's RWC 2023 (made nearly three years in advance of the competition) which ultimately meant only two of the five top-ranked teams^[8] could reach the semi-finals.

The new format may benefit lower ranked teams as it increases the number of teams that will progress to the knock-out stages and reduces the matches a team needs to win to progress to the knock-out stages. However, an additional knock-out round will be played before any team progresses to the quarter-finals. Therefore, only time will tell if the new format allows lower ranked teams to progress further in the competition.

New men's Pacific Nations Cup

From 2024, a men's **annual Pacific Nations Cup** (“**PN Cup**”) will occur. The PN Cup will have three stages.

Stage 1:

- Fiji, Samoa and Tonga (“**Pool A**”) play each other; and
- Canada, Japan and the USA (“**Pool B**”) play each other.

Stage 2:

- @. the winner of Pool A plays the runner-up of Pool B (“**Semi-Final 1**”);
- @. the winner of Pool B plays the runner-up of Pool A (“**Semi-Final 2**”); and
- @. third-place in Pool A plays third-place in Pool B.

Stage 3:

- the winner of Semi-Final 1 plays the winner of Semi-Final 2; and
- the loser of Semi-Final 1 plays the loser of Semi-Final 2.

Every team involved in the Cup will host at least one match and Japan and the USA will take it in turns to host Stages 2 and 3.

The PN Cup is part of World Rugby's commitment to increase competitiveness ahead of the 2027 and 2031 men's RWCs. The global governing body for the game describes it as a “*key building block in providing increased number of annual test matches*”.

More details on the reform will emerge in due course. Many rugby fans will look forward to increased competitiveness between northern and southern hemisphere teams, and more matches between Tier 1 and Tier 2 teams. However, given the increased

scrutiny around player welfare, it will be interesting to see how the Player Load Guidelines seek to navigate such a congested club/international calendar and ensure that the players (and, in particular, their long-term health) do not become collateral to the latest reform. Watch this space.

[1] South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Argentina

[2] If SANZAAR applied the current [World Rankings](#), these would be Fiji and Japan

[3] At least in relation to Block 1

[4] Argentina, Australia, England, France, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, Wales

[5] For competitions such as the women's Six Nations likely from March

[6] For the new WXV competitions likely from September

[7] Replacing the four pools of five teams from the RWC 2023

[8] Based on World Rankings from the start of the RWC 2023

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