

# THE NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

## A 'Nations Championship' for Rugby Union - One for the TMO to Review?

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World Rugby intends to [tinker with the international fixture list](#) by creating a Nations Championship competition, as confirmed in their recent statement. The launch is [rumoured to be planned](#) for early next year, however, this latest proposal might be kicked into touch quicker than an Englishman can bring up Jonny Wilkinson's left boot to an Aussie counterpart.

According to a [report in the New Zealand Herald](#), the blueprint envisages that a 12-team annual league will spearhead the revival of test matches worldwide. The league would be comprised of the Northern Hemisphere Six Nations teams and the Southern Hemisphere Rugby Championship teams, with the addition of emerging rugby nations Japan and the USA. The format would see the teams playing each other once during the year, with the semi-finals and a final to be contested in the Northern Hemisphere in November or December.

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### The Case for a Nations Championship



THE RUGBY GAME, IN ENGLAND.

Those in favour of the formation of a Nations Championship point to a projected increase in commercial and broadcast revenue which could generate huge amounts for individual unions to reinvest into the sport at grassroots level. In recent years, the game has expanded dramatically in the USA and Japan, as evidenced by the award of the World Cup to Japan, which is due to commence in September this year. These relatively untapped commercial markets leave World Rugby's organisers desperate to expand to the western and eastern frontiers.

The marketing campaign would not take much imagination either. A global league would determine who really is the king of the international stage, showcasing the world's best players with the silkiest skills on a more frequent basis. On the face of

it, establishing a global league is a bold step to modernise rugby and to freshen up the traditional structure of the international game. Its advocates could argue that it is as revolutionary as the decision by William Webb Ellis to pick up a round-shaped ball during a football game, which gave birth to the spectacle that we now know and love.

However, one must also question whether the benefits of this new structure actually outweigh the possible disadvantages.

### Polynesian Exclusion

The New Zealand Herald reports that the new Nations Championship would exclude the Pacific Island teams - Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. According to the [representative body](#), Pacific Rugby Players, this would signal "the death of Pacific Island rugby." It is inconceivable that three nations which contribute almost [20% of the world's](#)

[professional players](#), in terms of heritage, would be excluded from the inaugural league. It can hardly be claimed that their omission would be based on merit – Fiji are ranked 9<sup>th</sup> [according to the World Rugby rankings](#), placing above Argentina, Japan, Italy and the USA, whilst 13<sup>th</sup> placed Tonga rank above both Italy and the USA.

In a combative move, akin to the Haka performed by the Polynesian nations prior to matches, the Pacific Rugby Players' Welfare (“**PRPW**”) body will soon vote on a potential boycott of the 2019 World Cup. The [head of the PRPW](#), Daniel Leo, declared: *“The days of colonialism are long behind us but this model that they’re proposing is more reminiscent of those days... Everyone plays this game to progress and if there’s a ceiling to how well you can do in this game then smaller nations probably just shouldn’t play in the first place.”* Former England Head Coach Stuart Lancaster [echoed the concerns](#) of the PRPW, stating: *“If you think of the number of players who come from the Pacific Islands and play rugby across the world, if anything we should be doing everything in our power to help them – not to hinder them.”*

## **Player Wellbeing**

The planned exclusion of the Pacific Island nations isn’t the only concern expressed by stakeholders in the rugby world. A number of the sport’s highest profile stars have weighed in on the debate, suggesting that World Rugby are putting commercial interests before the welfare and safety of players. Their main apprehensions include:

- The workload challenges which demand ever more high-octane, top-level test matches across different time-zones over consecutive weeks;
- Increased long-haul travel in short time frames and less opportunity for a meaningful family life outside of the game; and
- Increased conflicts between players’ clubs and countries and the Regulation 9 release periods (World Rugby’s provision for clubs and countries to negotiate the release of selected players to uphold their international commitments).

Johnny Sexton, the [current World Player of the Year](#), stated: *“It now seems like a commercial deal on the future of the game is being negotiated at a rapid pace, with little consideration given to the important points we raised with World Rugby... To suggest that players can play five incredibly high-level Test matches in consecutive weeks in November is out of touch, and shows little understanding of the physical strain this brings.”*

In agreement with Sexton, [former World Player of the Year and current New Zealand captain Kieran Read](#) stated: *“Fans want to see meaningful games; they don’t want to see fatigued players playing a reduced quality of rugby as part of a money-driven, weakened competition that doesn’t work for the players and clubs.”*

Current [England captain Owen Farrell](#) added that: *“This proposal shows no signs of improving an already difficult situation.”*

The moral argument made by the likes of the PRPW against the exclusion of the Pacific Island nations is one consideration, but this could arguably be counterbalanced against the commercial incentive to expand the game in Japan and the USA. However, the criticism, which World Rugby’s plans have faced from some of the game’s most respected players, upon whom the success of the Nations Championship would depend, presents a very difficult hurdle for World Rugby to overcome.

## **The Effect on Existing Competitions and Concluding Thoughts**

Notwithstanding the other criticisms made of World Rugby’s plans, a Nations Championship also risks devaluing rugby’s most prestigious competitions. The Six Nations (established as the Home Nations way back in 1883) and the Rugby Championship would almost certainly become redundant if a Nations Championship came to fruition. More significantly, World Rugby’s showpiece tournament, the World Cup, would almost certainly be watered down if the best teams are already competing on an annual basis. The former [Webb-Ellis Trophy winner Graham Henry](#) opined that the Nations Championship is: *“going to kill the Rugby World Cup because you’re going to have a mini-World Cup every year, so people are going to lose interest.”*

World Rugby must weigh the commercial benefits of a new Nations Championship against the possible effects on existing flagship tournaments. After considering the possible detriment to such competitions, World Rugby will need to decide if creating a new league structure would provide sufficient benefit, both from a commercial perspective and in terms of growing the game, to justify the impact it would have on existing tournaments.

More generally, World Rugby will need to engage meaningfully with stakeholders at all levels of the game to determine if the Nations Championship can move forward in a format that adequately addresses concerns over player welfare, the exclusion of the Polynesian nations and the possible devaluation of existing competitions.

World Rugby have announced they are willing to be flexible and address such concerns, with a [crunch meeting in Dublin](#) on 14 March 2019 likely to influence the future direction of their plans for a Nations Championship. The summit will consist of all Tier 1 Nations, along with Fiji, Japan and the International Rugby Players Union. In advance of that meeting, [Welsh Rugby Union Chief Gareth Davies](#) stated that the sport is at its *“most challenging and dynamic time since the game went professional in 1995”*. We eagerly anticipate news from the meeting on Thursday.

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