

Will the Sunwolves be a commercial and playing success?



Welcome to the big time SUPER EVOLUTION

The Super-times are changing for sure. Just what this could lead to and where, in the future, is the great unknown gamble for the competition. **Brett McKay** examines what has changed, and why? Interesting times indeed.

The hint was there in the name change. In readiness for the 2011 season, what we all knew as 'Super 14' decided to add a team – the Australian-based Melbourne Rebels. Logically, 15 doesn't fit into 'Super 14', and so a new name was expected.

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Super Fif...'

But it wasn't Super 15. This was the new age of Super Rugby, with three conferences of five teams in each of the three SANZAR partner countries. It didn't take much imagination to see that in dropping the number from the competition name, in favour of the generic and numerically unspecific 'Rugby', meant 15 would not necessarily be the number for the future.

Already, far-fetched talk of the Americas was brewing.

Here we are, five years and a new broadcast deal later, and Super Rugby is swelling once again. This time, the number is 18, but there's much more to SANZAR's latest expansion than just three teams.

In going from 15 to 18, Super Rugby has gained three new teams, but also three new countries to host games, two new countries of participation, two new overarching groups and one extra conference.

The move to conferences was always going to be about expansion. Whereas the previous Super 12 and Super 14 competitions saw each team playing every other team once during the regular



Nicolás Sánchez: Sure to spearhead a powerful Jaguars backline.



Agustín Creevy: Certain to lead by example.

season, the conference format placed more emphasis on local derby matches in each market. In Australia, this was ideal for a football market entrenched around internal rivalries and club tribalism. South Africa saw it as being rather similar to their Currie Cup competition, and New Zealand initially liked the idea of testing their teams and players from outside their waters, but then realised it didn't generate gate receipts like local derbies do.

The conference format was perfect for expansion, though. In the short term it means new teams in existing conferences, but it's entirely possible that future iterations will involve entirely new conferences.

A team or teams based in the United States were considered for Super Rugby from 2016 onwards, and though that consideration didn't produce an actual team, it's not too hard to picture an American conference containing US and Canadian teams at some point down the track. A Pacific conference could similarly include North American teams alongside teams from Asia and the Pacific Islands.

In admitting Argentina and Japan – along with a South African recall for the Port Elizabeth-based Southern Kings – Super Rugby has had to rejig its conference format, but the current incarnation could quite easily prove to be temporary. Travel was always and is always going to be a factor for teams based in Buenos Aires and Tokyo, but logic will surely have to dictate, at some point, that putting them in South African conferences can't remain feasible.

Indeed, the lack of flights between South Africa and Japan means that Japan will play home games against Africa 1 conference

counterparts, the Stormers, Bulls and Cheetahs at the new National Stadium in Singapore. Interestingly, though, that same travel concession wasn't made the other way; the Sunwolves will still have to play games in Cape Town, Pretoria and Bloemfontein.

Though there had been precious little Super Rugby news coming out of Japan, the JRFU announced the 'Sunwolves' in late 2015. It was a welcome development, too, with genuine concerns at the time that the giant killing run of the national team at the Rugby World Cup would be followed up with an uncompetitive Super Rugby side.

But in announcing their roster, the Sunwolves have managed to pull together a reasonable squad. Of the 34 players inaugural coach Mark Hammett named before Christmas, 10 were in Japan's RWC squad, while flanker Andrew Durutalo featured in the US Eagles squad and former Hurricanes first-five Tusi Pisi played for Samoa. Another three internationals were named, as were former Bay of Plenty lock Tim Bond and former Queensland flanker Ed Quirk.

The Sunwolves probably won't make the playoffs in 2016, but they could certainly provide nuisance value in the African group and maybe even the Australian conference. They could quite easily post wins against the likes of the Cheetahs, Southern Kings and, depending on the state of urgently required rebuilds, the Reds and Western Force.

Argentina's promotion to full SANZAR member in 2016 coincides with their admission to Super Rugby, too, and on paper, Los Jaguares already look to have a real chance at the playoffs. You could put

the sky-blue and white Los Pumas hoops on the Jaguares, and they wouldn't be too far off a proper Test side. The squad, as named, includes 11 of the starting XV from the RWC semi-final against Australia, with 21 of the RWC squad in total.

All the big names are there: Creevy, Herrera, Lavanini, Leguizamón, Landajo, Hernández, Sánchez, Cordero, Montero, Tuculet. Their Africa 2 counterparts – the Sharks, Lions and Southern Kings – will already be nervous, and with good reason.

So, the next evolution of Super Rugby is upon us. Already, it has brought us record television broadcast deals in some 11 different markets.

And, interestingly, it's the markets outside the member countries that will provide the long-term stability and growth strategies. We know there were record TV audiences during the Rugby World Cup in Japan, Europe and North America, so undoubtedly catering for those markets will be the strategy going forward.

More teams in Japan? A permanent team in Singapore? Quite possibly.

A whole new Americas conference? Equally possible, and no doubt the SANZAR crystal-ball gazers will be keeping a very close eye on the success, or otherwise, of the new World Rugby and USA Rugby-sanctioned professional league kicking off this April.

If the Olympics does for rugby in the States what it's expected to, and if the network television interest follows, it's almost inevitable that Super Rugby will have an American footprint down the track. And, if that happens, moving to Argentina, and especially Japan, will have been an evolutionary masterstroke.