

Rugby Europe: united and focused

Balanced growth of rugby in Europe

1. Introduction

In mid-June, I announced my candidacy for the role of President of Rugby Europe and sent a letter and video to all members of Rugby Europe, explaining why I wanted to do this. Also, I listed a number of focus points, which I believe are key to enable Rugby Europe to lead the organic growth of rugby in Europe over the next decade and beyond.

Over the last few months, I have spoken with most member unions to understand their expectations of Rugby Europe and what they would need to develop and grow rugby in their country, and how they feel they can contribute to one united Rugby Europe.

This document, “Rugby Europe: united and focused”, revisits these focus points, and elaborates on the challenges and conditions underpinning what must be done to achieve the dynamic and balanced growth of rugby in Europe, based on what has to be a sound financial footing.

This document doesn’t go into the granular detail of specific targets or how and when they should be achieved because that is the responsibility of the Board which is to be newly appointed in November.

The current by-laws are the leading document of reference, and if any adjustment is required to make desired changes possible, the correct procedure will be followed.

2. Rugby Europe: united and focused

From the discussions with the unions, the most common feedback comments are: more transparency, communication, listening, decisiveness, and a change from some of the policies of recent years.

In other words: we need to act more **united** - good cooperation between Rugby Europe and the member unions, and between the unions.

We need to be more **focused** - not everything can be done all at once, we need to establish our priorities.

This will require for a different management approach, not just in words, text or photos, but in effective actions and results.

Therefore, the new President, Board and Committee members, should be skilled, open-minded, communicative, decisive, take responsibility and act accordingly.

The mission, vision, and strategy of Rugby Europe, as defined in the Strategic Plan “20-“24, should be re-evaluated and redefined in the updated Strategic Plan “25- “29, based on the input from the newly appointed Board, Committees and the operating staff. This should consider the needs and wishes of the member unions.

However, strategic plans require patience. The successful implementation and results depend on the quality, experience and commitment of the people leading the process.

3. How I see Rugby Europe and rugby in Europe in 2032

- Rugby in Europe grown >10 % in players, most unions > 500 players
- 15- a side is the main format, 7-a- side increased importance and exposure
- Women's rugby counts for > 30% of players
- Union boards, technical staff and referees > 30 % women
- European competition for women 15 and m/w U 18 and U 20
- At least 12 Rugby Europe countries in World Cup (m/w)
- Rugby Europe is financially sound with a balanced source of income
- Rugby Europe has strong, constructive relationships with World Rugby, the 6 Nations, the European Olympic Committee, and other relevant partners
- One European / World Rugby broadcasting platform for all high-performance competitions

4. Rugby Europe today

A lot has been achieved, since the FIRA/AER became Rugby Europe, including professionalization of the organization and the creation of new competition formats. The staff worked hard to implement these changes.

However, in my meetings with member unions I have heard a number of shared frustrations and disappointments:

- Quite a few unions feel no-one is listening and that there is a lack of adequate support.
- The level of cooperation between the governing bodies and unions is perceived as insufficient and lacks transparency.
- Unions perceive the level of visibility of the President and the Board to be inadequate.
- Equally, the financial situation is worrying and needs fast action.
- The relationship with World Rugby and the 6 Nations needs to be improved quickly.

In short, unions are asking whether Rugby Europe have set the right priorities and have operated in the most effective way.

5. Roles and responsibilities of Rugby Europe

The main goal is to develop and grow the game of rugby in all European countries. But there is more to this than just competition and high performance. Education, player welfare, data, broadcasting, and commercial factors play increasingly greater roles.

This growth has to be achieved by and through the individual unions. Rugby Europe should act as a service provider and facilitate and support the countries with various non-financial resources to strengthen their capacity for growth and development. Rugby Europe must involve and support the member unions, rather than just tell them what to do.

It is essential that we clearly define the role and responsibilities between World Rugby and Rugby Europe as its biggest Regional Association.

6. Focus points

- Implementation of the Governance
- Board: responsibility and competencies
- Communication with and improved visibility towards unions
- Cooperation with 6 Nations, World Rugby and institutions
- Service provider to the unions
- Priority and support level
- Create formats for growth
- Sound financial organization

7. Implementation of the Governance

The Board of Directors is the governing body of Rugby Europe, reporting to member unions at the Annual General Meeting.

The Board makes the strategic decisions and controls the quality of the operations, The Rugby Europe CEO and staff are responsible for the implementation and execution of the plans and to run an efficient and responsive operation.

Over the last number of years, the decision-making and responsibility structure of the governance was not always followed. The Board did not always receive the agenda and information in time to discuss the subject at the meeting and make a proper decision. This resulted in a too strong positions of the CEO in the decision-making process. The Board was also confronted with decisions already taken that fall within their authority.

⇒ *The responsibility of the President is to lead this process of cooperation in and between the governing bodies, unions and partners. This is not a political job, but requires experience and knowledge of international organizations, cultural differences, and the “European” way of working. He/she should be a connector, motivator, communicator and a decisive force to get things done.*

8. Board: Responsibilities and Competencies

The bylaws define how the Board members are elected and what their areas of competence should be to be eligible.

The Board has a shared responsibility to make well considered decisions, taking into account input from the various Committees/Subcommittees and Rugby Europe staff. However, to improve the information level of the Board and to tackle the urgent issues more pro-actively, it is to be consider electing a number of Board members with proven skills in particular areas of responsibility, such as finance, commerce/sponsorship, education, youth retention, women’s development, etc.

The Board should also preferably be made up of a balanced representation from the various categories of unions and the geographical regions.

To improve the effectivity of the Board and its interaction with the Committees and the staff the frequency of the meetings should be reviewed.

9. Committees: responsibilities and competencies

The Committees are the advisory bodies to the Board. They should monitor subjects and provide input (solicited and unsolicited) to the Board for decisions to be made.

The Rugby (sub) Committees are the “eyes and ears” of the unions and regions, concerning competition, formats and development topics. The members should represent the right balance of expertise and regional knowledge.

The other Committees advise the Board, and carry out specific tasks, on subjects like business topics, legal / regulations, audit / risk, disciplinary topics. In these Committees the relevant expertise is key.

In the last years a few (sub) Committees and the Business Committee have been understaffed and not able to fulfill their role, resulting in lack of information and suggestions from unions and Committees to the Board. This should be addressed as quickly as possible, giving the Committees a more clearly defined role, more positive feedback and involving them more directly in the decision-making process.

The Business Committee should comprise people with expertise in sponsorship, fundraising, international business and institutional contacts. They should work closely with World Rugby and the 6 Nations countries to learn from their expertise and contacts / sponsors and other opportunities for raising money.

10. Communication and visibility to unions

It is the main responsibility of the President and Board to establish, maintain, monitor and initiate transparent and open communication channels with the unions.

During the General Meeting, less time should be spent on reporting and presentation. Information should be sent well before the meeting, so sufficient time can be spent on genuine and open discussion on relevant / urgent subjects.

Contact and understanding between the President / Board members and the unions should be intensified and improved by regular meetings.

11. Cooperation with external institutions

Rugby Europe is the largest Regional Association of **World Rugby**. World Rugby is currently the major financial contributor to Rugby Europe and gives also direct subsidies to Unions through the Union Development Investment and the High-Performance Investment for some unions.

Rugby Europe and World Rugby should build a strong and constructive relationship, allowing for more cooperation: to save operating cost, be proactive and involved in decisions and explore new options or collaboration on various projects.

Rugby Europe must maintain a strong and constructive relationship with **the 6 Nations** as an organization and obviously with each of the individual unions as members. Various paths of collaboration and potential non-financial support should be explored

Rugby Europe must build and maintain a relationship with external institutions like the **European Union and EOC/ IOC**, and commercial organizations like the **EPCR** (ao) Not only potential subsidies or financial supporting programs from these institutions are important, but also the support of these institutions in talking to national Governments for support to the national Rugby Unions on facilities and programs.

Within the European rugby community there are many people with relevant contacts in these institutions. We need to get these people involved!

12. One united Rugby Europe: but different support levels required.

There should be a solid cohesion between countries, Rugby Europe and World Rugby The current 47 rugby unions affiliated to Rugby Europe are playing at different levels and are in different phases of development and growth. This requires different levels and types of support and involvement from Rugby Europe, bearing in mind the pressures on funds and staff time.

All 47 countries participate in the education programs from World Rugby / Rugby Europe

- **6 Nations** countries, for the most part, don't participate in all the Rugby Europe competitions and don't need technical or financial support from Rugby Europe. They have direct representation on the council of World Rugby. Some provide educational and technical support to other member countries.
- **REC** countries participate in the various Rugby Europe competitions and receive financial support for travel costs. For some of their high-performance programs, they have direct relationships with World Rugby. Most of them are not directly represented on the World Rugby Council and need Rugby Europe to represent their interests.
- **Trophy** countries usually have a smaller number of players and structure. However, some of them have the ambition and potential to become high performance unions. They therefore rely on a certain level of technical and financial support from Rugby Europe.
- **Conference and Development** countries vary considerably in the number of players and their stages of development. Some have great potential, but others are in danger of disappearing. These unions are the ones that need the most technical, financial, and organizational support from Rugby Europe.

For **Trophy and Conference countries**, the Rugby Europe competitions rely on a precarious balance between arranging suitably challenging matches in accessible locations and the inevitable associated travel costs.

To better support these countries Rugby Europe should.

- Have a regular regional meeting to provide and sustain the right support.
- Lower the pitch/grounds/location conditions for these matches and revise tournament fees and penalties
- Get representatives from these countries onto Committees

- Set up a platform to enable better coordination between RE and unions for the supply and demand of training camps, facilities, technical support, tournaments and education programs.

This should be available to be used by all 47 unions.

13. Opportunity for balanced growth

The growth in Europe must come from:

1. Attracting and retaining young people of both sexes
2. Women's rugby

Attracting and retaining young people

A lot of attention was given to the project "Get into Rugby". A lot of kids at schools participated but only a few kids started actually playing rugby and became members of local clubs.

However, numerous rugby clubs across the countries and national unions provide excellent examples of good practice in their campaigns to get young people excited about playing rugby.

The success of these campaigns does not lie solely in the game itself, but also, significantly, through their focus on its wider 'culture' – through the values of friendship, inclusivity, and self-discipline, as well as international exposure, and promotion by 'stars' on social media.

To retain young people past the age of 15/16, more special attention should be given to international exposure of emerging talents and rugby events/tournaments in general.

Women's rugby

In most countries, the number of female players counts for less than 20% of the total number. This can and has to be increased substantially in the years to come.

It is perceived by the unions that limited attention and budget has been allocated to the growth of women's rugby in Europe.

In the 6 Nations and most REC countries the number of women playing rugby is increasing. They have a well-structured national 15s competitions and national 15 a side teams.

However, in most of the other countries, the number of girls and women playing rugby is small, therefore the focus in these countries is on women's 7s.

To challenge and motivate women and girls to keep playing rugby, there should be a well-structured 15-a-side international competition for the different age grades.

We need to be more flexible and enable unions with smaller numbers of female players can form cross-border teams and participate in tournaments.

One of the Board members in Rugby Europe should be the point of contact for Women's rugby and be part of the Women's Committee.

14. Rugby Europe Competition formats

The main operational and financial focus of Rugby Europe is and will continue to be on 15- and 7- a side rugby. Beach, snow and T1 rugby is to be facilitated, promoted and controlled by Rugby Europe, but as a general rule should be organized and managed by regions or countries.

7s

With the introduction of 7s at the Olympic Games, it has become increasingly divergent from 15- a side, offering new opportunities and challenges. However, the level of investment in this in terms of funding and facilities varies hugely between the RE unions.

In the 6 Nations and some of the REC unions the international players almost always play either 15 or 7 a- side. In the amateur game in all unions, players are the same across both forms of the game, as before, and Sevens is the format enabling clubs to start playing rugby with limited numbers of members.

To make tournaments for Trophy and Conference more challenging and affordable, Rugby Europe should start with regional Sevens tournaments followed by Finals. It should be more attractive and affordable for countries to organize these tournaments. Organization fees should be strongly reduced, and more regional officials and referees used to reduce cost of travelling.

Thanks to the Olympic status of Sevens, doors are opened at Governments and National Olympic Committees to access subsidies to develop and grow Sevens at national level.

15 a-side

The current structure of the 15- a side competition within Rugby Europe is not universally appropriate or desired for all countries. Travel costs are high, and match schedules often not coordinated with the unions in time.

For the **REC countries** it will be a challenging period for unions, clubs and players to combine the opportunities provided by the Nations Cup, World Cup 2027, the Supercup and participation in their national competitions.

Good coordination on scheduling and finance between Rugby Europe, REC countries and World Rugby is key to making this work.

For the **Trophy and Conference** countries it is a challenge to establish and sustain the fine balance between playing competitive matches in European competitions and financial affordability.

Rugby Europe and regional representatives should therefore meet frequently to ensure an appropriate balance can be found.

The **Supercup** started in 2022. After 3 seasons the opinions of the participants differ. The participation criteria are not clear and create an imbalance between the teams. (Players like to play in the Supercup to gain more international experience.)

The cost / benefit for Rugby Europe and unions is therefore questionable. Broadcasting is expensive and the number of spectators and online followers is limited.

Internally within Rugby Europe, the Supercup consumes a great deal of staff time and energy - one of our most valuable but scarce resources.

15. Sound financial organization

For the past few years, Rugby Europe has operated at a loss financially. If this continues the very existence of Rugby Europe could be called into question.

With all your help and support, urgent, decisive action therefore needs to be taken to achieve break even in financial year 2024/25 and positive results in the years after:

- The budget to be strictly based on the new strategic plan which should be defined into an operational year plan(s) with clear operational and financial priorities.
- Proper budget process with detailed information provided to the board and member unions
Quarterly financial reporting to the President and new Board Treasurer.
- Share expertise with the service departments of World Rugby and the 6 Nations.
- Team up with World Rugby (and 6 Nations) in broadcasting and sponsorship programs (E.g. European shirts sponsoring)
- Actively seek new institutional and commercial revenues

60-70% of cash income at Rugby Europe comes directly from World Rugby.

The income from sponsorship and broadcasting is limited.

The other income comes from union membership fees, penalty- and tournament fees, charged to the unions. New resources need to be explored.

The new Business Committee has an important role to explore opportunities with World Rugby and 6 Nations on sponsoring and income from broadcasting and the subsidy opportunities with international institutions like the EU.

Rugby Europe TV is a good initiative but is in the meantime partly overlapping with Rugby Pass from World Rugby. Serious and constructive discussions must be held with World Rugby on a potential fruitful collaboration on this topic.

The level of the broadcasting ambition should be adapted to the various levels and means of the member unions and the competitions. A REC competition should aim at a higher level of broadcasting, while Conference level may be more realistic and more comfortably situated with a live streaming or social media casting type of solution.

“I hope to get your vote on November 8th and to be elected President. Together, we will successfully grow rugby in Europe!”

Janhein Pieterse

