

Challenging the core: The rise of Argentina in international rugby

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Abstract

This chapter critically assesses the place of Argentina within the global rugby setting. It examines issues surrounding the governance of the sport and outlines some of the key geographical issues affecting this. Having been admitted into an expanded tri-nations championship in 2012, and having a team in Super Rugby since ***, Argentina are now at a crucial juncture in the quest to be part of the established order of international rugby. This chapter reflects on the development of rugby in Argentina since they began a regular competition with the three core nations in the Southern Hemisphere. It highlights the increasingly influential role of former Argentina captain Augustin Pichot within World Rugby, and addresses the challenges associated with realigning the country alongside (or within) the core as the sport's governing body aims to grow the game around the world.

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the place of Argentina in the international rugby landscape and considers the role they have to play in developing the game in the Southern Hemisphere more generally. Geographical notions of scale and core/periphery are applied to this case as a means of further understanding where the nation 'fits' in the international rugby world. Argentina's third place finish at the 2007 RWC, where they became the only team from outside the founding eight nations to place in the top four of the competition, was a key moment for the international game. After their success in 2007, Argentina was able to push for more regular international test matches against the core nations in the Southern Hemisphere and now compete in The Rugby Championship. Argentina have struggled to match their opponents on the field and have finished bottom of the table almost every year between 2012-2018 (the exception being in 2015 when they edged out South Africa on points difference). Yet it should be noted here that at the 2015 RWC in England, Argentina finished fourth in a tournament where all of the semi-finalists came from the Southern Hemisphere. The dominance of New Zealand, South Africa and Australia within the RWC, together with the emerging power of Argentina can be seen in Table 1 (note also that South Africa did not compete in the first two RWC competitions).

Table 1: Top 4 finishers in each Rugby World Cup (1987–2015).

World Cup	Winner	Runner-up	3rd Place	4th Place
1987	New Zealand	France	Wales	Australia
1991	Australia	England	New Zealand	Scotland
1995	South Africa	New Zealand	France	England
1999	Australia	France	South Africa	New Zealand
2003	England	Australia	New Zealand	France
2007	South Africa	England	Argentina	France
2011	New Zealand	France	Australia	Wales
2015	New Zealand	Australia	South Africa	Argentina

Argentina has played in every one of the eight RWC competitions to date and will be looking for another strong performance in 2019. Argentina had to wait some time for the opportunity to be a part of an international competition like The Rugby Championship and to be supported to have a professional team located in the country to compete in Super Rugby. Given the focus of this book on rugby outside of the hegemonic core, this chapter offers insight into Argentina's rise and how they have challenged the established nations of the rugby world more than any other country.

Similar to other nations, rugby in Argentina sits in the shadow of the more dominant sport of football. Argentina won the FIFA Football World Cup in 1978 and 1986 and the sport is an important signifier of Argentinean identity where its leading male players can become national heroes (see Archetti 2001). Research on rugby and Argentina has received far less attention in the academic literature. They were the only nation from the top ten teams in the world who were not the focus of a chapter in Ryan's (2008) edited collection detailing the changes in rugby since open professionalization in 1995. Argentina does not feature in the more recent collection of work by rugby scholars looking at a longer period of professional rugby union (Nauright and Collins, 2017).

We have attempted to outline the position of Argentina in relation to core/periphery relations within the sport (Harris and Wise, 2011, 2012). Whilst this offered an initial geographical analysis of international rugby, it is important to look at what has happened in the last seven years and to allow us to consider what more recent changes have meant for the sport in the country. Before moving on to discuss contemporary issues, the next section briefly outlines the history of rugby in Argentina to provide some context for the discussion that follow.

A brief history of rugby union in Argentina

In the mid-1860s, many Britons moved to Argentina to invest in the economic potential of the Pampas and British stockholders had a strong involvement in the railroad network being constructed during that time. Whilst Argentina was not part of the British Empire, the country had strong commercial links with Britain, and English cricket clubs were noted to have moved rugby's development forward in many countries around the world (Richards, 2007). This is still evident today, as rugby is commonly played in railroad towns beyond Buenos Aires such as Mendoza and Rosario as a result of the British legacy (Unión Argentina de Rugby, 2008). The first rugby match in Argentina took place in 1873, with participation encouraged by British immigrants.

Argentina's rugby governing body was formed in 1899. The formation was a result of mergers between four clubs: Belgrano Athletic, Buenos Aires Rugby Football Club, Lomas Athletic, and Rosairo Athletic. This group is formerly known as the Unión de Rio de la Plata (Unión Argentina de Rugby 2008), representing a formation of clubs from the Rio de la Plata and Buenos Aires region. In 1910, Argentina held their first international match in Buenos Aires, competing against a touring British team, and travelled to neighboring Chile in 1936 where they played (and won) their first match on foreign soil (Unión Argentina de Rugby 2008). The original club name, Unión de Rio de la Plata, was changed to the Unión Argentina de Rugby in 1951 to put emphasis on the nation. This was also the same year Argentina hosted the South American Rugby Tournament against Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay (Unión Argentina de Rugby 2008). Argentina continued to host teams from Europe through the 1950s/1960s, and in 1965 made their first transatlantic tour to

South Africa. World Rugby (2016) figures suggests that there are over one-hundred thousand registered players in Argentina.

International rugby governance and strategy: Positioning Argentina

Academics from across the world have looked at various aspects of international sport governance, and the research in this area has developed markedly in the period since rugby went openly professional (e.g. Hums and MacLean, 2018). Yet despite these advances, little work has considered sport governance in relation to rugby or particularly around key geographical issues shaping the sport in a global perspective. Rugby is also notably absent from many discussions about the wider policy issues within global sport, and the game will often not even warrant an entry into the index of sport management texts on the subject. The hegemonic positioning of the two (most) mega-events (the summer Olympic Games and men's Football World Cup) has attracted the attention of scholars across the world for many years (e.g. Roche, 2000; Tomlinson and Whannel, 1984). When we consider the RWC, there have been some claims that this is the third biggest global sporting event (see Harris, 2010, 2013; Hutchins and Phillips, 1999; Wise, 2017) but this remains a contested space and other events also stake a claim that position (see Harris, Skillen and McDowell, 2017).

As noted in the introduction to this collection, the governance of rugby union has been dominated by the eight foundation member nations. The governance of international rugby, as with many other sports, has in recent years focused in large part on developing the game as the increased commercialization and commodification of the sports business has assumed an increasingly important role. More opportunities to develop the game in countries such as Argentina are based on the International Rugby Board's (now known as World Rugby) 2010 to 2020 strategy to develop and invest in specific places outside the eight core nations (International Rugby Board, 2010).

In their strategic plan, the governing body noted that "ensuring Argentina's participation in an expanded Tri Nations tournament is successful" was integral to ongoing expansion developments of the game—to make rugby a truly international sport (International Rugby Board, 2010). This first step has been accomplished with Argentina participating in The Rugby Championship since 2012. Argentina is still dependent upon World Rugby decisions when it comes to dedicating efforts and finances to support future expansion of Argentinean rugby. The next wave of expansion came in 2016 with a professional Super Rugby team (Buenos Aires Los Jaguares). Argentina has just completed their seventh year of competition in The Rugby Championship, and are in a very different position to when we first looked at the positioning of the nation within the global rugby landscape (see Harris and Wise, 2011). Argentina have new influence based on solid international performances on the field of play, inclusion in elite competition, and the increasingly prominent role of former national team captain Augustín Pichot as Vice Chairman of World Rugby. Pichot, who represented Argentina 71 times as a player, was in 2016 described by *Rugby World* magazine as the most influential man in the whole of world rugby.

Assessing Argentina's rise

This chapter contributes to the sports geography literature by bringing together notions of place framed alongside a focus on the governance of international rugby to better identify how Argentina is now positioned. The geographical notion of 'place' is used to designate and conceptualize

Argentina's position in relation to the global core of the rugby world. Referring to place as a rank, or hierarchy, helps explain how rugby governance influences (and has limited) Argentina's emergent position, or interconnected place in a global system. This consideration thus expands on understandings of 'place' as a conceptual point within hierarchal relationships. As noted in the introduction to this collection, there is an already developed place(ment) of rugby nations that has long exerted a tight control over the sport.

Argentina is currently ranked tenth in the world rankings (as of the April 2019 rankings at the time of writing), but have been ranked as high as three following the 2007 RWC. It must be noted that the ranking are always changing but Argentina has been consistently ranged in the top-ten in the past decade. Japan 2019 represents the first time that a nation from outside of the core group will host the RWC competition. In 2016 the President of Argentina announced that Argentina would put forward a bid to host the 2027 RWC.

To critically frame the directions that will be discussed in subsequent sections, common geographic terminology identifying scale, core and periphery, further positions the conceptual 'place' of Argentina among the rugby playing nations in a global perspective before focusing on the more recent developments since 2012. Notions of scale in relation to core and periphery critically offer insight into how places are conceptually positioned in relation to others (Herod 2011; Smith 1993; Swyngedouw 1997). The ideas of core and periphery are important here because they are central to the culture of global rugby, and the concept of scale attempts to clarify core/periphery relationships. Moreover, Smith's (1993) idea of 'jumping scales' critically acknowledges the conceptual complexities regarding the challenges Argentina faces if the country is to ascend and join the existing core member nations. According to Swyngedouw (1997, 168), 'transformation is accompanied by transgressions of scale boundaries,' and leads to the production and restructuring of others.

To conceptualize the place of Argentina in global rugby perspective, the country's isolation within the sport must first be acknowledged. Many of the elite Argentina players were committed to professional contracts in Europe, as they had the opportunity to earn higher salaries and gain experience in established leagues. As is also the case for many other national rugby federations, this often meant it was challenging to always get these players released for international competition. Today, with the creation of a Super Rugby team in Buenos Aires, many of those who represent the Argentinean national team play professionally in Argentina for Los Jaguares. If we consider the regional scale, Argentina could be perceived as a regional core in South/Latin America. Their success positions them geographically to further develop the game in South America. They also represent the most likely candidate to further diffuse the growth of the sport in neighboring countries with established national rugby unions including Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile and Brazil. These countries may also benefit from Argentina's success in the global context as more resources are directed towards the region.

In rugby union, the core exert tight control over the vast majority of wealth and power, leading to an uneven distribution of power and relations (see Harris, 2010; Richards, 2007). Argentina has been described as being part of a very small semi-periphery in rugby, or an emerging country, in a global perspective (e.g. Herod 2011; Wise 2017). Wise and Harris (2011) adopted Wallerstein's (1974) world systems theory to highlight the significant differences between 'core' and 'periphery'

in the movement of athletes between nations. Wallerstein's (1974) widely used approach, based on a neo-Marxist critique of globalization, provides valuable insights into the inter-relationships of different nations but it is important to note here that some nations who are on the periphery in economic terms may occupy the core of a particular sporting world (see Harris, 2010; Wise, 2017).

Harris (2010), in an initial attempt to conceptualize the positioning of rugby in a global perspective, suggested that it was probably more apt to refer solely to a core and a periphery when discussing international rugby given the power of the eight foundation unions. Whilst acknowledging Wallerstein's (1974) use of the semi-periphery, it is suggested that if we were to employ this term in rugby then in some ways only two nations (Argentina and Italy) would form this group (Harris 2010). In relation to the governance of the game the fact that these nations did not receive the voting privileges of the eight foundation unions meant that they were still peripheral in many respects. The changes to the voting rights on the World Rugby Council, agreed after the 2015 RWC, was an important step to involve more nations in the growth of the game.

The Rugby Championship

When Argentina joined the expanded Southern Hemisphere Tri-Nations competition, The Rugby Championship, there was much talk around the importance of the inclusion of a fourth team. Greg Peters, CEO of SANZAR noted that "the invitation to Argentina to join the Championship is a defining moment for Southern Hemisphere rugby and significant for world rugby" (*The Irish Times*, 2011). Peters added that Argentina's inclusion was long overdue and they have proven themselves in international competition and they add something new to the existing competition between Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Argentina's success at the 2007 RWC showed that they had potential to compete with the best teams in the world. But as power relations would dictate, it is not simply about performance on the field of play, but the ability to generate revenue and new commercial gains. While there were clearly some stakeholders pushing the incorporation of Argentina noting how Argentinean rugby would benefit, there was also emphasis on the need to expand the preexisting Tri-Nations competition to benefit Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The development of a more international approach to rugby governance and the development of the sport is not based solely on growing the game in the periphery, but is also shaped by allowing the core nations to expand coverage and generate further commercial revenue. Moving into the South American market and trying to capitalize on the sports growing popularity there was a strategic move as those involved in the governance of the tournament recognized the need to grow the competition.

Pichot, the former Argentina scrum-half and then UAR's SANZAR Representative, played an important role during Argentina's inclusion in The Rugby Championship and noted that "after many years of history and the hard work of many generations of players on and off the pitch, Argentinean rugby will be part of the toughest and most prestigious tournament in the Southern Hemisphere" (in Rugby Football History, 2011). Building on Pichot's comment, the President of the UAR, Luis Castillo, described much pride in his country's inclusion and the need to "will work to maintain high standards in our rugby, with our ultimate goal being to keep generating resources for the development of rugby at the clubs" (Rugby Football History, 2011). Furthermore, Manuel Galindo, (UAR High Performance Chairman) stressed this as a significant point in history because Argentina had "been seeking to participate regularly in a tournament like this" for years. (Rugby Football History, 2011). Pichot, Castillo and Galindo each saw The Rugby Championship as

Argentina finding their place in the global rugby landscape. For Argentina, inclusion was about opportunity, while for SANZAR it was about delivering an improved product. This is where geographical interpretations are necessary because the ‘placing’ of a country strategically aligns with product and power.

Argentina has a larger population and allocation of resources, so geographically the country is in a strategic area to develop the game and capture interest in the wider context of South America (especially in places such as Chile, Uruguay and Brazil where the game has seen growth in recent years). Moreover, as noted previously, Argentina are not competing with Australia, New Zealand and South Africa for players so represent less of a threat to the existing hegemonies in place.

SANZAAR and Super Rugby

From 2016 two major developments would bring Argentina in line with those at the core of rugby governance in the Southern Hemisphere. First, SANZAR would become South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Argentina Rugby (SANZAAR). Second, as noted earlier in this chapter, Argentina was awarded a Super Rugby franchise. Despite their newly-established presence, The Jaguares compete in the South Africa conference. This highlights some of the challenges in developing the game in the southern hemisphere and the logistical challenges involved in playing matches over such a large geographical area. Pichot’s increasingly influential position in World Rugby gave the country a stronger voice and international presence in global rugby governance. Pichot continues to play a pivotal role in ensuring Argentina and other nations from outside of the core are able to have more of a voice in the direction of future developments.

The formation of SANZAAR helped lay the foundation for Argentina as part of the core of professional rugby in the Southern Hemisphere. Initially Argentina was being considered for two professional teams (Guardian, 2013), but to spread the development of the sport it was decided that one team would be based in Argentina and the other in Japan (Super Rugby, 2014). Having a professional team centrally bringing many of the leading players together would mean that members of the national team would be playing together more often. Agusten Creevy, the Jaguares captain in 2016 noted that:

It will help us not only to become a more unified team, but also to provide the group with continuity. We will now have the chance to keep on growing as individuals, to get to know each other much better as to the game and to become a better team as a whole (Super XV, 2015).

In 2015, the inclusion of an Argentinean based team in Super Rugby meant the Jaguares were able to attract and sign key players who represent the national team. Having a professional team in Argentina is very important to any future growth but it must also be noted that the economic core remains located in the northern hemisphere (see Super Rugby 2018). Even the three leading southern hemisphere nations have had to face up to the fact that some of their top players would move to England or France at an earlier age than had been the case in the past. This has led to some national federations making changes to the criteria used for players to be eligible for national teams and some players have been selected for their country whilst playing overseas (in the past by moving to play in another country they would not have been considered for selection for the national team). But in terms of developing the game in Argentina, Pichot noted that “since we

started with this project of insertion in the game's elite, at the end of 2007, it was crucial to have regular competition for our players" (in Super Rugby, 2014).

There was a clear need from a geographical standpoint to develop a strictly Southern Hemisphere competition, despite Argentina historically being more successful against the core European nations (when discussions about including Argentina in one of the elite competitions first commenced). What seemed to initially result as an attempt to incorporate Argentina and gain from commercial revenue in a growing rugby region and market, has a positive future outlook. Beginning in 2016, an established professional competition has potential to develop more talent, allow domestic supporters to view more top-level matches, and television rights will bring more money to aid in developing the sport. Argentina's more established presence in 2016 points to an emerging challenge to the core that also includes a first RWC outside of the foundations nations when Japan hosts the 2019 event.

Argentina did not have voting power in SANZAR until 2016 when the organization became SANZAAR. Before their full inclusion, Argentina was dependent on the policies and regulations of SANZAR. While Argentina are a new member, and have one team in the Super Rugby competition, they are in a much more significant and strategic position compared to the start of the decade when we first looked at Argentina's place in international rugby union (Harris and Wise, 2011, 2012). Here we discussed Argentina's status geographically as part of the semi-periphery, and that has since evolved to the present time where they now have voting rights as a full member of SANZAAR, making the shift from being dependent to having a greater say in shaping the future direction and decisions of international rugby. Their increasingly established role in World Rugby governance is also important to note again here.

The future

As they attempted to find a place amongst the core rugby nations, given their future was dependent on the voting powers of the founding eight members and the future directions of SANZAR, Argentina faced quite a challenge to move closer to the core. There is a chance that the future expansion of Super Rugby will lead to Argentina having two professional teams in the coming years. This development, and the support of Pichot within World Rugby governance circles, could mean that they are in a strong position to put in a bid to host the 2027 RWC. The changing landscape has also reconfigured where many of the top Argentinean professional rugby players now play their club rugby and earn their salaries. The movement of elite players back to Argentina with an established Super Rugby club in Buenos Aires may help the sport to grow domestically. If managed correctly this will allow much better access to players for those running the national team and a coordinated approach to player welfare ensuring that the top players are not asked to play too many matches each season.

Argentina continues to benefit from playing against the most competitive teams in the world and are themselves now in a more influential position to contribute to future growth. However, Argentina remains fragmented to the extent that they initially competed in this Southern Hemisphere competition but many of the elite players were based in Europe. Many of the squad playing for Argentina in the 2018-19 season play for the Jaguares in Argentina. Thus, in previous years the economic pull of the richer European rugby nations challenged the attempts at expanding rugby within Argentina. But the competition in Argentina is now professional and this allows for

new attempts to the next division to develop. It is also important to note here that an Argentina XV also compete in the Americas Rugby Championship. To reiterate the point about developing the next generation of players to compete for the Jaguares and Pumas in Argentina, the team that competes in the Americas Rugby Championship is the second (or development) team below the Pumas and provides an opportunity for players to make the step up to international rugby. In 2019 Argentina were once again the winners of this competition and did not lose a match. Argentina also hosts the World Under 20 Championship for the second time in June, 2019 with matches taking place in Rosario and Santa Fe. Having staged the event in 2010, the 2019 tournament could provide an important opportunity for the host nation to match (or better) their third-place finish in 2016. Buenos Aires hosted the 2018 (Summer) Youth Olympics and Argentina took the rugby sevens title in the boys competition.

The notion of place in this chapter has been discussed as a position, rank or hierarchy in a global system where the established hierarchy for years controlled the direction and development of the sport. Argentina has marked their presence in the global rugby landscape but has in some ways yet to be given a defined place. Argentina will play in The Rugby Championship for the eighth year running, SANZAR is now SANZAAR, the Buenos Aires Jaguares compete in Super Rugby and Pichot is Vice Chairman of World Rugby. In many ways then there has been significant development since we first looked at the place of Argentina in the wider international rugby landscape (Harris and Wise, 2011).

As will be discussed at various points in this collection, the inclusion of rugby sevens in the Olympic Games represents an important moment in the increased internationalization of the sport. The fact that rugby made its debut in 2016, at the Olympiad in Rio de Janeiro, was another boost for rugby in South America. Argentina's men's squad qualified for the Rio Olympics but were eliminated by Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the quarter-finals. Argentina did not have a team compete in the women's event at Rio, as they were knocked out of the Olympics Repechage tournament by Russia, but it in the sevens version of the sport that the country has made some inroads into developing women's rugby. Argentina's national sevens team is often considered to be the second most successful team from the region in women's rugby after Brazil. The country does not have a fifteen aside team in the World Rankings for women's rugby but has played in a World Sevens Series event. As is the case in many other nations, both in the core and on the periphery, rugby has long been positioned as a masculine game and women have faced many challenges in getting involved in the sport.

The next few years represent a challenging and interesting time for the sport as those involved in its governance pursue an internationalization agenda to develop the game beyond the narrow core. Argentina has pointed the way forward for other nations to show that they can challenge the dominant nations. Yet it could also be that it may be sevens rugby and/or women's rugby that more sustained challenges will be made and the tight grip of the core may need to loosen if the sport wants to see other countries rise among the ranks of international rugby as Argentina has been able to prove. This is a subject that we will return to later in the collection.

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