

Lining out for the Dubai sevens heaven

ONLY A few days ago every paper and broadcast in Ireland was full of just one sporting event – the defeat of the mighty English by the plucky Irish in the latter's quest for a first rugby Grand Slam since 1948 under the legendary try-scorer Jackie Kyle, when, coincidentally, England were also beaten by a single point.

So how could another rugby event, with a far more international flavour than a contest between a mere six countries, a World Cup no less, have glided so silently beneath the Irish radar? The quadrennial Rugby World Cup Sevens, just about to begin in Dubai, is one of the world's great unsung competitions, and this time it's not just for the boys.

A parallel competition has brought 16 women's teams to Dubai to battle (minus burkas) for an inaugural Women's Cup, with the Irish currently ranked sixth in the world (and ahead of England and France).

Sevens rugby is played on a full-size pitch, but each team has only seven players – three forwards and four backs – and each half lasts just seven minutes; yellow cards mean two minutes in the sinbin. Apart from that, the game follows the same laws as the 15-a-side version, but is played at a much more frenetic pace which is only for the super-fit.

Matches follow each other at strictly choreographed 22-minute intervals, which allow for stoppage time and changeover.

This means spectators gorge on a non-stop feast of fast, skilful, international rugby, for 2½ crazy days, interrupted only when attendants bring food and refreshment to your seat. It's almost like getting up to go to work every day, except that every night is party time, which can make it hard to get up in time for the first game.

Bar a handful of games, the whole tournament takes place in a single stadium, which means not only do you see every knockout contest, but you never have to miss even a pool game.

The men's 36 pool games occupy the first day and a half, after which a points system divides the teams into three groups of eight. On the third and final day they compete in three knockout battles for a bowl, a plate and the big one, the 2009 Rugby Sevens World Cup. In the midst of this, there is a break for a big parade of all the players and

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match officials and some extravagant entertainment.

The Sevens are being staged at a just opened stadium called, er, The Sevens, located on the outskirts of Dubai, a half-hour's drive from downtown. It sports a permanent grandstand with 4,000 seats, plus temporary stands for a further 36,000 people. The complex has a secondary pitch which caters for 5,000 spectators where some of the men's and most of the women's games will be played, plus a further four.

It also incorporates changing rooms, hospitality areas, broadcast and medical facilities, as well as a 30-metre wide rugby promenade, featuring cafes and food outlets. Though intended to become the new new home of rugby in the Middle East, it will also target cricket, football, basketball and netball.

There is no doubting from the international array of colourful shirts, hats and other accoutrements on display in the streets and haunts of Dubai that there is a very big rugby event in the air.

You know it is rugby and not, for example, soccer because of the way all the men walk.

It is more of a slow, exaggerated, nautical swagger, with hips moving deliberately fore and aft while the manly shoulders sway in a kind of horizontal circle that says "I'm a tough guy, I could win this competition single-handedly, don't mess with me".

However, exchange a few words and they are instantly your best friend, as eager, enthusiastic and childish as you are to talk about the forthcoming games, the players, the beer, the rankings, the Fijians (current world champions), the All Blacks (everyone's nemesis) and plans for the next competition in four years. And no player has even kicked a ball yet.

It all begins at 5pm today with Wales v Zimbabwe. An hour later Ireland, under manager Jon Skurr, plays its opener against a formidable Samoa. Australia and Portugal also share this tough pool.

Can't wait.