

Rugby

Women flying the flag for Ireland at World Cup Sevens in Moscow

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in Moscow

With rugby set to return to the Olympics at Rio in 2016, here's something to consider: who are the current Olympic rugby champions? It's the USA, who bagged the title in 1924, the last time rugby featured.

Before the focus switches to Brazil, the 2013 Rugby World Cup Sevens tournament got underway in Moscow yesterday, the first time Russia has hosted a major rugby occasion.

There's a strange aura around the streets of Moscow as this unfamiliar global happening unfurls in a country where the vast majority of a 143 million population haven't even heard of rugby, despite the hosts competing in many sevens competitions and qualifying for the last Rugby World

Cup in 2011.

Nevertheless, Moscow has allocated its giant, Croke Park-sized Luzhniki Stadium. Sadly, for the first time in any rugby world cup tournament, Ireland has not entered a men's team. At the last RWC7s, in Dubai in 2009, John Skurr coached Ireland's men into the quarter-finals, knocking out Australia on the way.

Spurned

Why Ireland has spurned men's sevens ever since only the IRFU can answer – and they should.

The wider sevens circuit, involving annual competitions around the world, is not only a magnificent showpiece for rugby, but allows talented youngsters who might not quite make it into the professional XV's game to show what they're made of – future Zebos

for example.

Happily, however, since April of last year, the IRFU has given full support to a women's squad, managed by Gemma Crowley and coached by the same Skurr, which has been competing with some success ever since.

This World Cup is the side's biggest challenge so far and, despite being beset by injuries, they will give it all they've got.

It helps that eight of the 12 players in the squad are veterans of this year's epic Grand Slam in the Six Nations.

As for Moscow, it's actually staging something closer to a festival of sport, culture and hospitality. Nine other sevens tournaments involve over 2,000 players from across this vast country battling it out for different prizes on the various side pitches at the huge Luzhniki complex.