

Rugby World Cup Sevens

USA send Irish women out of tournament with heads high

Ireland played magnificently though Russia has space to improve

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in Moscow

“Space” was the curious theme the Russians chose for the Rugby World Cup Sevens they hosted to showcase their ability to stage international sporting events.

They mean their considerable astronomical achievements since the 1950s but, on entering the cavernous 89,000 seater Luzhniki Olympic stadium, space is the first thing that hits you: empty space, as it is only about a quarter full. Likewise, the Gorogok stadium where the women played had seating for 6,000 but barely 2,000 attended. Both have acres of space between the fans and the pitch.

Considering how the 40,000-seater stadium in Hong Kong and the 50,000 fa-

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The number of women clad in intergalactic silver with grey balloons leapt around

cility in Dubai were heaving sell-outs for previous events, Russia’s failure to put bums on seats has been a huge lost opportunity.

The three-day try-fest of rugby was more scintillating than ever however. Fast, skilful, passionate, and displaying astonishing levels of physical fitness.

An exciting feature of the Sevens is the enthusiastic participation of nations not widely recognised for their rugby prowess, such as the Philippines, Tunisia, Kenya and China. Yet here they are fighting it out with the big boys and gals for a World Cup.

In fact, there are three sets of trophies. After the group stages, teams are split based on performance into new groups, which then compete for a bowl, a plate and, for the best, the hallowed cup itself.

Ireland’s women, under Gemma Crowley and John Skurr, played magnificently in their group games to qualify for the cup. But two last-minute tries by the USA denied Ire-

land the 5-0 lead it sported for most of the quarter-final, so they exited the tournament, though with heads held high.

It was eventually New Zealand who were crowned champions in both the men’s and women’s events.

But enough about the rugby. Russia’s “space” theme was evident in an interlude in which 200 women clad in intergalactic silver, with big grey balloons signifying the planets, leapt around the pitch as music throbbed. This was followed by a parade where more women pushed 29 big, wheeled sputniks around, each adorned with the flag of a competing nation.

Ireland’s was green with the emblems of the four provinces. Perhaps the ministerial speeches in Russian were also about space – it was hard to tell. On the second evening, a French band, named, er, Space, performed on a stage in the stands. Periodically, when space appeared in the programme, fans were regaled as groups of cheerleaders bounded on to the turf brandishing Russian flags.

The ingredient that makes every Sevens a roaring success is the fans – and there were too few to generate the usual party ambience. Moscow is difficult and expensive to get to and the marketing was poor.

The fans’ boisterousness was further dampened by a ban on alcohol, rudimentary food arrangements, an absence of interesting merchandising, the presence of armed soldiers and police, and signs admonishing fans to be well behaved and inoffensive (even if the ref makes a wrong call?).

The venue was a poor and avoidable choice by the IRB and will have done little to popularise RWC7s, which is a pity.

We have to wait until 2018 for the next RWC7s, so as to intersperse it on a two yearly cycle with the Olympics since it includes rugby Sevens in Rio 2016. Until then, however, there is the IRB Sevens World Series with regular competitions in great venues around the world; it throws up an overall league winner every year. And nothing about space.



■ The Irish women’s team in Moscow earlier this week before their participation in the World Cup Sevens.