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## BACK TO COMPETITIVE RUGBY IN THE CONTEXT OF PANDEMIC

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### ABSTRACT

This article deals with the feasibility of returning to the competitive performance in the Game in the context of pandemic. The study was performed to assist sport associations in organizing and hosting sport events both on national and international level. It aims at providing guidelines and options that will bring the Game back to its real life, while respecting the standard health requirements and measures.

**Key words:** Rugby, Health Standards, Player Welfare Best Practices,

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, pandemic conditions and imposed restrictions have significantly increased the demands on organised sport activities. In addition to the standard requirements inherent in each sport, additional requirements had to be placed to get us back to active training and competitive performance as soon as possible. This applies to rugby in particular, i.e. the global rugby family has been subjected to various impacts and major challenges in the wake of the current Covid-19 pandemic. National policies differed from country to country, but the re-establishment of an international sports calendar required the efforts of all member countries of the various international associations, unions and federations.

This applies in particular to rugby, subject to the various impacts and challenges that the global rugby family is experiencing as a result of the current Covid-19 pandemic. The governing bodies, i.e. World Rugby and Rugby Europe,

have provided educational resources and protocols for all players, coaches, supporters, officials, administrators and volunteers to help identify and address these challenges. In addition, there are a number of medical leadership and financial support initiatives now available for federations and regional associations to provide their members with expertise and knowledge, and thus help various stakeholders and their communities get back in the game. (1-6)

- Awareness for Coaches and Players regarding Covid-19 - Online course in multiple languages
- Awareness for Administrators regarding Covid-19 - Online course in multiple languages
- World Rugby Return to Play Guidelines - Guidelines in multiple languages
- Template Documents incl. Covid-19 Symptom Checklist, Pro14 Draft Guidelines, Personnel List, Pitch Side Emergency Care and Personal Protective Equipment etc. - Guidelines in multiple languages
- World Rugby Updates, Member Union Models of Good Practice and Supplementary Documents - Information in multiple languages

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- Optional and Temporary Law Trials to mitigate risk of transmission of Covid-19 - Guidelines in multiple languages
- Anti-Doping Guidelines - Guidelines in multiple languages
- Impact of Covid-19 on Sport - SIGA-Soccerex Webinars in English
- First Aid in Rugby module - Online Course in multiple languages
- Immediate Care in Rugby modules - Online Course in multiple languages

- Covid-19 Safety Guidelines poster - Toolkit/Template in multiple languages
- IOC Athlete 365 - Athlete-relevant resources in multiple languages
- Return to Play video (Rugby Americas North) - English
- Policy Analysis Tool for Community Sport and Sport for Development in Response to COVID-19 (Commonwealth Secretariat) - Guidelines in En

Return to Training/Play - Community & High Performance

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- [Managing Concussion modules](#) - Online Course in multiple languages
- [RugbyReady](#) - Online Course in multiple languages
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- [Conditioning for Rugby](#) - Online Course in multiple languages
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**Resources Provided by World Rugby**

**METHODS**

A World Rugby study in June 2020 identified a number of priority areas where support is required.

A Rugby Europe survey, as well as an online conference on the readiness of Europe's unions to return to the game nationally and internationally was produced in early 2021.

In our view Sevens proved to be more adaptable to the setting. Sevens is the younger, Olympic version of rugby which has attracted significant spectator interest in recent years, along with its growing popularity and increasing number of

competitions, its commercialisation and most notably its inclusion in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

Our observations show that Unions from Europe are significantly more willing to participate in these tournaments than in the fifteen-a-side game. The reasoning is from preparation, the format of the tournament, travel options and other areas related to epidemiological restrictions. It is no coincidence that in 2020-21, due to a lack of readiness from the unions in Europe, the Rugby 15s Conference tournament did not take place, and we all hope it will be resumed in September - October 2021. Unions have expressed a

significant willingness to commence international competitions during the months of May and June in Sevens, while for 15s this is declared for the months of September and October. There is probably a rationale for this, primarily at national level.

Rugby sevens competitions are held on a tournament basis over two or three days with 12 or 16 teams of each gender participating in each tournament. A total of one such tournament, which is for men and women requires the provision of security for 24 or 32 teams with a total of 400 and 600 players, officials and support

*VELKOV P.*  
staff. All participants have a full day stay on the days of competition with a duration of between 6 and 8 hours.

The requirements we will present were imposed by Rugby Europe, but would also be valid for other international Rugby 7's tournaments in Europe, respecting the general requirements of spread prevention and the imposed health standards on the continent. We believe that this system is a good example of a return to the game that we have approbated, through our direct participation in two such tournaments.



*Version dated of April 2, 2021*

## INTRODUCTION

These guidelines are not intended to replace any public health guidance and/or restrictions issued by governmental authorities, but should be referred to in combination with such guidance from public health authorities. In case of conflicting recommendations, governmental authorities laws, regulations and guidelines supersedes these Rugby Europe measures.

These measures must also be read in combination with the already existing RE rules and regulations, especially Manuals and Handbook referring to each Competition. These measures apply to all Official RE 7s Tournament. This Document has been written under the guidance of the RE Player welfare Committee

## 1. BEFORE THE EVENT – PRE-COMPETITION REQUIREMENTS

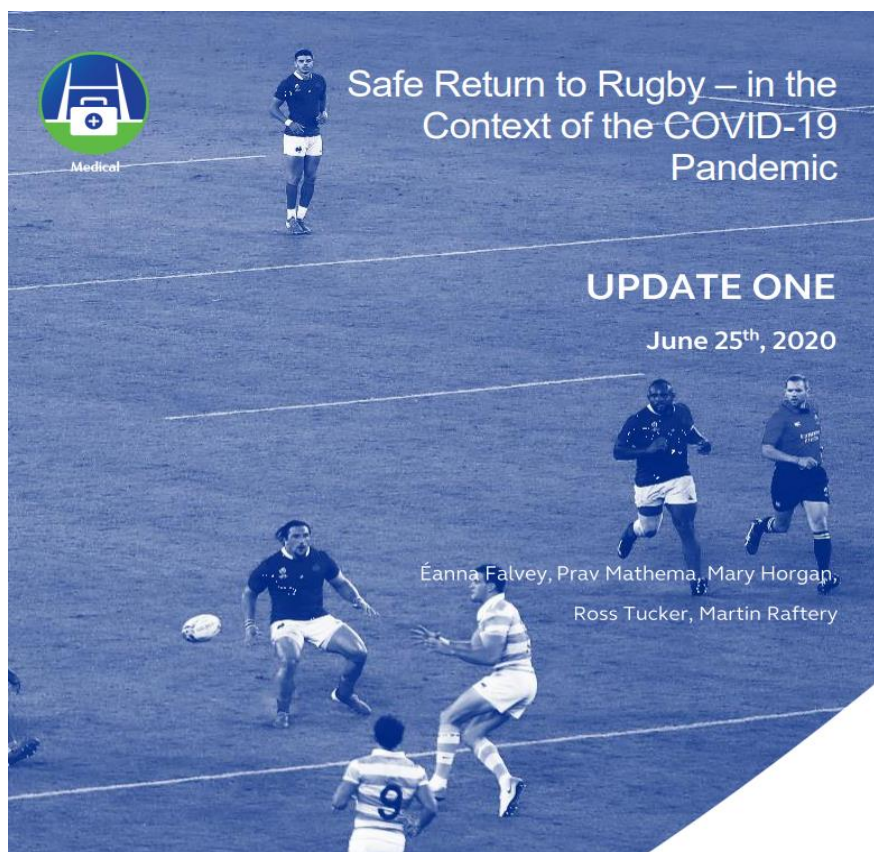
*This section details the steps that each union (traveling or host of a tournament) must take during the preparation of the Tournament.*

We will present an analysis of requirements that do not fit or differ in the common health standards for individual countries, but which we believe make a significant contribution to player welfare.

### 1. PRIOR TO THE EVENT

#### 1.1 RETURNING TO PRACTICE

Following World Rugby Player Welfare best practice, which recommends 4 weeks of training with contact before the first competition and ideally a further 2 weeks before an international match, he will be asked for Unions to provide a 6-week training plan before his first tournament in 2021.



**Figure 1.** Covid-19 Return To Play Guidelines

Bulgarian Rugby Federation has adopted such a plan for the national Rugby 7s team, for a return to the game which included preparation and two preliminary , control competitions. The teams started its preparation in the first week of April, which allowed until the beginning of May to meet the recommended criteria, for their first control participation on 9 May - international tournament Sofia 7, Until the first official competition in Conference 1 of the RE on 4,5 and 6 June in Belgrade, the teams completed a 9-week-preparation period.

For all member clubs Bulgarian Rugby Federation has developed a standard for safety in rugby training and competition, approved by the Ministry of Sport. After training, Bulgarian Rugby Federation conducts control in its implementation.

### 1.2 ISOLATION PLAN

2 weeks prior to the tournament, delegations - via their Covid Manager - must submit a document

detailing their pre-tournament isolation plan for the two weeks prior to the competition. This document provides a preliminary list of all members of the tournament delegation. This plan is not a strict isolation plan, but a plan that contains details and any measures taken to minimize and reduce unnecessary contact of delegation team members with outsiders.

### 1.3 PARTICIPATION AND HOSTING

Rugby Europe requires the designation of positions - Covid Managers responsible for the communication, synchronisation and implementation of anti-pandemic requirements.

**The hosting Rugby Union appoints its Covid-19 Manager**, who will be in charge for contacting and liaising participating teams in the tournament.

**Visiting teams appoint a Covid-19 manager**, who will be responsible for liaising with the host rugby union, their Covid-19 manager, and the



player welfare committee. Covid-19 managers must have adequate knowledge of local and regional health protocols.

**RECOMMENDATIONS TO EVENT PARTICIPANTS**

**Pre-event**

Anyone participating in the event (athlete, volunteer, official, food handler etc.) should proactively and regularly check their health status (including taking their temperature, and monitoring for any symptoms).

Anyone due to participate in the event who is feeling ill should not come to the venue and be advised on the designated contact online or by telephone.

Team staff and volunteer leads should ensure that their teams and volunteers are briefed on the protocols for a suspect and confirmed patient, on infection prevention and control measures and on where to find more information.

**During the event**

Participants should be aware of and cooperate with team medical staff or event organizing staff at venues in taking their own/competitors' temperatures each day, any temperatures above 38°C to be reported to the event medical lead/chief medical officer. Follow the same approach as the management of ill travelers at points of entry (international airports, seaports, and ground, crossings) in the context of COVID-19

Wash hands often with soap and water. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water not available. Hand sanitizer stations should be available throughout the event venue, the accommodation, and on team buses.

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when coughing or sneezing. Practise respiratory etiquette (maintain distance: at least 1 m), cover coughs and sneezes with disposable tissues or flexed elbow, wash hands). If coughing persists, isolate and seek medical advice.

Avoid contact with sick people, including avoiding close contact with those suffering from acute respiratory infections.

Avoid contact with anyone if you are ill.

Gloves should be worn by team and event staff handling towels or laundry in the team environment.

Towels should not be shared.

Athletes should not share clothing, bar soap or other personal items.

Recommended protocol for the use of water bottles:

- Good team hygiene includes ensuring all players, officials and staff have their own water bottles to prevent the transmission of viruses and bacteria.
- Bottles should be labelled and washed (with dishwasher soap) after each practice or game.

Advise athletes not to touch their own mouths or nose.

Avoid shaking hands or hugging.

Avoid steam rooms or saunas.

Be aware of regular cleaning of frequently touched items (door handles, elevators, gym equipment, etc.)

WHO Global Infection Prevention and Control Network. Considerations for sports federations/sports event organizers when planning mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19. 14/04/2020 [Internet]. 2020;(i):1-4. Available from: [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331764/WHO-2019-nCoV-Mass\\_Gatherings\\_Sports-2020\\_1-eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331764/WHO-2019-nCoV-Mass_Gatherings_Sports-2020_1-eng.pdf)

**Isolation plan:**

- ✓ Managing the possibility of an individual becoming unwell will include:
- ✓ Isolation in pre-ordained room.
- ✓ Notify local health authority and manage the individual appropriately.
- ✓ Provide necessary close contact detail for contact tracing.
- ✓ Arrange for thorough cleaning of the isolation area post-use.

If an individual at the facility is confirmed as an infected person or potentially infected person, the facility should be thoroughly cleaned as outlined by the WHO or relevant public health authority. There is no requirement to close the facility unless required to do so for cleaning.

It is recommended that the COVID-19 manager liaises with local government and health authorities to guide appropriate actions.

Safe return to Rugby – in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, April 27, 2020

Bulgaria rugby 7s senior national team players + staff COVID-19 testing schedule.						
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
			Departure and arrival to Serbia	Departure and arrival to Serbia	D-1	D-2
PCR-TEST-1	PCR-TEST-1		PCR-TEST-2	Antigen test PCR-TEST-2	Antigen test	

**Women Men**

Medically responsible person:

Viktoria Marinova

Radoslav Spasov

**Figure 2.** Isolation plan implemented for men's and women's national teams participating in Rugby Europe Conference 1.

## 1.4 LIASONS WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Since each national or local legislation has a different protocols, it is paramount that the Host Union contact the local authorities as soon as possible to obtain *Elite Status* for the Tournament and permission to bypass certain restrictions in order to avoid contact with as many people as possible and take advantage of facilitated security checks. It is a good idea to initiate this process as soon as the tournament is planned and/updated.

## 2. PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

### 2.1 PARTICIPATING PARTIES

- Team and party number: for 7s tournaments the standard party number is 15 persons (12 players and 3 officials) according to the Competition Manual.

- Medical insurance. Party members of all teams members of all teams must be insured against both sports and Covid-19 related claims.

#### Pre-travel PCR testing protocol:

- Visiting team party members must be tested 3 days prior to travel.
- Members of the host delegation must be tested 3 days before the first day of competition.

All member delegates will also be required to submit an online non-symptomatic form.

### **Arrival PCR testing protocol.**

There are two different protocols depending on the arrival day of the visiting teams:

- If the visiting team arrives two days (48 hours) prior to the first day of competition, PCR tests must be performed the morning of the day prior to the first day of competition (D-1) at a time arranged during the Covid Managers preparatory meetings.

- If the visiting team arrives the day before the tournament: PCR tests can be done in their home country prior to travel as long as they can provide results within one day. In this case, however, another antigen test must be conducted either the evening before the first day of competition OR the morning of the first day of competition. The list of certified antigen tests will be provided by the RE Player Welfare Committee.

- For the home team, PCR testing must take place on the morning of the day before the competition at a time agreed by both parties and during Covid Manager preparation meetings. The entire process outlined in a, b and c must be reviewed by the Tournament Director and Tournament Medical Delegate.

- The host union should negotiate with local laboratory partners to test a large group of delegations, provide PCR results within 6 to 12 hours, and discuss options for group discounts. Rugby Europe recommends that team delegations will test a larger pool of players prior to the tournament in order to be able to compete should one or more of them test positive. When testing the team, regular intervals using antigen testing and PCR testing are also recommended whenever possible.

### **2.2 DELEGATION NUMBER, TRAVELING TEAMS**

It is desirable that all delegations travel with the minimum number of participants, travel with adequate levels of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), sanitary equipment (hand sanitizer and wipes) and following social distancing.

Travel arrangements should meet Rugby Europe travel standards. Required paperwork for each member, signed and dated, stating that they have or have not had symptoms and have not

knowingly been in contact with a potential or confirmed case of Covid-19 in the previous 7 days. A paper copy of the PCR test results for all members of the delegation. Immediate following of the measures indicated by the local legislation, if any members of the delegation must present any symptoms compatible with Covid-19, as well as presentation of adequate medical insurance.

### **2.3 TRANSFERS TO/FROM AIRPORTS, TRAINING SESSIONS AND TOURNAMENT VENUES**

#### **2.4 ACCOMMODATION**

#### **2.5 MEALS**

#### **2.6 TRAINING SESSIONS**

#### **2.6 TOURNAMENT DAY**

#### **2.8 OFFICIAL STAFF**

#### **2.9 EMERGENCY/CRISIS MANAGEMENT GROUP COVID-19**

#### **2.10 TOURNAMENT SAFETY**

All requirements from 2.3 to 2.10 are detailed and monitored by the Host Union and Rugby Europe representatives, and they are mandatory for participants. All of these requirements are subject to the organisation of the event and are binding on the participants, subject to ongoing control. They are also a major part of the Covid-19 Return To Play Guidelines, they have been adopted by national federations, and they also largely overlap with the requirements for other collegiate sports, so we do not cover them in detail in this article.

#### **2.11 GAME PROTOCOL**

The protocol under the Competition Manual should apply but with the following changes:

- No handshakes. Can be replaced with elbow bump
- No escorting kids with players on the playing field
- Only players, match officials, flag bearers and key personnel of the organising committee are permitted on the field.

### **3. UNIVERSAL PRECAUTIONS**

#### **3.1 Face masks**

#### **3.2 Handwashing**

#### **3.3 Rubber gloves**

#### **3.4 Social distancing**

#### **3.5 Temperature check**

### **RESULTS**

Our teams followed strictly the regulations described above. The host union requirements described above were also applied to each of the tournaments. With the requirements thus

imposed, we participated with three teams comprising a total of 36 different players and staff. Of which 30 players/12 of them women/ and 6 staff /2 of them women/.

In addition to these requirements, we also sent an online daily symptom form.

## APPENDIX 1

Example online self-declaration, it is important to note that each Organisation or Competition should consider data protection laws within their own territory

### COVID-19 symptom checker

This form must be utilised to ensure that you are free from COVID-19 symptoms and pose limited risk to others

\*Required

Date \*

DD MM YYYY




Name \*

Contact details - email \*

Contact details - mobile phone number \* \*

Are you currently diagnosed with or believe you may have COVID-19? \*

- Yes  
 No

Have you had any of these symptoms of COVID-19 in the past 14 days?

High temperature (fever) \*

The return to play activities covered a 9 week preparation period and a 3 week participation period. No players were infected during the period, and there is no official information on any infected tournament participants at all. It should be borne in mind that a total of 30 different teams and approximately 600+ players and persons participated in the tournaments.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusions we can draw are that the implementation of these standards accomplished several outcomes.

1. Demonstrating the best practices forced teams to find ways to practice with contact, which provides a good foundation for participation, but most of all prevents players from participating

without the necessary preparation and injury predisposition.

2. The introduction of the Covid Manager, relieves the work of the teams, defines precise duties of this position and solves specific issues of safety and team organization.

3. The introduction of compulsory two or three stage testing, the symptomatic forms is a sure guarantee of limiting the spread, while at the same time enabling us to return to competitive activity. Here, as a disadvantage, we have to say that in many countries tests are still expensive despite support from Rugby Europe. We consider it necessary for regional and national associations to make representations to national health authorities for relief from testing for sport activities if there is no national strategy for this.

4. The return to play and especially the competitive part was an important step for the sport after this long break. The possibility of international competitions has united our efforts to overcome the crisis and provided an opportunity and incentive for national unions to seek opportunities to participate.

In conclusion, we believe that these requirements and criteria are also applicable to Rugby 15, with National Unions having the freedom on the ground to decide the options for their implementation as well as the resources to secure them.

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