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Battle of the titans launches Rugby World Cup

Explosive: Brodie Retallick (New Zealand), Owen Farrell (England) and Beauden Barrett (New Zealand).

Whisper it quietly, but is rugby a better game than football? The World Cup kicks off in Tokyo this morning and all the world's a stage as the giants of the game prepare for an epic battle.

And so it begins. The world's top rugby nations are poised for the start of the Rugby World Cup, with the outcome as uncertain as any of the previous **eight** contests.

New Zealand has won the past two World Cups, but Ireland is currently ranked as the best team in the world.

A resurgent South Africa won the Rugby Championship earlier this year, while Wales took the Six Nations in March.

England has won 10 of their last 14, while Australia's minimum target is a repeat of its 2015 run to the final.

Argentina (semi-finalists in two of the last three tournaments), talented Scotland, Fiji and France, and hosts Japan are among those hoping to derail the title ambitions of the leading contenders.

"I think this is the most open World Cup we've had for a long time. There are six or seven teams capable of winning the World Cup," said Wales coach Warren Gatland.

The ancient **samurai** warriors of Japan were more than just loyal soldiers.

They believed in honour above life and were famous as much for their spirit as their distinctive swords.

Put them in a pair of boots and a gum shield and they would have felt a sense of kinship with all 20 competing squads awaiting the start.

As *The Guardian* says this morning: “That notion of sacrifice in pursuit of a higher ideal, in this case, the holy grail of global domination, remains one of the touchstones of modern international rugby union.”

“In few sports are pleasure and pain so inextricably linked, where supreme resolve, character and resilience are basic requirements. No one wins seven Tests in seven weeks by fluke, nor lifts the Webb Ellis Cup by happy accident.”

But rugby is still often regarded as a pastime for the privileged.

In England, the game was named after the **boys of Rugby School** in Warwickshire, who developed it and wrote its first rules in 1845. For the following 150 years, rugby was an amateurs’ game, restricting access to those who were able to afford to play. Despite this, many argue that it is a more exciting, purer and more ethical game than football.

Might that be true?

Sheer thrill

Only elitists think there is anything superior in rugby compared with other sports, say many. Never let it be forgotten that it has a dark side: the All Blacks’ shocking spear tackle, for example, on Brian O’Driscoll in 2005, which went unpunished, or the ‘**Bloodgate**’ scandal in 2009, when the Harlequins team planned how to cheat before the game.

Hang on a minute, say its champions. There is no finer sight in sport than watching New Zealand’s All Blacks flipping the ball from hand to hand, switching gears and direction with ease. Players do not feign injury or challenge the referee’s authority — and if they do, nobody defends them. Crowds remain unsegregated and orderly. Rugby is a self-policing game that encourages respect for your opponents and the sport.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is rugby better to watch than football?
2. Who do you think will win the World Cup in Japan this year?

ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a poster for the Rugby World Cup, aiming to maximise its appeal across the world.
2. Do you have a favourite sporting memory? What was the greatest sporting victory you ever saw? Describe it in on one side of paper, or less.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Rugby is a hooligan’s game played by gentlemen; football is a gentlemen’s game played by hooligans.”

Winston Churchill (1874-1965), former British PM
What do you think?

Q & A

What do we know?

The opening group stage of the competition sees 20 teams attempt to battle their way out of four Pools: A, B, C and D. Each Pool contains five teams, and only two can advance into the knockout rounds. From there, it is standard quarter-final, semi-final, final format. England’s Pool is particularly tricky, having been drawn in C with Argentina and France. It means one of rugby’s ‘big fish’ will suffer the ignominy of going home early.

What do we not know?

Who will win! Robert Kitson, the respected rugby correspondent for *The Guardian* says: “South Africa will win, unless they are flattened in the final by a free-wheeling England team, boasting even more dynamic power. The side that hits hardest for longest — with and without the ball — will ultimately prevail.”

WORD WATCH

Eight

The Rugby World Cup is a men’s rugby union tournament contested every four years between the top international teams. The tournament was first held in 1987, when the tournament was co-hosted by New Zealand and Australia. Today’s is the ninth World Cup.

Samurai

The samurai were the warriors of ancient Japan. They later made up the ruling military class. Samurai employed a range of weapons such as bows and arrows, spears and guns, but their main weapon and symbol was the sword.

Boys of Rugby School

According to legend, William Webb Ellis inspired the game by picking up the ball while playing football at Rugby School in 1823. But this version of events does not appear to be supported by much reliable historical evidence, and the development of the game appears to have been more of an organic process. Webb Ellis is still regarded as one of the founders of the game, and the World Cup trophy is named after him.

Bloodgate

In a crucial European Cup match between Harlequins and Irish side Leinster in 2009, a Harlequins winger used a blood capsule to pretend to be injured.

His action allowed his team to bring on a replacement, who was a specialist at taking kicks at goal. Harlequins' director of rugby was banned for three years over the incident.