

## **Pumas Scratched Again?**

**Tri Nations = Tire Nations but Southern 4 Nations is the way forward.**

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When the Pumas beat France for the second time in six weeks to claim third place in the 2007 Rugby World Cup there were tears in the players eyes as they proudly received their medals. They knew that they had put Argentina well and truly on the rugby map and they hoped that the deserved reward would be a place in an annual tournament, after all what forward thinking rugby tournament wouldn't want this outstanding team in its ranks? Think again!

Roll forward 18 months to May 2009 and SANZAR after much squabbling have just released the long awaited blueprint for the new Super 15 provincial competition to be played from 2011. This 15 team competition will run from late Feb to early August and then be followed by the Tri Nations. The SANZAR release states that the Tri Nations will always kick off in South Africa in mid August and end in early October with two All Blacks Vs Australia games and that this will allow for Tri Nations tests between particular teams in particular countries to become permanent fixtures on the rugby calendar. With all this talk of permanent fixtures it looks like any chance of the Pumas adding spice to Tri Nations has been well and truly scratched and the Argentines will likely be again left on their own to try and scratch together a match schedule worth their standing.

How can it be that the world's third best team containing world class players like Juan Martin Hernandez, Ignacio Corleto, Rodrigo Roncero, Juan Manuel Leguizamon, Juan Fernandez Lobbe, Patricio Albacete, and Filipe Contepomi is not wanted on the international stage? What have the Pumas done to deserve this treatment?

Fans and players would dearly love more contact with Argentina and there are many sound reasons for including the Puma's in an expanded Tri Nations. Their continued rejection defies belief and reeks of discrimination.

I believe that a Southern 4 Nations with Argentina, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand (Tri Nations ordered in accordance with their support for Argentina!) would make an exciting tournament for fans and players and create the genuine tournament feel that is missing in the Tri Nations. This added interest would help grow the game internationally and lead to additional revenues in the medium term.

Let's look at why 4 would be better than 3:

**Playing Strength – Pumas are World class and came 3rd in RWC 2007**

The Pumas placed third in the 2007 World Cup after losing their semi final to eventual winners South Africa and were ranked forth in the IRB rankings at the end of 2008. They have beaten France in 6 of their last 8 games and have also beaten each of the other Six Nations teams at least once since 2000. On the All Blacks last visits to Buenos Aires they have escaped with hard fought 28-24 and 25-19 wins. In 2003 on one of the rare occasions that a full strength Pumas side has played in the republic they lost 25-26 to a last minute Louis Koen penalty. At full strength and with an even playing field the Pumas are a match for any international team. Just think how good they could be if they got to play regularly!

Their Latin flair adds an exciting dimension to international rugby and their stars would be welcomed warmly by fans in New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa.

### **New Markets = New players, new fans, and new revenues.**

Argentina has a population of 36 million and a strong rugby tradition. First division club matches are played before good crowds in all the main centres and test matches are almost always sold out. Fans just can't get enough and the current starvation diet of international matches here is becoming tiresome and risks turning fans off the game. Rugby is also played in Chile and Uruguay with Uruguay playing in the 2003 RWC. There is great potential to grow the game and attract players and viewers in the southern cone of South America. Buenos Aires is a wonderful and interesting city to visit and a welcome change from the traditional rugby nations.

### **Tri Nations = Tire Nations**

The current Tri Nations format with three games played between each country means that tournament stretches out over a tiring ten weeks. With only one match able to be played each weekend it seems to go on forever and at no stage does it feel like a tournament as there is little continuity and too much repetition. The Six Nations in comparison is played over a compact 7 weeks (including 2 bye weeks) with a total of 15 games and each three matches each week. As a result there is huge public interest and players and supporters look forward eagerly to each match and tournament. Including Argentina to make a Southern 4 Nations would mean that two games could be played each weekend and much more of a tournament feel would be achieved.

	Teams	Game weeks	Bye weeks	Total weeks	Matches per Game week	
<b>Euro 6 Nations</b>	Ireland, England, France, Wales, Scotland, Italy	5	2	7	3	3 games each round creates and maintains high player and fan interest
<b>Tri Nations</b>	New Zealand, Australia, South Africa	9	1	10	1	1 game a week for 10 weeks gets a bit tiring!
<b>Southern 4 Nations</b>	New Zealand, Argentina, Australia, South Africa	6	1	7	2	2 games each round is attractive for fans and players.

Current three matches against each team also leads to long layoffs between matches that leaves resting team and fans twiddling thumbs and getting bored while waiting for next game. In 2009 the All Blacks have two layoffs of three weeks each while playing just the one match in a six week period from 2 August to 11 September.

In 2008 the All Blacks had a four week break between their game in Cape Town and their final match in Brisbane. To keep their minds on the job a test against Samoa was hastily arranged but it was only luck that meant the final game was the tournament decider as could it could just as easily have been a dead rubber!

A Southern 4 Nations including Argentina would enable home and away matches between the four teams to be played over seven weeks. This would eliminate long and uneven rest periods, create continuity and provide a genuine tournament feel. The three weeks saved could even enable international players to get back to their roots and play in either Air New Zealand Cup or Currie Cup competitions.

### **Travel is no obstacle – Especially not in first class!**

Travel times are often put up as an argument against Argentina's inclusion in the Tri Nations but these differences are more imagined than real. In fact it's quicker to fly from Auckland to Buenos Aires than it is to Cape Town. From Australia flight times are about the same flight time to Argentina and South Africa, and it's quite a bit shorter from South Africa to Argentina compared to flying to New Zealand.

Approximate Flight Times	Auckland	Sydney	Cape Town	Buenos Aires
Auckland		3	16	13
Sydney	3		13	16
Cape Town	16	13		9
Buenos Aires	13	16	9	

These days travel and accommodation are very comfortable and while long flights can be boring with not much to do its still better than waiting three weeks for a game!

### **Cash is King**

It seems to me that SANZAR, and especially New Zealand and Australia are looking for reasons not to include Argentina when they should focus on the benefits of having a tournament with the World's top 4 teams. No doubt one of the reasons is financial with a perception that revenue will be reduced by including the Pumas. I do not have access to information about match revenues and attendances but I do know that players and fans are tired of the endless and repetitive Tri Nations. If fans want more variety it would be much better to act now rather than wait for TVs to be turned off and seats to go empty at stadiums. It's a question of supply and demand.

If SANZAR is prepared to provide detailed revenue breakdown a full analysis can be prepared including income projections with and without Argentina. Until then we can only speculate.

### **Issues to resolve**

Of course there will be important issues to resolve in order to achieve a world class Southern 4 Nations tournament with all teams at full strength. A key issue is that of the availability of European based Pumas for a tournament that would run from mid July to end of August - right in the middle of the northern summer break. The options would be

for Pumas to have a break after the Southern 4 Nations and rejoin their clubs in early October to resume playing 2/3 weeks later. It wouldn't be much of a break for players as only 4/6 weeks but combined with a rest after June tests could be just enough until the global season comes along. UK and French clubs may not be happy but in effect they are compensated as Pumas are available to play during 6 Nations when northern players are on international duty.

I would also suggest playing the Southern 4 Nations only every two years and not in RWC or British and Irish Lions tour years. This would reduce calendar congestion and allow for the possibility of tours by non Lions hosts. i.e. this year the All Blacks could tour Australia, and in 2013 South Africa could tour New Zealand. There is just no point playing a Tri Nations immediately before a World Cup.

### Sample Southern 4 Nations match schedule and comparison to Tri Nations

Date	Week	Tri Nations	Southern 4 Nations
18-Jul	1	All Blacks Vs Australia	All Blacks Vs Australia AND South Africa Vs Argentina
25-Jul	2	South Africa Vs All Blacks	Australia Vs Argentina AND South Africa Vs All Blacks
1-Aug	3	South Africa Vs All Blacks	All Blacks Vs Argentina AND Australia Vs South Africa
8-Aug	4	South Africa Vs Australia	
15-Aug	5		Australia Vs All Blacks AND Argentina Vs South Africa
22-Aug	6	Australia Vs All Blacks	Argentina Vs Australia AND All Blacks Vs South Africa
29-Aug	7	Australia Vs South Africa	Argentina Vs All Blacks AND South Africa Vs Australia
5-Sep	8	Australia Vs South Africa	
12-Sep	9	All Blacks Vs South Africa	
19-Sep	10	All Blacks Vs Australia	

6 games for each team spread over 7 weeks makes for an exciting tournament!

### Summary

On one hand we have a tired Tri Nations that goes on forever and leaves teams and fans waiting weeks to see any action. On the other hand we have a world class Pumas team looking for a stage to grace. They say that obstacles are what one sees when you take your eyes off your goals and SANZAR would do well to look with different eyes at the Pumas instead of just focusing on the obstacles. There is no doubt that by working together with courage and vision the dream of a fantastic Southern 4 Nations tournament could be achieved.