

In November 1985 I woke early on a Sunday morning and turned on the TV for the All Blacks match against Argentina in Buenos Aires. It was the 2nd of two tests and after a convincing 33-20 win in the first test more of the same was expected. Indeed it was no surprise when John Kirwin proved unstoppable and 4 tries were scored in the first half while establishing an 18-9 lead.

The 2nd half was a different story however and the Pumas came out smoking with legendary first 5/8 Hugo Porta directing play and knocking over penalties and drop goals from all over. Argentina edged closer and closer and I could feel the crowd getting behind the Pumas as a miracle suddenly seemed possible. It was intense and passionate and the All Blacks seemed in a state of shock. The fans were yelling, chanting, and urging their players on and it seemed to mean so much to them. The crowd erupted at the final whistle with the score Argentina 21 New Zealand 21. The Pumas had drawn with the mighty All Blacks and achieved the most important result in their rugby history.

The scenes from Buenos Aires were amazing as fans surged onto the field and enveloped the players, they jumped, danced, and played tribute in any way they could to Porta and his fellow heroes. It was an amazing day for Argentine rugby and as I would soon find out this passion and expression is a vital part of Argentina's wonderful social fabric.

### **Passion, Pride and a Place in the Tri Nations**

At RWC 2007 this passion and pride was expressed on the faces of the Puma players as they sung the national anthem before the tournament opener against hosts France. Tears of pride stung their eyes as they stood tall and then went on to roll Les Bleus as they marched into the semi finals with courage and skill. There were again tears of pride as the Pumas received their bronze medals after their 2nd win in six weeks over France. They knew that they had put Argentina well and truly on the rugby map and they hoped that their deserved reward would be a place in an annual tournament.

Almost exactly two years after the epic win in the world cup opener another monumental triumph is being celebrated by Argentine rugby as SANZAR have finally invited the Pumas to join a Southern 4 Nations tournament from 2012. This victory took far more than 80 minutes to achieve and the effort and commitment put in by past and current Argentine Rugby Union boards has been intense and sustained. Current head of the high performance committee Ricardo Garcia Fernandez called the invitation a great satisfaction and source of enormous pride for all involved in rugby in Argentina. Indeed many have played their part in this historic achievement.

Few would argue that Argentina don't deserve their place in the esteemed company of the Tri Nations, they have achieved on field success and while they may not have beaten the All Blacks or South Africa their climb up the rankings provides clear evidence of a rugby culture and commitment to winning.

Few either would argue that the Tri Nations in its current format is so compelling that to change it would be too big a risk to take. Fans, players, and even administrators know that a total of 9 games played between 3 teams over 10 weeks is hardly going to set pulses racing.

Current three matches against each team 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 had two layoffs of three weeks each while playing just one match in a six week period from 2 August to 11 September.

So on one hand we had the Pumas looking for a regular tournament to showcase their talents and passion and on the other a tired Tri Nations looking for a new lease of life. It seemed like a match made in heaven and while it was love at first sight for some, others wondered about the need to change something they didn't think was broken.

Back in 2006 Syd Millar stated that the Pumas deserved a Tri Nations place and that "The tournament will soon need refreshing" Chris Moller of the NZRU replied that he did not think the plan (to include Argentina) was practical. They say that obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off your goals and in this case a pretty small obstacle was blocking the sight of a glorious Southern 4 Nations.

### **South Africa's support sets the Precedent**

It was South Africa, closer geographically to Argentina than Australia and New Zealand, who made loud and clear its support for the Puma nation back in 2006. Argentina and South Africa have been working for some time to establish closer ties and regular tours from provincial and age grade sides are a strong feature of this exchange.

This support went right to the top with then President Thabo Mbeki telling the Argentine ambassador the day after the Springboks had lifted the Webb Ellis Cup in 2007 "We must ensure that the World Cup trophy remains for ever in the south and to achieve this we need a strong Argentina." South Africa was also tired of getting the short end of the long distance travel stick and saw the Pumas addition as a good way to level out the travel playing field as well as adding colour, culture and interest.

On the other side of the Pacific New Zealand and Australia weren't quite so infatuated by the Latins and their desire to dance a Tri Nations tango. They figured that if you can play the best you don't need the rest and decided to stay safe on first base and added an extra round of games.

So while New Zealand and Australia gazed at their navels and South Africa groaned the Pumas approached the Six Nations to see if they could be accommodated there. Luckily for the Australasians there was no room at the northern inn, if there had been it would have doomed the Tri Nations to something resembling a never ending series of M\*A\*S\*H reruns – brilliant the first time, pretty good the second, but then quickly becoming familiar and losing excitement and emotion.

Argentina then came knocking on the SANZAR door again and again instead of embracing Argentina and working out the details later Australia and New Zealand remained hesitant and steadfast in their belief that if it ain't broke don't fix it. The sounds of TVs being turned off throughout NZ could be heard in the background. Argentina was sent away to do its homework and present a business plan showing how it would benefit the Tri Nations.

Agustin Pichot was recruited by the Argentine campaign team and an emotive advertisement was filmed outside the IRB offices in Dublin in which Pichot and other

Puma players in full playing kit pleaded for inclusion in the Tri Nations. It was a moving and powerful statement.

In May 2009 SANZAR after much squabbling released their 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 be followed by the Tri Nations. The SANZAR release stated 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 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 seemed that any chance of the Pumas adding spice to Tri Nations had been well and truly scratched as Argentina wasn't even mentioned.

Then on 14th September SANZAR announced that Argentina had been invited to form part of a 4 Nations competition from 2012! This long awaited good news was a big surprise for most as it seemed the door had already been shut by the talk of permanent fixtures.

### **A friend when in need is French indeed**

So what happened then between June and September? I asked the question to Ricardo Garcia Fernandez. He tells me that during this time the Argentine Rugby Union was working to fulfil the conditions set down by SANZAR for inclusion. Paramount was the need for the best Puma players to be available to play in the 4 Nations and to this end discussions were held with the French Rugby Federation, Top 14 league, and French Clubs. The result was a commitment from French rugby to work with Argentina to achieve the release of Puma players for the August to October 4 Nations window.

Nothing has been finalised yet and there is still plenty of work to do but the intention to help is a positive and vital step in the right direction. The commitment by France can also be seen as a dividend payment for all those Puma players who have served their French clubs over the years and have continued to play while northern internationals were away on 6 Nations duty. Puma players have provided excellent value to their clubs because of Argentina's restricted international programme and now its time for the clubs that have benefitted to repay the favour and help the Pumas into the 4 Nations.

Garcia Fernandez says that the September SANZAR announcement was no surprise for his team as they were continuing to work towards meeting the conditions for inclusion and were confident of a positive response. I just wonder why SANZAR made such a point about permanent fixtures between New Zealand and Australia and so little mention of Argentina's possible entry. Could it be that Tri Nations viewer numbers and South Africa's early title victory caused a rethink and change of heart from Australia and New Zealand? Better late than never!

### **The road to 2012**

It's tempting to think that after struggling for more than 3 years to be accepted into the competition the onfield battles starting in 2012 could appear tame by comparison. But as history shows Argentina have never beaten New Zealand or South Africa and while Australia has been beaten 4 times there can be no tougher assignment in world

rugby than to have to play twice against each of these three super powers in the space of two months. In fact it's never been done before.

Entering an established competition is never easy, just ask Italy who joined the Home Unions and France in 2000 to form the 6 Nations. In the first 10 years of the 6 Nations Italy has won just 6 and drawn 1 of 50 games for a 13% winning record and is yet to record a win against England, France, or Ireland.

The chiefs of Argentine rugby are under no illusions about the task to be faced in 2012 with President Porfirio Carreras saying "It won't be easy" and High Performance Manager Garcia Fernandez admitting "It would have been easier to play in the 6 Nations" But Argentina has never wanted things easy and know well that the only way to get better is by playing the best.

If any Argentine knows what its like to compete with the best its Hugo Porta who masterminded that famous draw with the All Blacks, beat Australia, and in the guise of the South American XV also beat the Springboks. Porta feels that "It will be tough, but this way the Pumas will keep progressing as the best rugby in the world is in the Southern Hemisphere"

So Can the Pumas be competitive on the field? A look at recent results against Tri Nations provides a definite yes. The All Blacks struggled to 25-19 and 24-20 wins in their visits to Buenos Aires in 2001 and 2006. Australia last played the Pumas outside the World Cup way back in 2002 when the then world champions were unconvincing 17-6 winners. In 2000 South Africa just managed to hold out 37-33 in Buenos Aires and then in 2003 in Port Elizabeth the Springboks won 26-25 courtesy of a last gasp Louis Koen penalty.

Sure there haven't been any recent wins but opportunities have also been severely limited with only South Africa offering regular opposition in the last decade with 6 games (excluding World Cups). New Zealand have played the Pumas 4 times, and Australia a pathetic once since 2001. Let's not forget also that Argentina has beaten France in 6 of their last 8 games and has also beaten each of the other Six Nations teams at least once since 2000.

In my mind there is no doubt that Argentina will be competitive. They have a crop of world class players who will be at the peak of their powers in 2012 as well as many outstanding youngsters coming through the high performance academies. See "What will the Puma's look like in 2012" for a glimpse of this future.

Argentina's task now is to ensure that it continues to develop players at the top and make sure that all are available for selection in 2012. Having the best players available means working with the IRB, Northern Unions, and clubs to achieve player release for the 4 Nations window.

Opening up the Super Rugby franchises to Argentine players will also provide a tremendous boost. In this regard Juan Martin Hernandez is a pioneer with his signing for Natal and the Sharks. Hernandez is revelling on the hard South African grounds and describes the conditions as the best in the world for playing rugby. There is no doubt that others will follow Hernandez's lead and when combined with the experienced stars from European leagues and the best of the domestic academies Argentina will take the field with experienced, travelled, and motivated line-up.

## Full Circle

It's August 2012 and I'm sitting in the stand as the Pumas and All Blacks take the field for the opening match of the inaugural Southern 4 Nations. Visiting Kiwis settle into their seats after tasting the sights, sounds, and flavours of Buenos Aires and TVs are turned on in Australia and South Africa. The Argentine national anthem is played and tears are running down the cheeks of fans and players as a dream is realised and the Pumas make their debut in annual tournament play. The game is intense just as it was back in 1985 and the crowd yells and chants as the Pumas get closer and closer to the All Blacks. With 2 minutes left and the All Blacks up by 3 points Hernandez lets fly with a drop goal attempt from halfway. The rest as they say is history! Vamos Argentina!

Head to Head	New Zealand	Argentina
Area (Km <sup>2</sup> )	269,680	2,766,890
Population	4,315,800	40,482,000
Rugby Players	142,000	92,000
Adult Rugby Players	29,000	20,000
RWC 2007	Lost QF	3rd Place

## What will the Pumas look like in 2012?

**Rob Mumford runs his eye over current and future Pumas and puts together his starting XV for the Southern 4 Nations opener in 2012.**

### **Fullback: Lucas Gonzalez Amorosino, 27 (Age in 2012)**

Counter attacking fullback whose instinct is to run. Made his full debut against England this year and has recently been picked up by English champions Leicester.

### **Wing: Horacio Agulla, 27**

Made his presence felt in France 2007 as a sound defensive player and quality finisher. Has added size since then and can also play fullback.

### **Wing: Gonzalo Camacho, 27**

Strong running winger plying his trade with Harlequins. Made a try scoring debut against England this year.

### **Centre: Gonzalo Tiesi, 27**

Took over from Manuel Contepomi after RWC 2007. Tiesi is in his 2nd season with Harlequins and is a smart distributor in the mould of Conrad Smith.

### **2nd 5/8: Santiago Fernandez, 26**

Creative and gifted ball player, elusive runner, and quality goal kicker. Can play 1st or 2nd 5/8 and will form an outstanding partnership with Hernandez. Made starting debut Vs Ireland in '08. Felipe Contepomi (35) to add impact and wisdom from the bench.

**1st 5/8: Juan Martin Hernandez, 30**

One of the great players of today Hernandez can do everything. Instinctive with razor sharp vision, outrageous skill, and a prodigious kicker off either foot. Quest to develop his game has taken him to Natal and the experience will strengthen him mentally and physically.

**Halfback: Agustin Figuerola, 27**

A brilliant runner with a slick pass Figuerola hails from the CASI club where that other brilliant halfback also called Agustin (Pichot) got his start.

**No 8: Tomas Leonardi, 25**

This youngster from the SIC club made his test debut at 21 against Chile last year. At 108kg and with speed and an excellent all round game Leonardi has a huge future ahead of him.

**Flanker: Juan Leguizamon, 29**

Burst onto the international scene in 2005 with an eye catching display in the Pumas' draw with the British Lions. Skill, guts, and great timing with pass and tackle. Plays for Stade Francais.

**Flanker: Juan Fernandez Lobbe (C), 30**

Inspirational leader of the Puma pack. Skilful forward who knows his way around the field and inspires forwards with courage and commitment. Captain Vs England this year when Felipe Contepomi was injured. Good bet to be leading from the front come 2012.

**Lock: Patricio Albacete, 31**

Tough as teak and highly mobile 2nd rower who played superbly in RWC 2007. Will be there again at RWC 2011 and won't want to miss out on 4 Nations in 2012.

**Lock: Manuel Carizza, 27**

Made his test debut as a 20 year old Vs South Africa in 2004. 2.01 tall Carizza has the chance to establish himself as Albacete's locking partner after the retirement of Ignacio Fernandez Lobbe and Rimas Alvarez.

**Prop: Rodrigo Roncero, 35**

Veteran Roncero is a skilful and rugged front rower with the knack of being in the right place at right time. Will be 35 in 2012 but knows all the tricks in the front row book.

**Prop: Pedro Ledesma, 27**

Younger brother of hooker Mario - 12 years his junior. The Ledesmas played together in the front row Vs South Africa in 2008. Will be at peak of his powers in 2012.

**Hooker: Alberto Vernet Basualdo, 30**

Strong, mobile and an incredibly hard worker. Has played 12 tests and looks like the man to take over from the ultimate warrior Mario Ledesma if he ever retires. Mario Ledesma (39) to go all out for a 4 Nations swansong off the bench.

## About Rob



Rob Mumford (left) is originally from Wellington and has been living in Argentina for the last 10 years after first visiting as a backpacker and falling in love with Argentina's stunning landscapes and passionate people. Rob is a dedicated supporter of the All Blacks and los Pumas and is tired of having to explain to Argentine taxi drivers that the All Blacks are not the World Champions and in fact haven't won the cup for 20 years! [robmumford@challengeeverything.com.ar](mailto:robmumford@challengeeverything.com.ar)