



# ★ THE EAGLE HAS LANDED ★

THE ALL BLACKS WILL PLAY IN CHICAGO LATER THIS YEAR AT A SOLD-OUT SOLDIER FIELD IN CHICAGO. **GREGOR PAUL** LOOKS AT WHETHER THE US IS POISED TO FINALLY SHED ITS UNWANTED SLEEPING GIANT TAG.



**T**ier Two rugby nations are a lot like ice-bergs - only the tip pokes above the surface and judgements are made entirely on what is visible. In the case of rugby, it is the respective national sides that are in plain view.

Which is why, when the final whistle blows at Soldier Field on November 1, there may be assumptions made about the US Eagles. It is inevitable they will be well beaten by the All Blacks. This historic test will be a fantastic spectacle, but lacking in drama. If the Eagles can keep the margin of defeat to less than 50, they will have done well.

Unfortunately, a scoreline like that will have casual observers writing them off. Perspective and balance are not always applied: a 50-point hiding will confirm in many minds that the US remain the perennial basket case. The sleeping giant that will never be woken.

Look beneath the surface, though, and the picture is different. The Eagles are not an accurate representation of how the game is developing in the USA. The national side has not been the main focus of the regime's development strategy over the last eight years. The emphasis has been on long-term, bottom-up growth: the bulk of the available money and resource has been poured into the base of the pyramid to build a foundation that has generated a genuine optimism that America is most definitely not the perennial basket case. It is most definitely not slumbering. The giant is awake, it just needs a bit more time for the evidence to manifest in the test arena.

"In 10 years from now, I think we will be a viable Tier One nation," says outgoing US Rugby chairman and NZ Rugby World columnist Kevin Roberts. By that, he means the Eagles will be able to consistently challenge the likes of Scotland, Italy, Argentina and possibly Wales and Ireland.

If it sounds like an overly bold claim, it's probably not. When Roberts took the chair in 2006, he and his executive team effectively had one fundamental decision to make: should they pursue a quick-fix or play the long-game?

The option was there to emulate Major League Soccer - to set up professional teams across the country, fill them with foreign stars most likely past their best and hope this would build an audience and inspire a generation of new players. It didn't work that well for football and rugby, having given it due consideration, couldn't see that it would work that well for them either.

Winning hearts and minds by going down the road of glitz and glamour - wasn't going to happen. "There were plenty of All Blacks telling us they would like to finish their careers in the US and it was tempting," says Roberts. "But ultimately we couldn't see how that was going to end up with more American kids playing the game."



**TASTER** New Zealand Maori played in the US last year and the Americans loved the physicality.

With the decision made to be patient, to plant the seeds rather than buy the tree, it was a case of systematically identifying the boxes to tick: all the areas of development that would need attention to ensure that in time, America would be recognised as a genuine rugby powerhouse.

The first business on Roberts' agenda was governance. Geography and population are America's greatest strength and weakness and 10 years ago, rugby's administration was driven by self-interest. A streamlined structure was approved, with a majority of independent directors - who each brought a specific, relevant expertise - and professional athletes on the board. Former England captain and coach of several English Premiership teams, Nigel Melville, was appointed chief executive and with the engine built, the custodians had to decide where to go.

"We put together a purpose, which effectively spelled out our 10-year plan," says Roberts. "We wanted to inspire Americans to play the game and to play it the American way. We asked ourselves what was the greatest imaginable challenge and with total revenues of about US\$5million, we said getting those up to US\$20 million."

**T**hat notion of the American way has pervaded every initiative of the last eight years. If, and now most likely when, America is ensconced at world rugby's top table, that seemingly small detail could be the smartest decision made.

Plenty of established nations have made the mistake of trying to superimpose ideas and cultures from other countries. The Celts in particular have never been able to lose their obsession with the All Blacks - monkey see, monkey do and it has been to their detriment. Even Australia fell into that trap - hiring Robbie Deans as coach of the Wallabies in the hope he could take the ideas that were so successful with the Crusaders and instil them across Australia.

England's rejuvenation under coach Stuart Lancaster has plenty to do with his conviction that England must play like England. He has given them a sense of identity, purpose and pride they didn't previously have and the USA, while not as advanced, do at least have the same belief and desire to be unashamedly American. Win or lose, they will do it their way which is why, wherever possible, Americans have been installed in key coaching and administrative posts.



**BRAVE CAMPAIGN** The Eagles were good value at the last World Cup running Ireland and Italy close, beating Russia and scoring a memorable try against Australia.

New Zealand's Peter Thorburn was parachuted in to coach the Eagles at the 2007 World Cup; succeeded by Australian Scott Johnson then Ireland's Eddie O'Sullivan. By 2012 the time was right to appoint the home grown Mike Tolkin.

When Roberts was coming to the end of his second term, again, it felt the right time for an American to take the job and it was a relatively straightforward decision to appoint the skilled and experienced Bob Latham to the chair.

That commitment to Americanise has been total. Melville says when they decided to roll out what is known in New Zealand as 'Rippa Rugby', they had to change the name. "When I came into the job, we didn't have what I call a youth game. All our longer term strategical thinking was about building a strong foundation of players who had grown up with rugby.

"We had to plant that seed so that we could have six and seven year-olds running around with a rugby ball in their hands.

"Typically our youth game was being built around 17-19 year-olds at High School, or kids older, who were at College. So we looked around the world at all the various non-contact versions of rugby that were being used to engage really young kids, and while they were all largely similar, we adopted New Zealand's Rippa Rugby.

"But we couldn't call it that as no one in America knew what on earth the world 'rippa' meant. So we called it Rookie Rugby because we felt that mums and dads, who are such a big influence at that

age, would know what it was. When their kids came home and said they wanted to play 'Rookie Rugby' they would know what that meant."

The Hillsborough County region of Tampa was chosen as the first trial location for Rookie Rugby and within six months, 72,000 kids had given it a go. Melville estimates that in excess of two million American children have now been through the programme.

The importance of that is enormous. Typically, in the past, few American teenagers would have said rugby was their main sport. Those who played it seriously tended to have discovered it only after being cut by College gridiron programmes. Physically they were equipped to pass, catch, run and collide, but that didn't make them ready-made to successfully transition. "There are people who think it is enough to be a great athlete," says Melville. "It is not. Players coming across in their late teens or early 20s are going to be behind the curve internationally."

What the US has now is a generation – and more to come – of kids who have seen rugby as their primary sport from as far back as they can remember. Not all of them will stay with it – the American Football programmes at High School and College will snaffle plenty – but that's not terminal. Those programmes are ruthless and narrow and



they discard more athletes than they keep. "Guys can always come back to rugby," says Melville. "That's the difference. If you have had guys who have grown up playing rugby and then try American Football and it doesn't work out, they can pick it up again. That's not the same as trying to learn it from scratch."

And possibly more importantly, this emerging generation will be instrumental in establishing what the American style of rugby actually is. In time, no one will need to ask what exactly is the American way. Young men will gravitate to the Eagles and instantly know – and they will know by doing nothing more than coming through the development system.

**U**S Rugby have clawed their way into good shape. The next goal is to get themselves into great shape and there are several factors in their favour to help with that.

One of the sayings prevalent in the Roberts regime was to create no enemies. The US needed allies and it has them. They have cosied up to the IRB – winning plaudits for their innovative governance structure and steady ambition. Not renowned for being far-sighted, the IRB were able to work out that the US is the biggest sports market in the world and home to many of the biggest corporations.

US Rugby has also cosied up to the International Olympic Committee having



**LAST TANGO** The last time the US played the All Blacks was at the World Cup in 1991 in Gloucester.

## US MARINE CORPS ON RUGBY CRUSADE

The US Marine Corps has a long history of playing rugby, which is why they have taken up an invitation to play in New Zealand.

There isn't a more iconic institution in the whole of America than the US Marine Corps. And the game the Marines most enjoy playing...?

Rugby, which is why they are travelling down-under to take on the might of the navies of New Zealand, Australian and the United Kingdom in the Four Nations Maritime Cup. The tournament will be hosted by the New Zealand Navy at the Navy sports grounds in Devonport from 22 to 30 September. It will be the first time the US Marine Corps have participated.

When the South Africa navy couldn't take up the invitation, the Marine Corps jumped at the chance.

"We're looking forward to hosting all the nations, and

having a shot at taking the trophy off current holders, the Royal Navy," says tournament coordinator commander Pete Young.

"It's also going to be great hosting the Marines for the first time and we're looking forward to showing them a uniquely Kiwi experience."

Marine Corps Rugby has a long-standing tradition dating back to the 1930s. Marines have competed in unit competitions and within Armed Forces competitions at the international level. In recent years, the Corps have transitioned from 15-a-side rugby to 7-a-side rugby as an All-Marine Team and competed annually against the other US services in the Rugby 7s Armed Forces Championships.

The 15-a-side team that will be competing within the Commonwealth Navies Rugby Cup (CNRC) will include members of both the United States Marine Corps and the United States Navy.

"Our players were drawn from Marine Corps bases and air stations world-wide through player application," says Thomas Cureton, Marine Corps fitness, aquatics and sports section head at the Marine and Family Programs Division.

"For the Four Nations Maritime Cup 40 Marines and sailors will be selected from this application process and will compete in a training camp held aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California from August 18 to September 15. The final roster of ruggers will be composed of 25 athletes." A 25-man roster fits within the roster requirements

for the tournament, allows for substitutions due to fatigue on each game-day and affords the team the opportunity to replace injured players on the active roster.

"This is an opportunity for Rugby Union players from across the four maritime nations to develop and display their playing skills in an international arena," Thomas said. "But most importantly it's an opportunity to foster strong national and service partnerships, especially the cohesion between players and the camaraderie that will be gained."

Thomas is also looking forward to the opportunities the All Blacks visit to Chicago will bring for rugby in the US. "The All Blacks visit to the US will likely serve as an important opportunity to engage a new audience to the sport and hopefully increase interest within the States."

★ ★ ★ The tournament kicks off at 13:00 on 22 September, with the New Zealand Navy taking on the Marine Corps at the Ngataranga Sports Grounds in Devonport. Spectators are welcome.



**CLEVER CLOGGS** Overseas professionals such as captain Todd Clever are usually willingly released by their respective clubs.

realised early the potential impact of having Sevens on show in 2016 and beyond. The USA is an Olympic nation – insular in its four big sports - the Olympics is the only stage where their athletes are exposed to global competition.

Americans will watch their team play Sevens at the Olympics – and they will watch in their millions. Rio will provide massive exposure for Sevens specifically, but also rugby generically.

There is a strong and healthy strategic partnership in place with New Zealand Rugby and the Americans have carefully cultivated their relationship with both the Aviva Premiership and Top 14. When they need their overseas professionals released – they don't usually encounter too much resistance or hostility.

With all these ducks in a row, there's every reason to be confident about the US continuing to post healthy increases in playing numbers and commercial returns.

But there are two things that need to happen for them to be fully on the path

to Tier One status. The first is the establishment of a domestic, professional competition.

It doesn't need to be top flight necessarily; it just needs to provide those involved with regular, meaningful competition; exposure to good coaching and professional cultures and enough income that they can devote the required time to their strength and conditioning.

If it can build and consolidate a broadcast audience and media profile all the better – but it's main purpose may end up being to serve as a feeder competition to established leagues around the world.

Which highlights the need for the second step change to be made. "At the moment we play six tests a year," says Latham. "The All Blacks play 14. England played a similar number last year I think. If you look at next year – when there will be a World Cup – we won't play any tests in June and that is a problem – we will be trying to compete with Tier One nations

at the World Cup and yet we only play a Tier One nation once a year and not in World Cup years."

Fixing that is a priority and Latham will tirelessly lobby the IRB to put this issue somewhere near the top of its agenda in 2016. The problem from a US perspective sits on three fronts: there is the lack of tests per se; there is the lack of tests against Tier One opposition and there is the specific problem of World Cup years.

The first problem is arguably the most pressing. The Eagles, like every other Tier Two nation, are hampered by their lack of time together. The USA need to be involved in an annual competition – a version of the Rugby Championship or Six Nations. Geography, time zones and player release windows from major professional competitions make it hard to know when this competition should be played and who should be involved – but regardless, a solution has to be found.

To an extent, if the first problem is fixed, the third problem of World Cup

years will also be fixed. The lack of Tier One exposure, to a lesser extent, will also be helped by the creation of an annual Tier Two tournament.

With more games, the Eagles can expect to become more credible opposition and therefore a more attractive draw card for the likes of Scotland, Ireland, Italy and Wales.

Then, of course, there is the prospect, in the wake of the All Blacks' visit this November, of other top nations such as South Africa, England and Australia realising there are commercial returns to be had from playing in the US.

If the US had 10-12 tests a year and two, three or four of those were against Tier One opposition...how long before they are an entirely different force in the world game?

**I**t is scarcely believable even to those who have poured their soul into US Rugby since 2007 that in November this year, the Eagles will play the All Blacks at a sold out, iconic NFL stadium. This will be rugby's greatest day in America: an incredible opportunity to build a new audience and increase the player base.

Everyone connected with the game in the States knows the scale of the opportunity. Inch by inch they have won new followers in the last 10 years. The test against the All Blacks is a chance to take a giant stride. It will be televised live on a mainstream channel and for a week

leading into the game, Chicago will be a rugby rather than a gridiron city.

Americans will take note – largely because the All Blacks are irresistible.

"They are great ambassadors of the sport," says Latham. "The test will be a

**I** think a lot of people will see that we are credible enough to host the world's best team and that the game will reveal that the people who play this game have fantastic values.' **Bob Latham**

great opportunity for anyone [American] who has ever picked up a ball, or who has rugby in their soul, to celebrate and enjoy. I think a lot of people will see that we are credible enough to host the world's best team and that the game will reveal that the people who play this game have fantastic values."

Realism and perspective are going to be important. The Eagles, with the best will in the world, won't get close, but what November 1 will do is showcase America's ability to host a superb event: they will add a much-needed point of difference to the global game. And what it will also hopefully do, is get the All Blacks thinking about coming back. "We need to either offer them competition on the field, or commercial returns," says Latham about what it will take to get New Zealand to return to the US.

There's a fair chance that within 10 years, America will be able to do both. **■**



Come support your Royal New Zealand Navy as it takes on the might of the US Marine Corps, the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy in the Four Nations Maritime Cup.

All games will be played at Ngataringa Domain, Jim Titchner Parade, Devonport.

**Free Admission.**

**Monday 22 September**

1pm: Royal New Zealand Navy vs US Marine Corps  
3pm: Royal Navy vs Royal Australian Navy

**Friday 26 September**

1pm: US Marine Corps vs Royal Australian Navy  
3pm: Royal New Zealand Navy vs Royal Navy

**Tuesday 30 September**

1pm: US Marine Corps vs Royal Navy  
3pm: Royal New Zealand Navy vs Royal Australian Navy

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