

The Geography of the Rugby World Cups and Some Tourism Issues

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Abstract

According to legend, a kind of sport called rugby was born in the English town of Rugby on April 7, 1823, when William Webb Ellis, a local student and football player, took a ball in his hands and put it down in the goal of the opposing team. This legend is officially denied today, but it is important because the cup of the Rugby World Championship is named the “William Webb Ellis Cup.” Rugby was formed and spread during the 19th and 20th centuries, and both processes continue. Its spreading beyond the British Commonwealth became more or less difficult because of the conservatism of the Brits. For example, the British formed the “IRFB” (International Rugby Football Board) in 1886, which became the “IRB” (International Rugby Board) in 1997. However, as they did not admit France to this organisation, this state formed a separate union called “FIRA” (Fédération Internationale de Rugby Amateur) in 1934, which is “Rugby Europe” today. The first Rugby World Cup was held only in 1987 for various reasons. Nine tournaments were organised between 1987 and 2019, and the 10th one will open this year, in September–October 2023, on the 200th anniversary of the establishment of rugby. The arrangement of the world and regional championships often encounters problems, despite some written and unwritten laws. Tourism-related financial issues are one of the most significant troublemakers. They create obstacles for organising committees and hinder the spread of rugby’s popularity around the world. At the same time, they cause problems with the promotion of Georgia’s national team to a higher regional level, which is one of the most important goals for Georgian rugby players and supporters. The main sources of this article comprise some English and French magazines related to various world tournaments, interviews with rugby specialists, and the plentiful information accumulated during many years of my own connection with the world of rugby.

Keywords: tournament, rugby, Rugby World Cup, National Team

Introduction

Rugby is spread on all six settled continents, and there is at least one state on all of them, the national team of which is constantly included or even does not leave the top ten of the world rugby rating. England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, and Italy are such countries in Europe. It is worth noting that, unlike football, Northern Ireland has no national team in rugby. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have one common national team. Among European countries, only England won the William Webb Ellis Cup once. Georgia’s national team stands more or less near these six countries. At the end of 2022, our players managed to defeat the national team of Italy for the first time, and then they succeeded in winning the match against Wales as well. The national teams of Romania, Russia, Spain, and Portugal are more or less equal to those of Georgia. Other states in Europe are not as good at rugby.

Only Japan has a successful national team in Asia. However, there are no other teams on this large continent that could compete with the Japanese rugby players.

The Republic of South Africa (South Africa) is a triple world champion and has the best national team in Africa. Namibia and Zimbabwe, the states of the South African Region, have weaker but still successful national teams. Namibia took part in all world cups beginning in 1999, whereas Zimbabwe was admitted to the first two tournaments instead of South Africa.

Argentina has the most powerful national team on both American continents. Canada, the USA, and Uruguay have weaker teams, but they almost always participate in the Rugby World Cups.

Australia and the Pacific Region comprise the most successful national teams. Australia has been the world champion twice, and New Zealand three times. Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga have strong national teams as well.

Choosing the place for organising a championship has often been problematic for “IRB” leaders. It is established that one tournament is held in the southern hemisphere, and the next is held in the northern hemisphere. However, the naming of the concrete country becomes difficult for various reasons. First, rugby management tries to arrange the tournament in such “classical” rugby states as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK, and France. Only in 2019, for the first time, was the championship

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organised beyond these countries in Japan. On the other hand, there was no attempt to arrange this tournament in Argentina, which has one of the most powerful teams in the world and the best in the Western hemisphere.

Although Argentina always had a strong national team, which often occupied one of the top five positions in the world rating, for a long time, it was formed of amateurs, not professionals. This became the main reason why the championship was not organised in this state. Here, we should also name Italy, which is a member of Europe’s “Six Nations” championship as well as a constant participant in the World Cups. This state has all the means to host this tournament alone or at least with France; however, there was no mention of arranging the championship in Italy either.

Organising support and tourism are other important issues. The first tournament was organised in Australia and New Zealand simultaneously, and both teams played only in their own stadiums. A more complex situation occurred at the second tournament in 1991. England was the official host of this championship, but Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and France also played in their own stadiums.

The financial side of sports tourism has a significant influence on choosing a place. To date, all national teams and their supporters have had to leave the states where the championships were held and return home if they did not get into the play-off. However, the 2023 World Cup is arranged in France, and according to the local officials, all the players and their supporters will be allowed to stay in the country until the end of the tournament. If such tourist politics become usual, it will encourage further development of tourism and may motivate other countries to pay due attention to rugby and make them fight for the right to host this important tournament alone or with other states.

1987 Rugby World Cup

The “IRFB” decided to organise the world championship in 1985 on the initiative of Australia and New Zealand. All the members of this organisation supported this idea except the UK’s countries and Ireland, so these opponents had to agree. The “IRFB” leaders decided to organise the tournament in the states that offered this idea. Sixteen countries took part in the games, which were arranged in the cities and towns of Australia (2) and New Zealand (7). Although South Africa had one of the most successful national teams, it was cut off from this championship because of "apartheid" politics in this state. Zimbabwe had the right to take part on behalf of the African continent instead of South Africa. The USSR, which was one of 16 in the Rugby World Ranking, refused to take part, so the right to participate was granted to Tonga.

Table 1. 1987 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage²

Group	Country
Group A	Australia, England, the USA, Japan
Group B	Wales, Ireland, Canada, Tonga
Group C	New Zealand, Fiji, Italy, Argentina
Group D	France, Scotland, Romania, Zimbabwe

Seven European countries took part in the first championship: England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, Italy, and Romania; one from Asia and one from Africa—Japan and Zimbabwe, respectively; three states were from both the Americas: Argentina, Canada, and the USA; and four from Australia and the Pacific: Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Tonga. Many people hoped that the hosts would meet in the final, though France managed to defeat Australia in one semifinal; New Zealand left no chances for Wales in the other semifinal. New Zealand defeated France too and won the first “William Webb Ellis Cup.” As for third place, Wales could defeat Australia in the difficult match. They won only by one point.

² These insertions show which place was occupied by various teams during group stages in different championships

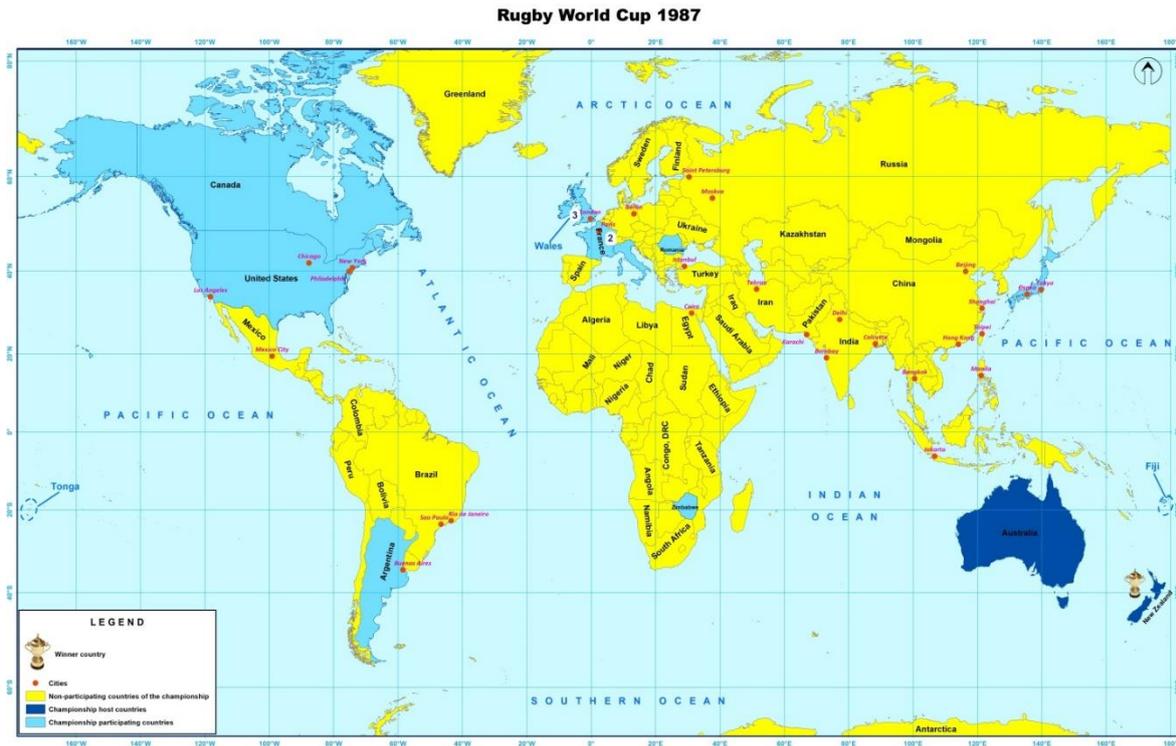


Figure 1. Hosts, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 1987

1991 Rugby World Cup

Soon after the end of the first championship, it was decided that the second tournament would be arranged in Europe. The well-known “Six Nations Championship” was the “Five Nations” one at that time, and Italy was not its participant yet. Therefore, five countries became hosts: England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and France.

The same seven European states, one country from Asia and one from Africa, took part in the second tournament. South Africa was dropped again. The same three states were from both Americas; as for the Pacific Region, Australia, New Zealand and Fiji played again, but Samoa replaced Tonga this time. Only countries of the “British Commonwealth” managed to occupy the first four positions in the second championship. England defeated Scotland in one semifinal and Australia beat New Zealand in the other. Australia defeated England with a good score in the final and won its first cup. New Zealand occupied third place.

Table 2. 1991 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	New Zealand, England, Italy, the USA
Group B	Scotland, Ireland, Japan, Zimbabwe
Group C	Australia, Samoa, Wales, Argentina
Group D	France, Canada, Romania, Fiji

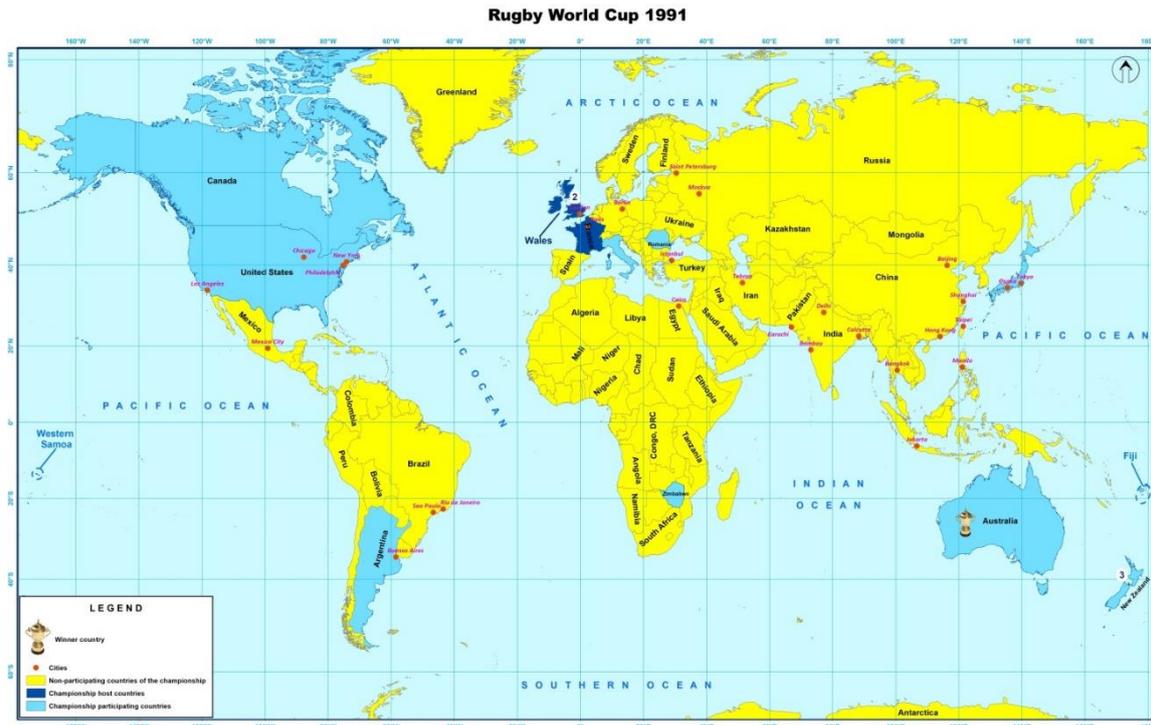


Figure 2. Hosts, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 1991

1995 Rugby World Cup

The place for the third championship should have been chosen in the southern hemisphere, so as South Africa had condemned the “Apartheid” politics this state was chosen. Sixteen countries had to take part in the tournament again, and 9 places were already occupied – 8 teams that played the quarter-finals in the former tournament plus the host. The list is as follows: England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Samoa and South Africa. Forty-five national teams, including Georgia (for the first time), were competing for the remaining 7 places. It is interesting that Russia’s national team was able to defeat Georgia’s national team for the first and hopefully the last time.

There were no alterations in the list of the European and Asian teams: England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, Italy, Romania and Japan. Important changes happened in Africa: the Ivory Coast took part in the tournament together with the host South Africa. Argentina and Canada represented the western hemisphere, the USA could not obtain the right to participate this time, and neither could Fiji from the Pacific. Only Samoa and Tonga played with Australia and New Zealand from this region. South Africa proved that its exclusion from the former championships was a sport absurd. In the semifinals, the host defeated France and New Zealand – England. For “the southern final”, South Africa won and got its first cup. France defeated England and took third place.

Table 3. 1995 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	South Africa, Australia, Canada, Romania
Group B	England, Samoa, Italy, Argentina
Group C	New Zealand, Ireland, Wales, Japan
Group D	France, Scotland, Tonga, Ivory Coast



Figure 3. The Host, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 1995

1999 Rugby World Cup

Important changes happened by the year 1999. Four places were added to the list of tournament participants. Wales was the official host of this championship, although games were also arranged in England, Scotland, Ireland and France. It is interesting that Georgia was trying to enter the championship again, and our team even defeated Tonga in Tbilisi, but they could not gather enough points in two games (at home and away).

Eight European countries took part in this championship. Spain was the eighth country with the former seven countries. Only Japan was from Asia; South Africa and Namibia were from Africa. Four states took part from the western hemisphere: Canada, the USA, Argentina and Uruguay. Five states were from the Pacific: Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. The 1999 championship, which was arranged in Europe, became a disaster for Europeans. Only France could save Europeans’ dignity more or less. Australia defeated South Africa in one semifinal and France beat New Zealand in the other. However, the Europeans lost in the final and Australia won the “William Webb Ellis Cup” for the second time. South Africa took third place.

Table 4. 1999 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	South Africa, Scotland, Uruguay, Spain
Group B	New Zealand, England, Tonga, Italy
Group C	France, Fiji, Canada, Namibia
Group D	Australia, Ireland, Romania, the USA

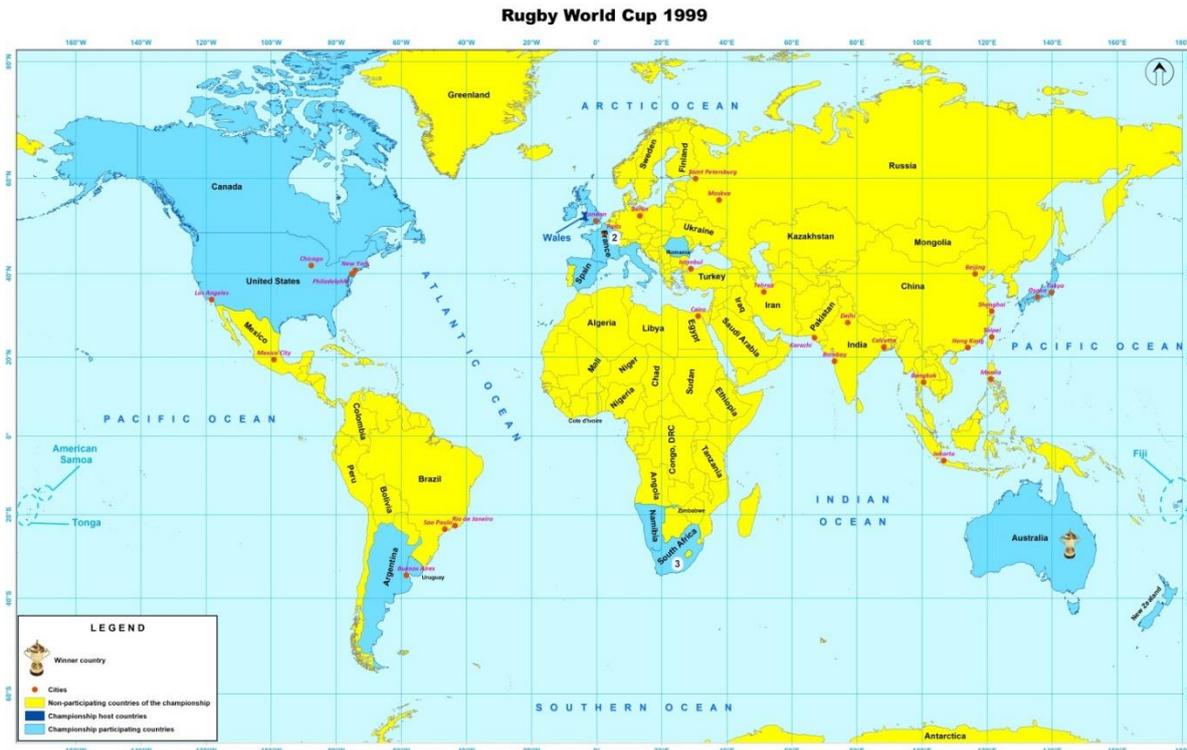


Figure 4. The Host, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 1999

2003 Rugby World Cup

The fifth Rugby World Cup was arranged in Australia, and only one change was made in the list of participants. Georgia turned in the championship for the first time instead of Spain. It is important that as Georgia turned, it has not skipped even a single tournament yet.

Georgia went to Group C with England, South Africa, Samoa and Uruguay. In spite of the great achievement and participation in the championship, our team could not show itself during the tournament and was heavily defeated by England, South Africa and Samoa. Uruguay defeated our players too, so Georgia left the championship without a point. Australia defeated New Zealand in one semifinal, England – France in the other. New Zealand heavily defeated France in the battle for the third place. As to the final, its fate was decided by one dropkick goal during the additional time, so England defeated Australia with the score 20:17. As a result, the William Webb Ellis Cup was won by his countrymen.

Table 5. 2003 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	Australia, Ireland, Argentina, Romania, Namibia
Group B	France, Scotland, Fiji, the USA, Japan
Group C	England, South Africa, Samoa, Uruguay, Georgia
Group D	New Zealand, Wales, Italy, Canada, Tonga



Figure 5. The Host, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 2003

2007 Rugby World Cup

The sixth world cup was held in France. It hosted 9 European (including its own), 1 Asian, 2 African, 3 American and 5 Pacific teams. Only one change occurred in the list of participant states. The European country Portugal took part in the championship instead of South American Uruguay.

Georgia was in Group D with Argentina, France, Ireland and Namibia. Our national team improved its previous results and defeated Namibia with a score of 30:0. It should be noted that it was the best result the Georgians could achieve because no other teams in our group were easy opponents to us. However, Irish sportsmen and fans still had reason to feel nervous, as they won only 4 points (14:10), and the Georgians received 5 points after these two matches. The game against Argentina turned out to be the most difficult, and our players could not get even one try, unlike the games against Ireland and France.

England defeated France in one semifinal and South Africa in Argentina in the other. South Americans astonished the whole Rugby world in the game for the third place as their team, which was considered “amateurs” by everyone, defeated the host, France (34:10). This victory brought a serious acclaim to the Argentinians. South Africa defeated England in the final and received “the William Web-Ellis Cup” a second time.

Table 6. 2007 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	South Africa, England, Tonga, Samoa, the USA
Group B	Australia, Fiji, Wales, Japan, Canada
Group C	New Zealand, Scotland, Italy, Romania, Portugal
Group D	Argentina, France, Ireland, Georgia, Namibia



Figure 6. The Host, Participants and Winners of the 2007 Rugby World Cup

2011 Rugby World Cup

The seventh world cup was arranged on 10 stadiums of New Zealand, and only one change was made in the list of the participants. Russia took part in the championship instead of Portugal. Georgia joined Group B with England, Argentina, Scotland and Romania. Our sportsmen were defeated by stronger opponents (41:10, 25:7 and 15:6, respectively); they won the match against Romanians (25:9) but could not improve or repeat the result of the previous championship. Georgians received only 4 points. According to the unconfirmed source, a new rule was enacted beginning from the seventh world championship: the teams holding third place in each group, as well as those participating in the play-off, automatically become the participants of the next world championship. Pursuant to the aforementioned rule, future selections include teams that go to quarter-finals. As a result, 12 out of 20 places in the world cup tournaments are occupied in advance.

At the end of this World Cup, 2 out of 4 matches ended with the unusual scores for Rugby. France defeated Wales 9:8 in one semifinal, and New Zealand – Australia in the other. Australia ranked third, and New Zealand defeated France 8:7 in the final place and obtained the world cup for the second time.

Table 7. 2011 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	New Zealand, France, Tonga, Canada, Japan
Group B	England, Argentina, Scotland, Georgia, Romania
Group C	Ireland, Australia, Italy, the USA, Russia
Group D	South Africa, Wales, Samoa, Fiji, Namibia



Figure 7. The Host, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 2011

The Europeans experienced an absolute collapse in this world cup tournament, and even France could not save, as they had done before in 1999. Four European teams moved to the quarter-finals: England, Scotland, Ireland and France. However, the semifinals became absolutely southern. New Zealand defeated South Africa 20:18 in one of them, Australia beat Argentina 29:15 in the other one. The first three places were distributed among the “Southern Grands.” South Africa defeated Argentina in the battle for the third place; New Zealand surpassed Australia in the final place. As a result, New Zealand became the champion for the third time.

2015 Rugby World Cup

The eighth Rugby World Cup was officially held in England, actually in England and Wales. The traditional participants took part in this championship again. The following countries took part in the tournament: 8 European (England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France, Italy, Georgia, Romania), 1 Asian (Japan), 2 African (South Africa, Namibia), 4 American (Argentina, Uruguay, the USA, Canada) and 5 Pacific (Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga.) Georgia played in Group C with New Zealand, Argentina, Tonga and Namibia, which brought double success to our sportsmen. First, they gained two victories, defeating Tonga and Namibia 17:10, 17:16 and occupying third place in the group. This gave our team a direct pass to the next world championship. In addition, our sportsmen could stand face to face “the Hakka” – the salute and war dance of New Zealanders, which is a great honour for all rugby lovers. In spite of the fact that Argentina and New Zealand heavily defeated Georgia, our sportsmen got one try against “the All Black” (the nickname of the New Zealand National Team), which became another symbolic success for our team.

Table 8. 2015 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	Australia, England, Wales, Fiji, Uruguay
Group B	South Africa, Scotland, Japan, Samoa, the USA

Group C	New Zealand, Argentina, Georgia, Tonga, Namibia
Group D	Ireland, France, Italy, Romania, Canada



Figure 8. The Host, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 2015

2019 Rugby World Cup

Only one change occurred in the list of participants of the ninth World Cup. Russia replaced Romania. In addition, the tournament was organised in Asia and Japan for the first time. Georgia was in Group D with Australia, Wales, Fiji and Uruguay. It was quite a difficult group, and the maximum possible result should have been the repetition of the previous achievement. The Georgians defeated Uruguay with a large score and gained 5 points from one match. However, they could overcome neither Wales nor Fiji, not to mention Australia. It must be noted that the game against Australia was a step forward that enriched our experience of playing against the “Southern Grands.” All semifinals and finals of the ninth championship became “intercontinental”. England defeated New Zealand in one semifinal and South Africa surpassed Wales in the other. The third place was occupied by New Zealand, whereas South Africa left no chances to England in the final and gained “the William Web-Ellis Cup” for the third time.

Table 9. 2019 Rugby World Cup – Group Stage

Group	Country
Group A	Japan, Ireland, Scotland, Samoa, Russia
Group B	New Zealand, South Africa, Italy, Namibia, Canada
Group C	England, France, Argentina, Tonga, the USA
Group D	Wales, Australia, Fiji, Georgia, Uruguay



Figure 9. The Host, Participants and Winners of the Rugby World Cup 2019

Conclusion

The geography of the Rugby World Cups shows that this sport is quite conservative. There is an admitted idea that divides the world national teams into the 1st and 2nd levels, but in my opinion, such dividing does not show their actual possibilities. I would like to offer you another idea: The highest level comprises the national teams that obtained the World Cup at least once: New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, and England, as well as the teams that occupied the second or third places at least once: Argentina, France, and maybe Wales. The high-level group comprises the national teams that stably participate in the play-off: Scotland, Ireland, Japan, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and perhaps Canada. It is interesting that this group does not include Italy, the 1st level team, because despite this level, Italy's national team never played in a play-off. The next group is the medium level, which includes the teams that permanently obtain the right to take part in the World Cup tournaments: Italy, Romania, Georgia, Namibia, the USA, and Uruguay.

The Rugby World Championships are characterised by a number of peculiarities. For example, Zimbabwe, which took part in the first and second championships, never played again. The same may be said about Ivory Coast, which participated only in 1995. Some European teams lack stability: Spain, Portugal, and Russia. In 2023, the national team of Chile, South America, will play in the tenth World Cup tournament for the first time.

The geography of the places where the championship is held and, accordingly, the inflow of tourists and finances are also conservative. Time and the next World Cup tournaments will show if the promise made by France to let all the tourists stay in the country until the end of the championship brings positive results. It would also be interesting to learn whether different states will express more interest in obtaining the right to host the World Cup or whether the 2019 tournament held in Japan was just an exception.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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