

WORLD DEAF RUGBY OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This *World Deaf Rugby Overview* has been compiled to introduce the organisation, outline why it was established, explain what it is seeking to achieve and assist in enhancing wider understanding of “Deaf rugby” and why/how it differs from mainstream rugby.

Consistent with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, World Deaf Rugby seeks to achieve equality through participation and the removal of discrimination against Deaf and Hard of Hearing people within rugby.

- **Vision:** A sport for all, true to its values and spirit
- **Mission:** Growing the global rugby family
- **Values:** Inherent in everything we do are our values of integrity, respect, solidarity, passion and discipline.

With more than twenty *National Deaf Rugby Union* members across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania and an aim of developing, growing and raising the profile of Deaf rugby around the globe, *World Deaf Rugby* is the peak representative body for international Deaf rugby. We cooperatively engage with *World Rugby* and encourage closer alignment, engagement and cooperation between *National Deaf Rugby Unions* and their Home Unions.

WDR ESTABLISHMENT & PURPOSE

World Deaf Rugby came into being under the “*World Deaf Rugby*” name in 2016. Its predecessor was the International Deaf Rugby Organisation (*IDRO*) which had been in operation since 1998.

WDR (and its predecessor IDRO) was established with the aim of developing, growing and extending Deaf rugby internationally and within Member countries and raising the profile and recognition of Deaf rugby across the world. Its core purpose is to coordinate, promote, foster and support all levels of international rugby for Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons by

- Promoting the participation of Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons in rugby and all activities associated with rugby including *World Deaf Rugby* events and Regional Deaf Rugby events
- Developing/organising a program and schedule of WDR Championships and Tournaments, selecting and approving the host country for each event and assisting hosting countries in the staging of such events
- Supporting international and regional Deaf rugby competitions and matches, and providing guidance on the procedures and protocols to be adopted in such competitions and matches
- Promoting, developing and supporting the creation of national Deaf Rugby Unions in all countries who have Rugby Unions recognised by and members of World Rugby
- Acting as the coordinating body for national Deaf Rugby Unions and assisting in matters under dispute between any national Deaf Rugby Unions

- Promoting, encouraging and facilitating closer alignment, engagement and cooperation between national Deaf Rugby Unions and their Home Unions through recognition and support
- Creating and fostering mutually beneficial relationships with World Rugby, ICSD and other relevant international sporting bodies
- Liaising, engaging and cooperating with World Rugby on behalf of all WDR members and, if requested by any Member, with that Member's Home Union
- Liaising, engaging and cooperating with any relevant Government or other organization on behalf of Deaf and Hard of Hearing rugby persons
- Co-ordinating recommendations for changes or amendments of the Laws of Rugby Union to adapt the game for Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons, and submitting the same to World Rugby for consideration and adoption. Save to the extent they are incompatible with these objects, WDR will follow, support and adhere to the objectives and regulations of World Rugby.

WDR MEMBERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

All countries having or seeking to establish a national Deaf Rugby Union/Association can apply to become a *WDR* Member and be represented on the *WDR* General Committee, with each Member permitted to nominate two delegates to the Committee but having a single vote. The General Committee is responsible for making all decisions.

There are currently twenty-four *WDR* Member countries across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania including several developing Deaf rugby nations, with a number of additional countries in the process of becoming Members.

A volunteer, Member-nominated *WDR* Executive Committee comprising a Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer, Secretary and three Project Officers has responsibility for all executive, financial and administrative functions.

WHY DEAF RUGBY

Though some Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals in some countries participate in local, mainstream rugby clubs, this is often not conducive to those having a more severe or profound hearing loss given inherent on-field and off-field communication difficulties and other cultural challenges.

This is why Deaf sports and "*Deaf Rugby*" exist as separate sporting streams that fully align with mainstream sport laws and regulations but incorporate operational modifications that enable inclusion and facilitate participation by those with significant hearing loss. Deaf sport provides a familiar, inclusive and equitably-accessible space for such individuals.

Whilst the sporting skills of Deaf people are not all that different to those of hearing people, the Deaf community is a separate cultural/linguistic group with its own culture and visual languages - *sign languages that are unique to each country.*

Separate “Deaf” sports events exist, not because of any significant differences in abilities, but because Deaf people want a sporting environment in which they feel comfortable, “belong” and can fully and equitably participate both on and off the field with minimal communication barriers.

WDR is cognisant of the importance of “Deaf Rugby” retaining its identity and differentiation from mainstream rugby - *a meaningful hearing loss eligibility threshold is fundamental to that*. It is also core to the basic rationale for having separate Deaf sporting events, with such events staged consistent with Deaf cultural norms including being based on the visual language and logistic needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people.

RELATIONSHIP WITH MAINSTREAM RUGBY

It is important that national Deaf rugby organisations engage cooperatively with their mainstream national Rugby Unions, that there is mutual understanding of each other’s perspectives and imperatives, and that Deaf rugby tests, championships and tournaments fully comply with all mainstream rugby requirements, albeit being tailored to the particular visual requirements of Deaf participants - *e.g. use of flags, referee orientation, no use of voice on-field, additional referees and availability of interpreters to facilitate access to Officials*.

WDR is keen to work closely and cooperatively with World Rugby on progressing Deaf rugby within individual countries and internationally, and establishing productive relationships at both the World Rugby level and between WDR Members and their national Rugby Unions.

WDR CHAMPIONSHIPS & TOURNAMENTS

WDR Deaf rugby championships and tournaments are seen as core to building Deaf rugby, expanding and diversifying participation and encouraging growth in the game across all countries. They provide an important vehicle for substantially raising the profile of Deaf rugby and giving Deaf and Hard of Hearing players an opportunity to play Deaf rugby on the world stage, thereby developing/enhancing their technical skills and competitiveness.

Having said this, it is clear that Deaf rugby teams and individuals face significant financial and logistic challenges in being able to stage/host championships and tournaments or participate in such events. These include:

- Difficulties in attracting significant sponsorship consequent of the current relatively small footprint of Deaf rugby, the infancy of multi-country Deaf rugby tournaments (*only one held since 2002 - a Sevens event in Australia in 2018*), and the lack of a track-record or “brand”/reputation
- Travel and accommodation costs, with developing countries often confronting additional costs and constraints in obtaining visas.
- Access to Government and other funding to assist with travel, accommodation and staging/hosting costs
- Availability of qualified coaching/development resources
- Access to suitable and affordable training and tournament venues

- Access to skilled event management/administration resources and the qualified referees and officials required to stage rugby tournaments that are compliant with national Rugby Union regulations

THE WAY FORWARD

The *WDR Executive* continues to discuss and explore ways of attempting to mitigate some of these barriers, and believes that closer alignment, ongoing regular communication, cooperative engagement and productive working relationships between Deaf Rugby and mainstream Rugby Unions is a necessary first step, both at the WR/WDR level and nationally in individual countries.

In addition, the importance of training for Deaf people in sports management and administration across all aspects of the game as well as their inclusion in the planning, development and organisation of future “*integrated*” mainstream/Deaf events cannot be overestimated.

The 2019 *Oceania Sevens* in Fiji showed the benefits of that, providing a wonderful “*case study*” example of effective Deaf rugby and mainstream rugby cooperation in successfully incorporating a “*Deaf*” rugby tournament into a mainstream event whilst ensuring the Deaf rugby competition was staged in accordance with the particular requirements of a Deaf sporting event. This clearly demonstrated what cooperative engagement between Deaf and mainstream sporting bodies (*in that case, between Fiji Sport Commission, Fiji Rugby Union, Oceania Sevens organisers and Fiji Deaf Rugby Union*) can achieve.

The economies of scope and scale consequent of incorporating Deaf tournaments into mainstream events as was done at the 2019 *Oceania Sevens* go a long way towards reducing the logistic and financial barriers faced in **staging/hosting** a Deaf event, particularly with respect to access to tournament and training venues, skilled event management/administration resources and the qualified referees and officials required to stage rugby tournaments that are compliant with national Rugby Union regulations.

Additional approaches being progressed to facilitate **participation** by Deaf teams and individuals in international tournaments include:

- A *WDR* focus on ***Sevens Championships & Tournaments*** given the smaller squad sizes, shorter timeframes, lower travel/accommodation costs and simplified logistics, all of which are considered to significantly enhance event viability and participation
- ***Regional Sevens Tournaments*** such as *African Deaf Rugby, Oceania Rugby Deaf Sevens* and *Pacific Rim Deaf Rugby Sevens* where the countries wishing to compete are in closer geographic proximity thereby reducing travel complexity/costs as well as often simplifying visa and other logistics

It is anticipated that by successfully staging a series of *WDR Sevens* events and supporting various *Regional Sevens* events over the coming years, *WDR* will establish a profile, reputation, track record and “*brand*” that will make it more attractive to Government and private sector funding sources as well as major event sponsors.

WORLD DEAF RUGBY MEMBER COUNTRIES

AFRICA

Ghana
Ivory Coast*
Kenya
Togo*
Uganda
South Africa

AMERICAS

Argentina
Canada*
USA*

ASIA

Hong Kong
Japan
Mongolia

EUROPE

England
France*
Ireland*
Italy
Portugal*
Scotland*
Wales

OCEANIA

Australia
Fiji
New Zealand
Papua New Guinea
Samoa*
Tonga*

**at various stages of development*