



Baltimore, All Blacks & Springboks show rugby can dream big in America.

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By Kevin Rademeyer, Sports Journalist.

Photo Credit: Baltimore Ravens.

The fireworks went up, the haka rolled around M&T Bank Stadium and 68,173 people watched South Africa and New Zealand produce the sort of spectacle World Rugby has been waiting to see in America.

Then the Springboks went and won 43 28.

For South Africa, it was the perfect ending to Rugby's Greatest Rivalry, securing a 3 1 series victory over the All Blacks. For World Rugby, the significance stretched well beyond the final whistle.

This was a rehearsal for 2031.

The United States will host the men's Rugby World Cup in five years' time, followed by the women's tournament in 2033. Baltimore was never intended to be the finished product. It was a test of whether rugby's biggest occasion can travel to a country where the sport remains a long way behind American football, baseball and basketball.

On Saturday, the answer looked encouraging.

The attendance was a record for a rugby match in the United States. Tickets were bought across all 50 states and more than 30 countries, while only about 10 per cent of the crowd came from the Baltimore area. South Africans had travelled in significant numbers, turning the NFL home of the Baltimore Ravens into something that felt unmistakably like a Springbok stadium.

That matters.

World Rugby executives have spent two years working with more than 25 potential host cities, examining stadiums, transport, commercial arrangements, weather, team movement and the awkward reality of fitting a 15 a side rugby tournament into a country whose sporting calendar is already dominated by the NFL and college football.

Alan Gilpin, World Rugby's chief executive, has described the process as one of constant learning. "We've been in a long process with venues and cities," he said before the match. "We've still got 25 plus cities involved in that process, which is fantastic in terms of engagement and enthusiasm."

The organisation has also been watching what happened during the 2026 FIFA World Cup, learning from both its successes and its mistakes.

World Rugby chairman Brett Robinson said his team spent the summer "observing, learning, understanding" as football took over the United States.

The lesson was simple enough: when the sport becomes the centre of the event, people rally. When the sport got to be front and centre, it became the thing," Robinson said.

Baltimore offered a glimpse of what that could mean for rugby.

The Springboks arrived as world champions and one of the most recognisable teams in international rugby. The All Blacks brought the haka, their own mythology and a global following. The match had a narrative before a ball was kicked, and the 3 -1 series added genuine sporting consequence.

That is the formula World Rugby needs.

South Africa's commercial value is particularly significant. The union has already made clear that it wants the Springboks to become America's second favourite rugby team by 2031. Mark Alexander, president of South African Rugby, knows that cannot happen by simply playing in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

The Baltimore crowd suggested there is an audience to be won.

World Rugby also believes rugby supporters can be valuable visitors, particularly because so many leading rugby nations have substantial communities in the United States. Ireland, Argentina, Italy, New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Island nations all have natural pockets of support.

The organisation estimates that the 2023 World Cup generated 1.33 billion viewing hours across its programming. The ambition now is to turn that global following into something tangible on American soil.

That doesn't mean pretending the job is finished.

Major League Rugby has contracted dramatically, from 13 teams four years ago to five. The sport's biggest stars don't yet have the profile of American sporting icons. And the 2031 World Cup will compete for attention with the NFL, college football, baseball playoffs and Major League Soccer.

There were reminders of the work still required in Baltimore, too. A communications failure involving the referee caused a stoppage of more than 10 minutes, despite World Rugby investing heavily in the match presentation.

But the crowd stayed. They watched South Africa score 43 points. They watched the All Blacks fight back. They saw the Springboks finish the series with authority.

And they left having experienced rugby at its most compelling. That is why the match mattered.

World Rugby isn't simply trying to sell tickets in America. It is trying to establish a sporting habit before 2031 arrives.

Gilpin believes marquee matches can help build that habit, including the possibility of taking a Six Nations fixture to the United States. "You've got two fantastic fanbases in the US of Irish and Italian fans," he said, using Boston or New York as potential examples. "If you could take a Six Nations game to the right place, you can definitely drive the economics."

It is a bold idea and one that will inevitably provoke resistance from traditional supporters in Europe. But Baltimore demonstrated the attraction of putting elite rugby in front of audiences who may not yet consider themselves rugby people.

South Africa's victory gave the occasion sporting weight. The crowd gave it atmosphere. And the American setting gave World Rugby something perhaps more valuable than either: evidence.

Evidence that the world's greatest rugby rivalry can cross an ocean and still fill a major stadium. Evidence that travelling supporters will follow.

Evidence that a World Cup in America doesn't have to be an act of faith.

It can be an opportunity.

The 2031 tournament will demand compromises. Stadiums will have to accommodate wider rugby pitches, natural grass and the logistical demands of a sport unfamiliar to many of their regular customers. World Rugby will have to work with cities rather than simply impose on them.

Robinson understands that. "We do need to be flexible because the venues are different around the country and we need to work with the host city and venue owners," he said. "We're conscious of the partnership and the win win of how we need to interact."

Baltimore was one step in that partnership.

For the Springboks, it was a victory and a statement. For the All Blacks, a bruising end to a series they wanted to win. For American rugby, a glimpse of what might be possible.

And for World Rugby, perhaps the most important result wasn't on the scoreboard.

It was the sight of 68,173 people turning up to watch the best two teams in the world play rugby. Five years before the World Cup, that is a reason to believe.

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