

# Significant changes made to Hong Kong Rugby Union Domestic League structure

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The Hong Kong Rugby Union has announced its schedule for the upcoming HKRU Domestic League. While similar on the surface to last season's competition, the 2015/16 season ushers in some profound and long-term changes in the structure of local rugby.

Primary amongst these changes is the decision made jointly by the HKRU and its member clubs to ring-fence the Men's Premiership around the six existing Premiership clubs at both Premiership and Premiership A levels for the coming three seasons.

Societe Generale Valley, Leighton Asia HKCC, Natixis Hong Kong Football Club, Bloomberg Hong Kong Scottish, Abacus Kowloon and Borrelli Walsh USRC Tigers retain their Premiership spots for the coming season and will maintain this status for three years.

Dai Rees, General Manager, Rugby Performance at the HKRU, commented on the changes saying, "The objective is to ensure a stable competition that is structured around two performance leagues, Premiership and Premiership A, and supported by a development and community league structure that will ultimately contribute to the national team and high performance rugby in Hong Kong.

"These changes are a culmination of months of consultation with local clubs to secure their buy-in. As a result the final structure places significant emphasis on establishing clear playing levels, with Hong Kong's elite level rugby ring-fenced around the clubs participating in the Premiership and Premiership A leagues," Rees said.

The Premiership and Premiership A leagues will now mirror each other with club fixtures played at the same location each week. The new structure will allow the Premiership teams in these leagues to support each other on any given league weekend and maximize the development of their performance players.

Below Premiership A level, National League 1 will become a feeder system and development structure grooming potential high performance players who aspire to play Premiership rugby.

National League 1 will feature nine teams, headlined by Tin Shui Wai Pandas, who voluntarily relinquished their Premiership A spot to support the wider objectives of Hong Kong Rugby.

Discovery Bay Pirates, SCAA Causeway Bay, Gai Wu, University Wizards, Valley Mavericks, PLA and two Hong Kong Football Club sides round out the National League 1 competition this season.

The Championship Club league has also been revamped for 2015/16 with nine clubs: City RFC, Discipline Services XV, East Kowloon, Gai Wu Crusaders, Kowloon Barbarians, Revolution, Tai Po Dragons, Tin Shui Wai 2<sup>nd</sup> XV, and USRC Tigers Development taking part.

The modified Championship Club structure sees that league now highly focused on serving as an entry point and breeding ground for Chinese players, with all teams required

to include a minimum of 14 ethnic Chinese players in each match day squad.

Following the amendments to the structure, the National and Championship Club leagues are now clearly identified as development competitions entering the season, with the aim to establish partnerships and mutually sustainable links with Premiership teams and to provide a clear and direct player pathway through to performance level rugby in Hong Kong.

National League and Championship Clubs sides will work closely with the HKRU to identify potential performance players. A new dual registration system will allow Premiership clubs to register and develop these players with nominated players allowed to play at both levels in a given season while officially remaining with their mother club.

Already there are signs of progress with U20s stand-out Eric Kwok Pak Nga, who developed his game at City RFC, now seconded to USRC Tigers in a move that has greatly hastened his development. Kwok was named the 2014/15 HKRU Development Player of the Year and is currently in the elite rugby sevens athlete programme at the Hong Kong Sports Institute, having represented Hong Kong in the Junior World Rugby Trophy and as vice captain for the men's U20s sevens team which defended its Asian sevens title in August.

HKRU league competition rules continue to emphasise the selection and development of local talent with the Premiership rules requiring 12 of the 22 or 23 players selected (depending on the team's front row configuration) for a league fixture to be eligible to represent Hong Kong.

The HKRU will continue to work in partnership with its member clubs to identify future strategic directions after the coming three seasons as it continues to refine and strengthen its development structures.

Complimenting the league's move towards enhancing the stability of domestic Rugby and further preparing Hong Kong players for international competition, the HKRU will be announcing several other transformative development initiatives in the coming weeks.

#### **Super Saturday marks 2015/16 Season Start**

The Premiership will be played over 15 rounds with break for the Asia Rugby Sevens Olympic Qualifiers on 7-8 November at the Hong Kong Stadium (for tickets visit: <http://www.ticketflap.com/asiarugbysevensqualifier>) and for the Cup of Nations (13-21 Nov) at Hong Kong Football Club when Hong Kong will face off with Russia, Portugal and Zimbabwe.

The 2015/16 HKRU season will kick off with a Super Saturday on 3 October, gathering all six Premiership and Premiership A teams for a triple trio of rugby excitement at King's Park. Admission is free.

Towards the business end of the season, a quarterfinals competition will be held with the top two teams entering the quarterfinals (27 February) receiving a first round bye. The semifinals will be held on 5 March with the Grand Final on 12 March.