

ONLY IN
RUGBY
WORLD

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Rugby is still a fledgling sport in **CYPRUS**, yet the islanders are already homing in on a world record

EITHER RETURN with it, or on it" was the message Spartan mothers told their sons before they left for war. The phrase refers to the soldiers' shields; returning without it meant they had fled battle and betrayed their kingdom. Returning on it meant they had been killed in battle as dead soldiers were carried back on their shields, while coming back with it meant they had been victorious. Quite fittingly, the motto has been adopted by another small army who, in true Spartan fashion, are becoming accustomed to defeating any opponent that comes their way.

The recently formed Cypriot national rugby team's meteoric rise through the lower European divisions is causing many in the rugby world to sit up and take notice. The Moufflons - nicknamed after the wild sheep found in the Cypriot mountains - are on the brink of creating history as they close in on a world





Men of war: high emotions during the anthem and (right) the team motto, which means "Return with it or on it" – alluding to the shields used in battles of old

record, while a recent tweaking of the World Cup qualification process could see the new boys qualify for England 2015.

Until recently, the only rugby that was played on the island was on the two British military bases by British Armed Forces, who competed against just a handful of other amateur teams. In the late 1990s, a large number of Cypriots who had moved to South Africa, England and Australia after the Turkish invasion of 1974 returned to their homeland with the will to introduce the sport that was so popular in the places where they had spent a large chunk of their lives.

The turning point for Cypriot

rugby came in 2003 when a group of predominantly former South African players set out to raise the profile of the sport in Cyprus by creating its first independent rugby team, the Paphos Tigers. While the sport continued to be played on an amateur level, the Cypriot Rugby Federation (CRF) was created in 2006 with the aim of handing Cypriots, both home and abroad, the stage to perform on the international scene.

The Moufflons took to the field for the first time in 2007 in a friendly against neighbours Greece, winning 39-3. Shortly after, they hosted the European

Nations Cup (ENC) Division 3D tournament and finished top of the table after three straight victories over Azerbaijan, Monaco and Slovakia.

As a result, they travelled to Israel, who had finished second from bottom in Division 3C, for a promotion-relegation play-off. The Israelis came out on top by 23-14 and despite the potential shown on the field in their first year, various aspects off it made

the future look bleak for Cyprus.

The cash-strapped CRF had a talented group of players but found financial support hard to come by; the Cypriot Sports Organisation (KOA) was unwilling to fund what it saw as a worthless investment as they ignored countless phone calls and emails from players and coaches pleading for financial assistance. The circumstances were so bad that the players had to pay for their own flights to away matches as well as opponents' accommodation and hospitality for home games. They were once even charged €2,000 (£1,590) by KOA to play a home game in Lefkosia, the Cypriot capital, despite being a full member of the European Rugby Federation.

The team wouldn't have stayed afloat had it not been for generous support from a number of local sponsors, the majority with close ties to the team. The players' determination,



■ **May mayhem:** second-row Kyri Antoniadis fights off the Greeks

Cyprus' 15-match winning streak

DATE	OPPONENT	SCORE
29 Nov 2008	Azerbaijan	37-3
6 Dec 2008	Monaco	24-3
14 Mar 2009	Slovakia	33-7
21 Mar 2009	Bosnia & Herzegovina	8-6
14 Nov 2009	Monaco	44-5
6 Mar 2010	Azerbaijan	59-0
27 Mar 2010	Bosnia & Herzegovina	15-0
20 Nov 2010	Greece	33-13
12 Mar 2011	Bulgaria	55-8
26 Mar 2011	Finland	70-10
7 May 2011	Luxembourg	50-0
8 Oct 2011	Luxembourg	48-7
28 Apr 2012	Bulgaria	94-3
26 May 2012	Greece	72-5
9 Jun 2012	Finland	52-5

"Our vision is simple: to get rugby recognised island-wide, played and enjoyed by all" **CHRISTO KASABI**

coupled with the financial injection from sponsors, revitalized Cyprus as they looked to maintain the promise they had shown in the first few appearances, yet even the most optimistic Cypriot could not have envisaged what was to unfold in the following years.

Under the new format of the ENC, with more matches and one automatic promotion place, the Moufflons won all

eight of their games in the 2008-10 campaign, seizing that coveted top spot. Whereas most teams need time to adapt to a tougher division, the Cypriots showed their muscle as they achieved the same feat in the Second Division (2D), again with a 100% record and racking up some brutal statistics along the way. Last season saw the Moufflons score the most points across all

European divisions (474) and concede the fewest (51), while their 94-3 win against Bulgaria was the biggest European victory in the past four years.

The play-off defeat to Israel in 2008 turned out to be a small bump on an otherwise smooth road having won every game

repêchage play-off. Cyprus are not yet an IRB Associate Member but they're confident membership will be granted when the council meet on the island next month.

With all that they've achieved within such a small period, it's difficult to comprehend that,

Road to the World Cup

How the race to qualify for RWC 2015 is shaping up

EUROPE

(FIRA-AER)

England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France and Italy have qualified

Two qualifier places and one repêchage place remain

QUALIFIER ROUND 1 4 MAY 2013

European Nations Cup
Division 2C winner



European Nations Cup
Division 2D winner

QUALIFIER ROUND 2 18 MAY 2013

Qualifier Round 1 winner



European Nations Cup
Division 2B winner

QUALIFIER ROUND 3 1 JUNE 2013

Qualifier Round 2 winner



European Nations Cup
Division 2A winner

QUALIFIER ROUND 4 10 MAY 2014

Qualifier Round 3 winner



European Nations Cup
Division 1B winner

QUALIFIER ROUND 5 EUROPEAN NATIONS CUP

ENC Division 1A winner

Division 1A second place

Division 1A third place

QUALIFIED

Top 2 into RWC 2015 as
Europe 1 & Europe 2

QUALIFIER ROUND 6 24 MAY 2014

Qualifier Round 4
winner



ENC Division 1A
third place

WINNER PLAYS IN REPÊCHAGE



Upper grade:
Cyprus Select
take on Episkopi
Eagles at Tala. The
Select XV serves as
a stepping stone
towards the senior
Cyprus team

since, a run that puts the minnows on the verge of a world record for the number of consecutive wins.

Cyprus have now mustered 15 straight wins over the past four years. The latest one in Finland saw them surpass England's record (14 from 2002-03) and the world record of 18, set by Lithuania from 2006-10, is in sight. The Moufflons aim to conquer that record during the ENC Division 2C, with their first game of the new season in Austria on 17 November.

And if their achievements until now seem surprising, so will the news that a recent restructure in the World Cup qualification format means the Moufflons stand a good chance of qualifying for RWC 2015 if they maintain their form.

This year sees the start of the 2015 World Cup qualification process in Europe and the team's aim is to top Division 2C after the first four league games, which would grant them entry to the first qualifying round against the Division 2D leaders. They must win five knockout qualifying matches to get to the

with the exception of a couple of semi-pro players, this is a team of amateurs who have to fit rugby between full-time jobs. A great amount of sacrifice has been made by the players to allocate time around their busy work schedules in order to train and travel to Internationals, and on many occasions players have missed games due to work commitments. More than half of the squad play for amateur or university teams in the UK, so a number of training >



Ever-present: skipper Tony Thoma has played in every Moufflons match



Clean through: flanker Marko Mladenovic, who plays his club rugby for Stratford-upon-Avon, heads for a try during win No 14 – a 72-5 rout of Greece

▶ sessions are held in England which players must find their own way of getting to. Players are required to pay for their international trips and recently also had to pay for their off-field attire.

A massive effort is made off the field from the players and coaching staff in order for the team to grow. Head coach Paul Shanks – or Shanksodopoulos as he has been christened by his players – has been with the team since the beginning, first as assistant and then as head coach since 2008. Shanks works in a voluntary capacity and spends endless hours coordinating the logistical and administrative nightmare of dealing with more than 50 players across nine countries.

Another linchpin is Enfield Ignatians prop Christo Kasabi, who runs the Cyprus Rugby website as well as updating social media outlets in a bid to get the word out on the Moufflons' achievements and attract new fans.

As well as a number of foreign-based players, just under a third of the squad used during the 2008-10 campaign play their club rugby in Cyprus. Captain Tony Thoma is the only player to have featured in every game in the Moufflons' short history (20) while centre George Agathocleous is the nation's leading try-scorer with

18 – both were born in South Africa and play for Paphos Tigers, as does Tony's younger brother, Chris. The island's only other active club side, Limassol Crusaders, is also well represented with four internationals.

The Cyprus team is also setting a great example on a political level. Tensions between 'Greeks' in the South and 'Turks' in the North have been long-standing but the presence of a Turkish-Cypriot player in the team, a first for any Cypriot national side, proves the sport can be an emblem for unity on the island. Scrum-half Burhan Torgut is a much-loved figure among the squad and has stated that rugby can bridge the existing divide as both sides have the same thing in common: "At the end of the day, we are all Cypriot."

Despite the team's success, recognition has been hard to come by in a place where football dominates the back pages. Kasabi feels that more credit is merited back home for their achievements: "Whilst

we have attracted some recognition, it's extremely hard to attain despite our significant success in our short history. We believe we are the most successful national team in the history of Cyprus sport; we just wish the Cypriot public would recognise this fact."

Such has been the lack of exposure from the national media that the most common response from locals, when mentioning the success of the Moufflons, is: "I didn't know we had a rugby team." Yet with the increasing success things are beginning to look more promising; the final home game of last season against Greece was the first match to be televised on the island and the first time Cyprus' public broadcasting channel sent reporters to a rugby International.

The players remain reassuringly humble about their aspirations. As Kasabi says:

"Our vision is simple: to get rugby recognised island-wide, played and enjoyed by all."

If the Government and the national sporting body begin to match the CRF's professional intent and show more commitment to a group that has achieved more in Cypriot international sport in five years than any other in history, the potential of this side will soar.

The Moufflons are still only at a formative phase, yet the performances on the field and commitment off it suggest that this group is on the verge of something exceptional. The Cyprus football team, which has been professional since 1934, holds a win percentage rate of 19% while the

largely neglected and underfunded rugby team boasts a 95% win record.

With the success they have already achieved, the sporting culture is evidently shifting on the island of Cyprus. 🏉

THE NEXT FOUR GAMES FOR CYPRUS

- 17 Nov AUSTRIA (A)
- 8 Dec SLOVENIA (H)
- 16 Mar BULGARIA (H)
- 20 Apr HUNGARY (A)

5 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT CYPRUS

- 1 ➤ Cyprus was the **wealthiest** nation in the known world during the Copper and Bronze Ages, when the island's rich natural copper resources were exported to other countries.
- 2 ➤ The mosque of Hala Sultan Tekke, the third-most important **Islamic site**, is situated close to Larnaca Airport. Umm Haram (Hala Sultan) was believed to be the foster mother of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.
- 3 ➤ On 12 May 1191 at Limassol Castle, King Richard the Lionheart wed Queen Joanna. It's the only **English Royal Wedding** that has taken place outside the United Kingdom.
- 4 ➤ The **British Empire** leased Cyprus from the Ottoman Empire in 1878 and officially became a British crown colony from 1925 until the island gained independence in 1960.
- 5 ➤ The capital, Lefkosia, is the world's last remaining **divided capital**. A UN buffer zone separates the self-declared Republic of Northern Cyprus and the Greek Cypriot-controlled South.