

New era dawns for expanded Super Rugby league

The 2016 Super Rugby season, the first to feature franchises from outside Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, begins today with an expanded 18-team league. Among the newcomers are the Jaguares of Argentina and Asia's first representative, the Sunwolves, who will be co-based in Japan and Singapore. New Zealand's Highlanders captured their maiden championship last year and will again be a force to be reckoned with. The Straits Times looks at all 18 teams ahead of the 21st season of the most prestigious rugby club league in the world.

Dates: Every weekend from today to July 16 (with a break for international matches in June). Play-offs start on July 22, final is on Aug 6. Available on Setanta Sports (StarHub TV Channel 217).

Format: All teams will play 15 home and away matches, with two rounds of bye, across the various conferences. The winners of the four conferences qualify for the play-offs, will be seeded and have home advantage for the quarter-finals. They will be joined by four wildcard entries comprising the three next-best sides from the Australasian group and the best-placed team in the South African group.

The teams:

AUSTRALASIAN GROUP

Australian conference



Brumbies
Head coach: Stephen Larkham
Captains: Stephen Moore, Christian Lealiifano
Home ground: GIO Stadium, Canberra
 2015: Semi-finals



Western Force
Head coach: Michael Foley
Captain: Matt Hodgson
Home ground: nib Stadium, Perth
 2015: 15th



Melbourne Rebels
Head coach: Tony McGahan
Captain: Nic Stirzaker
Home ground: AAMI Park, Melbourne
 2015: 10th



Queensland Reds
Head coach: Richard Graham
Captain: James Slipper
Home ground: Suncorp Stadium, Brisbane
 2015: 13th



New South Wales Waratahs
Head coach: Daryl Gibson
Captain: Michael Hooper
Home ground: Allianz Stadium, Sydney
 2015: Semi-finals

New Zealand conference



Blues
Head coach: Tana Umaga
Captain: Jerome Kaino
Home ground: Eden Park, Auckland
 2015: 14th



Chiefs
Head coach: David Rennie
Captains: Aaron Cruden, Sam Cane
Home ground: FMG Stadium Waikato, Hamilton
 2015: Quarter-final



Crusaders
Head coach: Todd Blackadder
Captain: Kieran Read
Home ground: AMI Stadium, Christchurch
 2015: 7th



Highlanders
Head coach: Jamie Joseph
Captain: Ben Smith, Shane Christie
Home ground: Forsyth Barr Stadium, Dunedin
 2015: Champions



Hurricanes
Head coach: Chris Boyd
Captain: Dane Coles
Home ground: Westpac Stadium, Wellington
 2015: Runner-up

SOUTH AFRICAN GROUP

South Africa 1 conference



Bulls
Head coach: Nollis Marais
Captain: Adriaan Strauss
Home ground: Loftus Versfeld, Pretoria
 2015: 9th



Cheetahs
Head coach: Franco Smith
Captain: Francois Venter
Home ground: Toyota Stadium, Bloemfontein
 2015: 12th



Stormers
Head coach: Robbie Fleck
Captain: Juan de Jongh, Frans Malherbe
Home ground: DHL Newlands, Cape Town
 2015: Quarter-final



Sunwolves
Head coach: Mark Hammett
Captain: Shota Horie
Home ground: Chichibunomiya Rugby Stadium, Tokyo, and National Stadium, Singapore
 2015: DNP (New franchise)

South Africa 2 conference



Southern Kings
Head coach: Deon Davids
Captain: Steven Sykes
Home ground: Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium
 2015: DNP (Relegated in 2013)



Lions
Head coach: Johan Ackermann
Captain: Warren Whiteley
Home ground: Emirates Airline Park, Johannesburg
 2015: 8th



Sharks
Head coach: Gary Gold
Captain: Patrick Lambie
Home ground: Growthpoint Kings Park, Durban
 2015: 11th



Jaguares
Head coach: Raul Perez
Captain: Agustin Creevy
Home ground: Estadio Jose Amalfitani, Buenos Aires
 2015: DNP (New franchise)



New Zealand's Highlanders, who clinched their maiden Super Rugby title last year, will be among the favourites ahead of this season's expanded 18-team league which begins today.