



Rugby Victoria Senior Competition Review, Recommendations & Rationale.

November 2025.

Background

At the conclusion of the 2025 season, Rugby Victoria undertook a thorough review of its Senior competition's and offerings with the view that many competitions were not fit for purpose. This resulted in excessive forfeits, uncompetitive matches, extensive travel time and subsequently poor experiences for players, volunteers and spectators.

The primary focus of the review was to create competition structures and offerings moving forward that supported the growth of Rugby within Victoria, while providing high quality experiences for stakeholders. This focus aligns to the [Rugby Victoria Strategic Plan 2025-2029](#), explicitly the *Attract, Develop and retain participant* and the *Deliver Brilliant experiences* pillars.

With this focus, this document outlines the explicit recommendations of Rugby Victoria competitions and offerings for 2026 and beyond and provides detailed rationale on many of the key changes or updates to the Rugby Victoria Senior Competition (Men's and Women's) moving forward. This document is supported by the **Rugby Victoria Senior Rugby Structure 2026 document**.

Please see below a high-level summary of the Senior Competition review process, Senior Men's & Women's Rugby, Dewar Shield requirements, Colts, Thirds/Social, Media, Finals structure.

Senior Competition Review

Overview

- Clubs strongly supported the introduction of Divisional Rugby.
- Clubs in unanimous agreement that a circuit breaker is needed in Victorian Rugby and change is needed.
- Competitive Rugby competitions is the key outcome sought from any recommended changes. Minimisation of forfeits and genuine competitive balance being the primary focus.
- Development of a competition structure that provides sustainability and competitiveness key. Specifically, the agreed outcome for all clubs was divisional Rugby, which provides a strong and competitive premier division, promotes new club growth, facilitates club improvement and development, and provides club the opportunity to rebuild in a competitive environment.
- Creating the Senior Men's divisional split was the most challenging aspect of the review. No model was unanimously supported. Five (5) options were presented, with the final model shared in the attached slide deck – document "Rugby Victoria Senior Rugby Structure 2026"
- Growth and development of Colts teams a high priority for clubs and RV.
- Introduction of more social rugby offerings (including the extension of the Under 85 model) strongly supported by clubs.

Senior Men's Rugby

Key Recommendations/Actions

- Introduction of Divisional Rugby, with promotion and relegation from 2027.
- Dewar shield to become a 6-team competition in 2026.
- 2nd Division to return to its original name, Ward Shield from 2026.
- Introduction of a player points system, focused on minimising movement between clubs, to be introduced in 2027.
- Target is to have three divisions by 2028, with all clubs to have at least two Senior teams across all divisions.
- Conference to become regional from 2026, with a view to decrease travel and reduce forfeits.
- Return of the club referee program from 2026, with each club to provide a minimum of one green shirt referee for every two teams and at least one qualified touch judge.
- Introduction of a qualified sports trainer/medic at every club by end of the 2026 season, in readiness for the 2027 season. RV to seek external funding and to deliver at no cost to clubs.

- Significant investment and focus on referee recruitment, development and retention to match any growth and provide the best match experience possible for all participants

Dewar Shield entry 2026

To Qualify for Dewar Shield in 2026, clubs must meet the following criteria (before or by the dates). Should clubs not meet any or all of the following criteria

- Financial with Rugby Victoria (March 1st, 2026).
- A minimum 50 registered players (April 15th)
- All coaches and officials (including trainers, club referee and touch judge) accredited and on Rugby Xplorer (April 15th)
- All club compliance measure complete and signed off by Rugby Victoria (April 15th)

Women's Rugby

Key Recommendations/Actions

- All clubs to have a women's or girls' program by 2027. This can include senior women's, girls, 7's or social.
- Development of an entry level program for women. 10's (play on) model to be utilised, though strong preference for 15's wherever possible.
- Introduction of the State Under 18 competitions for girls a priority to create greater depth and numbers for senior women's.
- Introduction of 7's rugby as a competition option for females from 2027.
- Introduction of a women's and girls role at RV by 2027
- Lindroth Cup Grand Final to move to its own day, with increased investment in media and promotion of the game and day. Preference is Preliminary Final week of senior men's competitions.
- Development of junior girls state teams and academies to increase the development and depth of women's players in Victoria
- Develop and introduce an equivalent to the 85 and Under model for women

Thirds & Social Rugby

RV and its clubs strongly support all senior clubs having three teams for sustainability. This can include a thirds, colts or alternative model such as 85kg and Under

Key Recommendations/Actions

- Compulsory thirds to be removed for Dewar shield, however three senior teams, (1st, 2nd, Colts) or (1st, 2nd, 3rds) strongly recommended for club's long-term sustainability.
- Introduction of a Premier thirds grade and regional (geographical thirds) conferences from 2026.
- Development of regional thirds/social rugby competitions a priority over the next 5 years. Minimise travel, remove barriers to participate and provide competitions for all levels the key goal.
- Thirds teams fixturing to align with senior club as much as possible.
- Introduction of associate membership of RV (non-voting member) that allows easier entry of new club and social rugby teams.
- Social rugby competitions (Masters, modified rules, 7's) to be developed and introduced from 2026
- Introduction of a set 7's calendar, including a pre-season competition from 2026.
- Introduction of 7's as a competition offering by 2028
- Development and introduction of a social competition model, utilising masters' rules, for all open age players by 2027.
- Working with the Vic Masters, embed these teams and competitions back into Rugby Victoria.
Introduction of female masters by 2029 a key goal

Colts

Key Recommendations/Actions

- Move from a two (2) to three (3) year window for colts, with 18,19 and 20 recommended.
- Soften dispensation policies, to allow more players to play Colts, with movement from lower age groups up and down available.
- Removal of the cap on top age players from 2026, to increase the player pool size.
- Development of graded colts, facilitating an entry level competition for developing players
- Support and promotion of the Under 85 competition for players not ready to transition to colts or senior Rugby

- Introduction of a State Under 18 competitions (boys and girls), using the regional mode utilised at Under 13 and 15 level, to be introduced from 2026. The competition, utilising players from club, state school (rebel Shield), Private (VSSRU) and interstate-based Victorian players, will provide a strong state level comp, played in the gaps of club and school rugby. State teams and academies to be developed and picked from this competition.
- Any player who plays in the state Under 18 competitions must be registered for a RV club and play at least (one) 1 game (this includes players who have moved to/playing Rugby League)

Finals Structure

Key Recommendations/Actions

- Three-week finals series from 2026, with the top two (2) sides earning a double chance
- Lindroth Cup and Conference Grand Finals to become feature events, on Preliminary final weekend of Ward and Dewar. Both games to be live streamed, commentated and provided full match coverage.
- Introduction of entry fees to all Senior finals (\$10) and Junior Grand Final Days (\$5) from 2026.
- Where possible, neutral venues for all senior finals from 2026.
- All Senior Grand Finals live streamed, with commentary.

Media

Key Recommendations/Actions

- All senior 1st grade games (Dewar, Ward, Conference and Lindroth) filmed in 2026, utilising remote cameras and AI technology)
- Introduction of a Rugby Victoria exclusive media and vision portal by 2026.
- Introduce a Rugby show (monthly) that promotes Ruby, its clubs and its people.
- Significantly increase of promotion of rugby, with a focus on new media and technologies. This includes weekly minis (match highlights), tries and defensive plays of the week.

Rationale

When considering making changes to any Rugby Victoria competition, Rugby Victoria has gone through extensive consultation processes with clubs and participants via Surveys, Working parties and 1:1 conversation. These changes have then been supported with the review of evidence and data that will act as KPI's to determine how the changes or updates made have impacted these KPI's. Eg the number of forfeits across competitions, total travel time, competitive balance within competitions, player satisfaction etc

See attached a table with the Competitions impacted, the change or update and the rationale of those changes.

Competition	Change or update	Rationale
Conference	Move to East and West conferences	In 2025 the Conference competition had an average game day travel time of 3 hours and 32 minutes, which Rugby Victoria feels needs to be significantly reduced to support clubs looking to recruit and retain players and volunteers to support the Conference competition. The movement to this model will reduce the overall travel time, as well as forfeits based on travel. This should increase the amount of game Conference participants will be able to play, while supporting clubs through increased revenue linked to food and beverage sales on game day.
	All Single team clubs and clubs' 4 th XV sides will compete in Conference	In 2025 multiple clubs had teams that played as the reserves team for a senior team in the Championship competition. In 2026 this will no longer occur with the desire to have clubs only enter Divisional Rugby (Dewar or Ward competitions) if they have a 1st XV and 2nd XV, meaning any clubs 4 th XV side will now enter the Conference competition as a single team.
Dewar & Ward (Divisional Rugby)	Rename of Championship to Ward Shield	The Championship competition has been renamed to the Ward Shield from 2026 onwards to align to the Shield name that is awarded at the end of the season to the competition winner. This change will provide stability to a competition name that has seen multiple iterations over the past 5 years.

	Move to 6 team competition	With only 12 clubs in 2025 indicating they will have a 1st XV and 2nd XV in 2026 the move to a 6 club Dewar Shield and 6 club Ward Shield allows for the best fixture and competitive balance with the constraints currently in place. The size of each Dewar and Ward Shield season will be reviewed annually as clubs may obtain a 1st XV and 2nd XV that previously weren't in Divisional Rugby or opposingly if Clubs are no longer in the position to field a 1st XV and 2nd XV. The desire from Rugby Victoria is to, by 2029, have 3 competitions within the Divisional model, with the current preference being 6-6-6.
Dewar & Ward (Divisional Rugby)	Addition of a 4 team play in (pre-season)	In 2026 a 4-team play in will occur in the pre-season to the Dewar and Ward competitions to determine the "ranking" and subsequent position of clubs to start the 2026 season. Only the clubs ranked 6-9, based on 2025 ladder results, will be involved in the play in. The club that wins the 4 team play in will start the season grading in Dewar Shield and the teams ranked 2-4 will start the season in Ward Shield. The reason for the 4-team play in is that Rugby Victoria and other impacted clubs felt that it was unfair to simply use the top 6 from 2025 to fill the Dewar Shield and Ward Shield starting positions as this was not shared as the determinant for Dewar or Ward starting positions in 2025.
	Addition of 5 round grading model in Divisional Rugby for 2026.	The purpose of the 5-round grading is to provide all clubs involved in the Divisional rugby model the opportunity to determine their playing position in 2026 based on grading results instead of 2025 results. The grading will culminate in a single play-off game between the 6 th ranked Dewar Shield club and the 1 st ranked Ward Shield club, with the view that this is the fairest way to judge 2026 competition positions. This model has been discussed with clubs and the model allows any clubs the chance to play in the Dewar shield competition in 2026 before promotion & relegation is the determinant of competition positions from 2027 onwards.
	Addition of promotion & relegation from 2027	At the conclusion of the 2027 season all club movement between Dewar shield and Ward shield will be based on promotion and relegation linked to on field results. The explicit model is still to be confirmed but will be shared with clubs in 2026.. Promotion & Relegation allows clubs the opportunity to play in the Dewar Shield who previously haven't had a consistent mechanism to do so. Promotion & Relegation also adds weight to all games during the season with the threat of relegation, a

		deterrent to poor performances. The Promotion & Relegation model is a consistent model amongst other National Rugby Competitions and local Victorian community sport.
	Investigation and potential introduction of player points model	The purpose of investigating a player points model is to support clubs who actively retain and develop players and limit the ability of clubs to recruit large numbers of players. Player points models provide teams with a points salary cap that clubs cannot breach on game day, with players attributed a points value based on their connection with the club eg a Senior player who has played at the club as a junior and gone through the club pathway is awarded the smallest points value and a player with a professional background who has been "recruited" to a club with no previous connections may be awarded the highest points value. The purpose of any player points model is to support club sustainability over current recruitment tactics that may exist.
U85kg competition	Increase to 6 teams in 2026	The movement to a 6-team u85kg competition represents the next stage in the development of this competition. An increase in team numbers allows for greater opportunities for people to return to Rugby via the u85kg competition, which was a feature of the registered participants in 2025.
Colts	Movement to 3-year age window (18-20)	The increase of the colts age bracket from 2 years (18-19) to 3 years (18-20) will allow more players to play an extra season of Colts Rugby prior to entering Divisional and Conference Rugby. The extra year should allow for extra skill development and potentially allow an extra year of physical maturation resulting in better experiences and retention of players within clubs and to the game.
Women's Lindroth	Standalone Grand Final	The move to a standalone Grand Final day allows the full attention of Rugby Victoria to be on the Lindroth Cup Grand Final. This will allow greater visibility of high-quality Women's Rugby with supported Media & Communications. The move to a standalone Grand Final day forms part of a broader Finals strategy to allow greater visibility for more Grand Final events.
Women's Lindroth development	Introduction of Women's Lindroth development	The introduction of the Lindroth Development competition will allow participants who may be new to the game of Rugby to play in a flexible and less rigid form of Rugby through the "Game on" model. The long-term strategy of Rugby Victoria is to develop multiple divisions of

		Women's Rugby and the introduction of the Lindroth Development competition aligns to that strategy.
Thirids	Moving to Premier competition and Thirids competition	In 2025, the most forfeits across any Senior competition came from the Dewar Thirids competition. The requirement of Dewar clubs to have a 3rd XV has placed increased stress on player numbers and volunteers at the detriment of the competition, moving forward a Premier Thirids allows the clubs who can manage a Thirids team to enter those teams into that competition.
Finals	Revert to a 3 game finals series	A 3 game finals series across all Men's Season competitions allows a greater opportunity to showcase Rugby in Victoria, it also allows double chances for clubs that finish in the top 2 from the regular season, rewarding a season of strong results.
Alternative offerings	Pre season 7's competition	The addition of the 7's competition in the pre-season is on the back of club consultation and desire. The 7's competition being held prior to the start of the traditional club season competitions allows an opportunity for clubs to leverage the 7's competition as a recruitment piece, conditioning opportunity or way to engage new or returning players to the game and their club.
	Diversity in "membership" offerings	The addition of the associate membership model in 2026 is based on the desire to decrease barriers to playing club Rugby. The associate membership provides the support of Rugby Victoria to clubs looking to get an entry point to club competitions and start their journey with the Rugby Victoria landscape. Murray River Rugby Union will be an associate member of Rugby Victoria in 2026.
	Introduction of social rugby offerings	Rugby Victoria will look to bring the Masters competition under the Rugby Victoria competition banner to allow access to the support and resources that is afforded to all other competitions, this will hopefully support the increase of teams playing within the existing Masters competition and help support the growth of social Rugby within Rugby Victoria's offerings