

The Rapid Growth of Major League Rugby

One of the most popular sports in the world, rugby is growing in interest and participation in North America. This is largely due to the success of Major League Rugby (MLR).

The four-year old league started with seven teams in 2018. After rapid growth, the young league will open the 2021 season on March 20 with 13 teams — Atlanta, Austin, Dallas, DC, Houston, Los Angeles, New England, New Orleans, New York, San Diego, Seattle, Utah and Toronto. "Adding two major markets in Dallas and Los Angeles for 2021 was a big milestone," said George Killebrew, MLR commissioner. "We're playing in 13 of the biggest markets in North America in only our fourth season. This is groundbreaking, phenomenal growth."



DARREN ZEJANEK PHOTO

Cutline

Rugby embodies elements of the country's most popular sports. "The physicality of rugby reminds me of football, except in rugby, you don't play with pads or helmets," said Killebrew. "The flowing grace reminds me of soccer, the constant ball exchange is similar to basketball, while the intensity is like hockey. It brings together a lot of the great characteristics of some of the major sports that are already here, but with the unique rugby elements that set our league apart."

Creating a Strong Business Model and Great Fan Experience

During the extended 2020 off-season, MLR worked on elevating the

sports business aspects of season ticket sales and community relations activities, along with local sponsorships, broadcast agreements and marketing. "All of these metrics were up through the first five weeks of the 2020 season (which was shortened due to Covid-19) and we expect them to increase in 2021," said Killebrew.



DARREN ZEJANEK PHOTO

Fetu'u Vainikolo of the Utah Warriors carries the ball to score a try in a match against the New England Free Jacks.

A major area of focus has been creating an exceptional fan experience. This led MLR to develop two programs for its teams — "Rugbytainment", centering on how teams can turn their matches into a complete entertainment experience, and "Driveway-to-Driveway", which focuses on everything a team can control from the time fans leave their driveway to go to the match to the time they return home. "We have to be attractive to, not just the rugby faithful, but also to their friends and families so everyone wants to attend and you do that through entertainment," said Killebrew. "We want to be the answer to the question, 'what do you want to do this weekend?'" MLR's goal is to make its matches full of pageantry and high-energy fun, entertainment and music.

From Youth Players to the Collegiate Draft

MLR teams made a major push in grassroots youth programs, which

count more than 50,000 youth players. The teams have been working with local rec programs and YMCAs to teach and grow the sport of rugby. "Our team in New Orleans had a goal to start more than 200 youth programs in Louisiana and they're well on their way," said Killebrew. "Our youth programs should generate the first several thousand fans through our turnstiles every Saturday."

New to MLR in 2020 was its inaugural collegiate draft. While the league was expecting from 100 to 150 players to sign up for the collegiate draft, more than 400 athletes registered to become one of the 24 players drafted. "The pathway from youth, to Academy, to collegiate player to professional is what dreams are made of," said Killebrew. "Now, we have that."



SAN DIEGO LEGION PHOTO CREDIT

Riekert Hattingh of the Seattle Seawolves, catches the ball in the 2019 MLR Championship Final. The team defeated the San Diego Legion, 26-23, in front of a sold-out crowd of 6,000 at San Diego's Torero Stadium to win their second MLR Championship Title.

Spreading Its Reach Through National Broadcasts

Although MLR is young, it already has major TV deals with CBS and Fox. The league's championship will be broadcast in primetime on CBS on August 1, 2021. There will also be 17 additional games nationally broadcast on CBS Sports Network and 17 on FS2. These nationally broadcast games are equally divided amongst

the teams. Additionally, each team has deals in place with either a local network or regional sports network.

Future Expansion and a Possible World Cup

As the popularity of MLR grows, there have been a number of cities that want a team. "We're in discussions with about 10 U.S. cities," said Killebrew. A potential frontrunner is Chicago, which has an aggressive ownership group and fits the league's criteria of capitalization, stadium plan, available sports marketing professionals and a plan to grow youth rugby in the area. "The more well-rounded a city is, the better partner they'll be for rugby just by the makeup of the people that live there," said Killebrew.

Looking towards the future, MLR has partnered with USA Rugby with the hope of bringing the Rugby World Cup to North America in either 2027 or 2031. The league is in the early phases of a feasibility study and has contacted stadiums across North America, such as Soldier Field in Chicago and AT&T Stadium in Dallas, to see if they'd be interested in hosting matches. "We'll either be a 10- or 14-year-old league by then and it would be a game changer for us," said Killebrew.



SAN DIEGO LEGION PHOTO

The San Diego Legion faithful cheer on their team, which finished as runners-up in 2019.



SAN DIEGO LEGION PHOTO

Early in the 2019 MLR Championship Final, San Diego Legion form a scrum in a close battle with the Seattle Seawolves.

MLR Opening Weekend Schedule
Saturday and Sunday, March 20-21

	Rugby United NY at Rugby ATL	
	New England Free Jacks at Houston SaberCats	
	Seattle Seawolves at Austin Gilgronis	
	Old Glory DC at NOLA Gold	
	Dallas Jackals at LA Giltinis	
	Utah Warriors at San Diego Legion	
	Broadcast info TBA. The full 2021 MLR schedule will be released on Tuesday, December 8 at MajorLeagueRugby.com.	