How serious is the lobby to move college rugby to the spring?

Serious enough to actually launch a concerted campaign. With Army Director of Rugby Rich Pohlidal at the very least speaking for the movement, the idea is under consideration by USA Rugby's Collegiate Committee.

The argument goes like this:
It's a lot easier to play in the fall, because you're not hampered by spring break (minor problem) or the fact that in large parts of the country, fields are unplayable due to snow or rain until mid-March at the earliest.

Northeast and Midwest teams, and to a lesser extent Rocky Mountain teams, have long held that were they able to play a solid, single-season season, they would perform better come national playoff time.

In the fall, teams could assemble early, because the only impediment to early training is that

players might have to return to school early.

Then they could play in lovely, predictable fall weather through into December, where, just after Thanksgiving, we could have a national championship game in a suitably weather-friendly venue.

The season is going to have to be split between 7s and 15s. Right now USA Rugby is looking to hold a 7s championships sometime in December. Many would agree that a 7s season, rather than just the one-off tournament, is best, and that therefore implies that 7s should be in the fall and 15s in the spring.

However … the USA 7s CRC is in June, when NBC wants it to be. That won't change. So now we have two 7s seasons: fall leading up to a USA Rugby tournament, and then in late spring.

Doesn't make sense, says the Pohlidal camp. Instead, why not follow NBC to the spring. Put 15s in the fall, and a series of 7s tournaments in the spring.

Good players need good games, and our national competitions need to improve. If we play college rugby in the fall, then collegians who want to move up to the Super League can do so in the spring, challenging themselves and also making the Super League that much better.

We need colleges and rugby enthusiasts to be more engaged in youth rugby. Kids are

crying out for the chance to play rugby. College players who aren't into 7s or playing in the Super League can spend the spring coaching or refereeing in High School or Youth games.

We could more easily brand college rugby and market it, if we had more fans showing up. Piggybacking on college football events could bring more fans to the rugby games.

That is the argument, in a nutshell. If those things are all true, and there are no detractions, then it seems a solid formula. Add to it the fact that huge numbers of college rugby teams populate the Northeast and Midwest. They, for the most part, want fall rugby. Some have already embraced it. They play in the spring because the national playoffs are in the spring, but choose their local champions in the fall.

So what's the argument against? There are a few:

Competitive balance. If it is true that snow retards the development of a team, and playing solidly from January through into May with decent weather the whole time makes champions, then why don't we see Californian teams dominate?

We don't. Yes, the University of California has dominated men's DI/CPD rugby, and Stanford women's team is one of the best teams every year. But after that other Californian programs perform about the same as everyone else. They win some, lose some, have great success, or an off year. In DII, the difference is even more marked, where teams from all over, notably Middlebury in snowy Vermont, have won the national title.

In addition, BYU, which often has to shovel plenty of snow off fields early in the season, and goes on road trips to find games, has made the national final six times in a row. The last time they didn't, Utah made the final.

Schedule. One thing we didn't mention in the *for* argument was that the college season runs into finals and graduations. Now this isn't normally an issue for collegiate sports, but those sports are varsity, often scholarship sports, and those programs get leeway from professors and administrators that club rugby teams do not.

Still, there's a schedule problem for teams on the front end, too. It's tough to get all your players in to campus early. They have a find a place to stay, which costs money. They have to leave jobs and internships early. You might run into conflicts with the All American tour (a minor consideration, true), or the 7s season. More importantly, for some schools, class doesn't begin until the third week of September.

Of the 31 2011 CPD teams, that was true of six teams. It's a competitive disadvantage for them, especially if they hope to recruit freshmen to their team ("come play for us, the league season is half over but it'll be fine").

This obstacle isn't insurmountable, but it's just the sort of thing that would make those schools oppose a move to the fall.

The 7s split season is certainly an issue, and skipping between 15s and 7s seems undesirable. However, it is something players will have to do throughout their careers. It's difficult, but part of the learning process.

Marketing and venues. Of the pro-fall camp's positions, this one has encountered the most resistance. Several college coaches do not think moving to the fall will allow them to feed off football's popularity. On football game day, hotels are full, parking lots are full, city police departments block roads ("you're going to a rugby game? Too bad, you can't go this way anymore."). Will fans who can't get a ticket watch a rugby game instead? Maybe. Will fans waiting for the Big Game, or waiting to leave the Big Game watch rugby while they wait? Maybe. The maybe isn't enough for some.

Actually, it might not, in fact, be football they compete with, but soccer. College rugby teams are enjoying access to university soccer fields in the spring. They could not, necessarily, do that in the fall.

And then you also need to follow the money. When the Pac-12 sold their TV rights for ten figures, they were able to keep the rights to small-time sports so they could televise them elsewhere. If TV thinks rugby is a better sell in the spring, then that's when it will be played (hence the CRC in June). If TV, even a college conference-specific channel thinks fall is the thing and there's room around football, then that's where it will happen.

It's likely that if you polled all the regions of the country, most North of the Mason-Dixon Line and outside of California would lean to Fall play (some hesitantly, many others with a fervor). But if you polled the South and California, they would likely prefer the Winter/Spring cycle.

Do the Northerners feel strongly enough to overcome Southwestern resistance?

All of this discussion, by the way, is a positive. We are at a big crossroads in college rugby. New conferences, the newly-engendered interest in 7s, some improvements in fan and TV interest, and the arrival of a new and fragile national competition have all thrown the college game into the mixer.

Now *is* the time to consider making big changes. Now *is* the time to seriously discuss whether how we've always done it works. And USA Rugby has a Collegiate Committee designed to consider such things, which is a relief as in past year who knows who would be contemplating such monumental changes. Deciding whether to change the playoff structure and the schedule is exactly what something like the Collegiate Committee was designed for.

Our thoughts? Well as often happens in this game, much of the decision has already been made. Many, many teams and competitions have already decided to concentrate on the fall. They will continue to do so regardless. One could easily see the DII and DIII seasons moving entirely to the fall.

But it remains a big risk to go up against football and varsity soccer, and with influential programs in California and the warmer states highly unlikely to change (even if everyone else did), fall playoff rugby, like the beautiful fall colors in the Northeast and Northwest, could be a pleasing sight to some, but all too fleeting.

And, as always, if there is even a small amount of money in the equation (and there's the potential for there to be a lot), follow it.