

The news came out Thursday that USA Rugby has signed Crispin Cider to a three-year sponsorship deal.

The sponsorship deal is an interesting one in that it's a sponsorship of American rugby, rather than a specific national team. Crispin will lend its name to various domestic awards, for example.

It's good news for USA Rugby, which has an expensive year ahead. Both 7s teams will play in a World Series circuit and the 7s World Cup. The USA Men's 15s team now has the Pacific Nations Cup along with the World Cup Qualifiers. The U20 men play in the Junior World Championships.



All of this costs money. While the IRB is footing a large part of the bill for the Pacific Nations, and the World Cup Qualifiers, USA Rugby still has to outfit and pay the players, and USA Rugby CEO Nigel Melville said he is hoping to increase the amount paid to national team players.

GoffonRugby: Income on USAR Mind as Outgo Rises

Written by Alex Goff

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“Per diems are our responsibility,” Melville said. “The IRB is helping with funding, but we have to look for more revenue opportunities. We have our foundation, which has secured grants. We are getting a lot of directed donations. But we continue to look for sponsors. The All Americans have AIG. We have the US Olympic Committee helping fund the 7s programs. But the fact is, if we had twice as much money, we’d spend it.”

Much of any added expenditure would go toward paying players.

US Olympic 7s players get a stipend in the low \$20,000 range, funded by the US Olympic Committee and USA Rugby. Some of those players have families, and USA Rugby and the USOC work to try to help those families make ends meet, perhaps by finding donation or low-cost options for needed items.

“But it’s a fact that when you’re training as an Olympic athlete, it’s the younger athletes who can afford it,” Melville said.

The rugby players are paid more than the average Olympic athlete, with some athletes from other sports receiving only a few hundred dollars a month.

Players on the 15s National Team have recently been getting between \$75 and \$150 a day, depending on various factors (usually players get one amount for days in camp and another if they make the squad for game day). Given that the Eagles assemble less than 50 days a year, that’s no more than a few thousand dollars, often nowhere near enough to bridge the gap of lost income due to having to leave work.

So Melville and USA Rugby will welcome the Crispin funds in part to make it easier for athletes to play for the Eagles.

Another source of income can be events. USA Rugby already receives an annual licensing fee for the USA 7s international tournament – and they get a percentage of profit from the event. But the organization has to look at their own major events as money-making propositions, as well. The USA v. Italy game that drew more than 17,000 fans was a start. This year, the Eagle

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men host Ireland in Houston on June 8, and Tonga in Salt Lake City (not confirmed) a week later.

“For a long time the drawing card for test matches was our opponent,” said Melville. “But last year we showed that it’s beginning to be our team. We still need to be smart about it, and put games in cities where we think there’ll be a draw.”

Interestingly, Melville and USA Rugby were happy to begin the Pacific Nations Cup with only one home match, Tonga in June. They will play the non-test Pac Nations game with Canada in May up north, and then finish the event in Japan against the Cherry Blossoms and Fiji. Melville said he wasn’t worried about the fact that Canada will host three Pac Nations games and the USA only one. But it does seem clear that at some point, playing at home in a trophy match will be a draw, too.

USA Rugby has opted, for the most part, to find mid-size, high-end stadiums for games. Those stadiums make the experience nicer for the fan, but cost money. Infinity Park in Glendale offers a fairly low-cost option, but with a much smaller seating capacity. By contrast, Rugby Canada has usually opted for lower-cost venues that don’t require as large of a crowd to turn a profit.

Rugby Canada is going for the die-hard rugby fan, while USA Rugby hopes to get a slightly bigger crowd. In 2012, the USA v. Canada game at Richardson Stadium in Kingston, Ont. drew about 7,500 fans, with tickets starting at \$10. If you take the average ticket to be \$20, that’s a gross take of \$150,000 (the US and Canadian currencies are virtually the same value). USA v. Italy at the flashier BBVA Compass Stadium in Houston drew just over 17,000 with the cheapest tickets at \$15. The total take was probably in the \$400,000 to \$500,000 range.

If USA Rugby can start to draw crowds of 10,000-20,000, instead of the 3,000-9,000 that has been the expectation for the last ten years, they can get a signification boost to their income, and provide an audience for those new sponsors, too.