Men's preview – 4-5 February, 2023

WORLD RUGBY

WORLD RUGBY RANKINGS EXPLAINER

WORLD RUGBY RANKINGS EXPLAINER

The men's and women's World Rugby Rankings powered by Capgemini are calculated using a points exchange system, in which sides take points off each other based on the match result. Whatever one side gains, the other loses.

The exchanges are based on the match result, the relative strength of each team and the margin of victory (15 points or less / more than 15 points), and there is an allowance for home advantage.

Any match that is not a full international between two World Rugby full member unions does not count towards the rankings, e.g. the British and Irish Lions test against Japan.

For more on the World Rugby Rankings, visit www.world.rugby/rankings.

STATS ON WORLD RUGBY MEN'S RANKINGS POWERED BY CAPGEMINI

- Ireland are guaranteed to remain at number one if they win in Cardiff for the first time in the Six Nations in 10 years.
- Their nearest rivals France cannot improve their rating with victory over Italy due the 14.06 points between the teams before home weighting is factored in.
- The simplest way that France can return to number one – a position they have occupied once before, for a solitary week in July 2022 – is if they win and Ireland draw or lose in Cardiff.
- However, a defeat for Ireland means that Les Bleus would also go top with a draw in Italy.
- A third team is in mix to end the weekend as number one in New Zealand, who will return to top spot if both Ireland and France lose to lower-ranked teams.
- World champions South Africa would climb two places to second in this scenario.
- Ireland can drop three places to fourth in defeat. They will escape with a two-place drop if France lose by the same margin in Rome as the Irish do in Cardiff.
- Neither Ireland nor France can drop out of the top four in defeat as England would still be at least 2.62 rating points adrift if they beat Scotland.
- A second consecutive win at Twickenham would see Scotland become the higher ranked of the two nations with a two-place jump to fifth.
- Fifth would equal Scotland's highest position in the rankings, one they last occupied in May 2018.
- A home defeat by more than 15 points would see England also drop below Australia.
- Wales must beat Ireland by more than 15 points to climb above Argentina into eighth. If they do – and Scotland lose by the same margin to England – then Wales will assume seventh spot.
- Italy will return to the top 10 for the first time since June 2013 if they beat France.
- The Azzurri start the weekend in 12th but would leapfrog Samoa and Japan in victory. Ninth is possible if the Azzurri win by more than 15 points and Wales lose by the same margin.
- A draw would be enough for Italy to replace Samoa in 11th.
- Georgia cannot improve their rating with victory over Germany in the opening round of the Rugby Europe Championship 2023 due to the 22.40 points between the sides before home weighting is factored in.
- Failure to win would cost the Lelos one place in the rankings with Fiji the side to profit.
- Germany would climb three places to 28th if they can become the first team to beat the Lelos at home in the competition in 19 years.

- While the gap between Romania and their opponents Poland isn't quite as big (11.76 before home weighting is factored in) as between Georgia and Germany, the Oaks cannot improve their position with victory alone.
- They will only climb the rankings if their victory is in tandem with defeats by Portugal or Spain, the latter needing to be by more than 15 points.
- A win for Poland in their opening match in the Rugby Europe Championship would see them climb at least two places, above Switzerland and the Netherlands – providing the Dutch don't pull off a shock win away to Spain, in which case Poland would only move up one position.
- Portugal cannot improve their rating with victory over Belgium due to the 10 points between the sides before home weighting is factored in.
- Belgium need to win by more than 15 points to climb above Russia into 25th.
- Such a heavy defeat would see Portugal drop down to 20th.
- It is not possible for Spain to improve on 16th place this weekend as a victory over the Netherlands would not come with any reward due to the 14.05 points between the sides before home weighting is factored in.
- However, Los Leones could fall as low as 20th in defeat, depending on the margin and the results for Portugal and Romania.
- The Dutch could climb as high as 26th if their winning margin is by more than 15 points and Belgium don't upset Portugal.

SIX NATIONS 2023

WALES (9) 78.09 v IRELAND (1) 90.63

Wales win by 15 points or less – Wales 80.05, Ireland 88.67
Wales win by more than 15 points – Wales 81.02, Ireland 87.70
Draw – Wales 79.05, Ireland 89.67
Ireland win by 15 points or less – Wales 78.05, Ireland 90.67
Ireland win by more than 15 points – Wales 78.02, Ireland 90.70

ENGLAND (5) 83.66 v SCOTLAND (7) 81.55

England win by 15 points or less – England 84.15, Scotland 81.06
England win by 15 points or more – England 84.39, Scotland 80.82
Draw – England 83.15, Scotland 82.06
Scotland win by 15 points or less – England 82.15, Scotland 83.06
Scotland by more than 15 points – England 81.39, Scotland 83.82

ITALY (12) 75.95 v FRANCE (2) 90.01

Italy win by 15 points or less – Italy 77.95, France 88.01
Italy win by more than 15 points – Italy 78.95, France 87.01
Draw – Italy 76.95, France 89.01
France win by 15 points or less – Italy 75.95, France 90.01 (No change)
France win by more than 15 points – Italy 75.95, France 90.01 (No change)

RUGBY EUROPE CHAMPIONSHIP 2023

ROMANIA (19) 64.79 v POLAND (30) 53.03

Romania win by 15 points or less – Romania 64.79, Poland 53.03 (No change)
Romania win by more than 15 points – Romania 64.79, Poland 53.03 (No change)
Draw – Romania 63.79, Poland 54.03
Poland win by 15 points or less – Romania 62.79, Poland 55.03
Poland win by more than 15 points – Romania 61.79, Poland 56.03

PORTUGAL (18) 65.97 v BELGIUM (26) 55.97

Portugal win by 15 points or less – Portugal 65.97, Belgium 55.97 (No change)
Portugal win by more than 15 points – Portugal 65.97, Belgium 55.97 (No change)
Draw – Portugal 64.97, Belgium 56.97
Belgium win by 15 points or less – Portugal 63.97, Belgium 57.97
Belgium win by more than 15 points – Portugal 62.97, Belgium 58.97

GEORGIA (13) 75.19 v GERMANY (31) 52.79

Georgia win by 15 points or less – Georgia 75.19, Germany 52.79 (No change)
Georgia win by more than 15 points – Georgia 75.19, Germany 52.79 (No change)
Draw – Georgia 74.19, Germany 53.79
Germany win by 15 points or less – Georgia 73.19, Germany 54.79
Germany win by more than 15 points – Georgia 72.19, Germany 55.79

SPAIN (16) 67.17 v NETHERLANDS (29) 53.12

Spain win by 15 points or less – Spain 67.17, Netherlands 53.12 (No change)
Spain win by more than 15 points – Spain 67.17, Netherlands 53.12 (No change)
Draw – Spain 66.17, Netherlands 54.12
Netherlands win by 15 points or less – Spain 65.17, Netherlands 55.12
Netherlands win by more than 15 points – Spain 64.17, Netherlands 56.12

SIX NATIONS 2023 – SATURDAY, 4 FEBRUARY

WALES v IRELAND – PRINCIPALITY STADIUM, CARDIFF – KO 14:15 GMT

Referee

Karl Dickson (England) **PROFILE >>**
Debut: 17 November, 2018 – Georgia 27-19 Samoa
Tests as referee: 10
Six Nations debut: 26 February, 2022 – Scotland 17-36 France
Six Nations tests as referee: 1

- Referee Karl Dickson's only previous experience of refereeing Wales was a 38-21 defeat to France at the Stade de France in the Autumn Nations Cup in October 2020.
- The English official has refereed Ireland twice before – the 39-31 win against Japan in Dublin in July 2021 and 12 months later for the 42-19 first test defeat by New Zealand in Auckland.
- Dickson made his Six Nations debut at Murrayfield for last year's Scotland v France fixture.

Head-to-head

Played: 133 – Wales leads 70-56 with seven draws
Points for: Wales 1,629 / Ireland 1,563 (avg. score: 12-11)
Highest score: Ireland 54 (54-10 on 3 February, 2002) / Wales 34 (34-9 on 21 March, 1976)
Biggest winning margin: Ireland 44 (54-10 on 3 February, 2002) / Wales 29 (29-0 on 9 March, 1907)

First met: 28 January, 1882 – Ireland 0-0 Wales* – Lansdowne Road, Dublin
Last met: 5 February, 2022 – Ireland 29-7 – Aviva Stadium, Dublin
** Wales won by two goals*

Head-to-head notes

- This will be the third year in a row that Wales and Ireland have faced each other on the opening weekend of the Championship.
- Ireland won their 2022 encounter 29-7 with a brace from Andrew Conway bookended by tries from Bundee Aki and Garry Ringrose.
- Taine Basham scored a consolation try for Wales, converted by Callum Sheedy.
- It was Wales' first defeat on the opening weekend since 2015. However, their overall win rate in round one is just 48 per cent.
- Ireland have a 70 per cent win rate on the opening weekend of the Six Nations but have lost their last three round one fixtures on the road.
- Ireland and Wales drew 16-16 in 2016 – the first time a round one match ended in a draw in Six Nations history.
- Ireland's 54-10 defeat of Wales in 2002 is the biggest win for any team on the opening weekend of a Six Nations Championship.
- Wales ended a run of four consecutive losses to Ireland with their 21-16 win in Cardiff in the 2021 Six Nations.
- Peter O'Mahony became only the second Irishman to receive a red card in a Six Nations match in that defeat. Willie Duggan was the first back in 1977, also against Wales.
- Since then, they have won twice there outside of the Championship, in Rugby World Cup warm-up fixtures in 2015 and 2019.
- This is their 12th meeting in Cardiff during the Six Nations era with Wales edging it six wins to Ireland's five.
- Ireland have not won a Six Nations match in Cardiff since their 30-22 victory there in 2013.

- Wales and Ireland have the two most experienced squads with an average of 38 and 35 caps per player respectively.

Team notes

- Ireland are bidding to become the first team to win the Six Nations having started the Championship as the number one team in the World Rugby Men's Rankings powered by Capgemini.
- Wales have won three Six Nations titles when they have been ranked ninth or lower (2008, 10th and 2013, 2021, ninth).
- Wales ended last season in fifth place – the third time they have been second-from-bottom in six years; however, they did also win the title twice in that time.
- Ireland finished runners-up to France in last year's Championship and are bidding for their first Six Nations title since 2018.
- Ireland haven't finished outside of the top half of the table since their fifth-place finish in 2013.
- Wales only managed three wins from 11 tests in 2022 (20-17 v Scotland, 13-12 v South Africa and 20-13 v Argentina).
- It is their joint-worst win return in a calendar year since 2010 when they could only manage two victories, equalling their return in the COVID-19 affected season of 2020.
- Ireland have won 17 of their last 19 tests going back to February 2021, only losing to France and New Zealand since then.
- They bounced back from that defeat to New Zealand at Eden Park by winning the next two tests and taking the series 2-1 – the first time they have won a series away to the All Blacks.
- Ireland were top try-scorers in last year's Championship (24) – seven more than champions France.
- Wales scored a record low 76 points in last year's Championship.

Player notes

- George North needs one try to become Wales' top try-scorer in Championship history, having drawn level with Shane Williams after scoring his 22nd try in their 2021 win over Italy. North has gone eight tests for Wales without scoring a try.
- Alun Wyn Jones will go a clear third in terms of most Six Nations appearances. The Wales second-row is currently tied with Ireland's Rory Best on 64. An ever-present record in this year's Championship would see him equal Sergio Parisse's tally of 69 matches.
- Jones starts for Wales, 16 years after making his Six Nations debut against Ireland in 2007.
- Flanker Josh van der Flier became only the third Irishman after Keith Wood (2001) and Johnny Sexton (2018) to be named World Rugby Men's 15s Player of the Year in 2022.
- Sexton needs 27 points to overtake countryman Ronan O'Gara as the leading points-scorer in Six Nations history. Sexton has 531 points to O'Gara's 557.
- Joe Hawkins makes his Six Nations debut at inside centre.
- Wales called up Liam Williams to replace Leigh Halfpenny on Thursday after the full-back suffered a back spasm. It was to have been Halfpenny's first Wales start since July 2021.
- Replacements Scott Baldwin and Owen Williams are set for their first appearances for Wales since 2017.
- Flanker Peter O'Mahony will play his 90th test for Ireland this weekend.
- Stuart McCloskey will make his first Six Nations appearance since making his debut for Ireland in the 2016 Championship against England.

Coach notes

- This will be Warren Gatland's first match in charge of Wales following his reappointment as coach in December.

- Gatland coached Wales from 2008-19, winning the Six Nations title in 2008, 2012, 2013 and 2019, three of them with the Grand Slam.
- Gatland has won 71 of his 126 tests in charge of Wales (56 per cent).
- Gatland has been involved in 60 Six Nations games as a head coach (50 with Wales, 10 with Ireland), the same tally as the other five head coaches in the 2023 Championship combined.
- The New Zealander also coached Ireland, winning half of his 34 tests in charge between 1998 and 2001.
- He won two of his three tests against Wales as Ireland coach.
- Andy Farrell has never finished outside the top three in the Six Nations as Ireland coach with two third places and their runners-up finish in 2022.
- Farrell has won 10 of his 15 games in charge of Ireland in the Six Nations.
- Farrell made three Six Nations starts for England at centre in the 2007 Six Nations with wins against Scotland and Italy followed by a 43-13 loss to Ireland.

ENGLAND v SCOTLAND – TWICKENHAM STADIUM, LONDON – KO 16:45 GMT

Related features

James Marsh: The story of the only male player to represent two home unions

Referee

Paul Williams (New Zealand) PROFILE >>
Debut as referee: 12 November, 2016 – Romania 23-10 USA
Tests as referee: 27
Six Nations debut: 16 March, 2019 – England 38-38 Scotland
Six Nations tests as referee: 2

- Paul Williams' Six Nations debut as a referee came four years ago in this fixture, an epic 38-38 draw.
- His only other experience as a Six Nations referee was Scotland's 28-17 win at home to France in 2020.
- Williams will referee England for the fifth time and first since their 21-17 series-clinching victory against Australia last July.
- England are yet to lose with the New Zealand official in the middle (W3, D1)
- Scotland are also unbeaten in their four tests with Williams in charge (W3, D1), although the last occasion was back in March 2020.

Head-to-head

Played: 140 – England leads 76-45 with 19 draws
Points for: England 1,710 / Scotland 1,262 (avg. score: 12-9)
Highest score: England 61 (61-21 on 11 March, 2017) / Scotland 38 (38-38 on 16 March, 2019)
Biggest winning margin: Scotland 27 (33-6 on 15 February, 1986) / England 40 (43-3 on 3 March, 2001 and 61-21 on 11 March, 2017)

First met: 27 March, 1871 – Scotland* 0-0 England – Raeburn Place, Edinburgh
Last met: 5 February, 2022 – Scotland 20-17 England – Murrayfield Stadium, Edinburgh
** Scotland won by one goal*

Head-to-head notes

- This is the oldest match in international rugby, having celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2021.
- Finn Russell kicked a late penalty as Scotland retained the Calcutta Cup in a breathless 20-17 victory in last year's encounter.
- It was Russell's second penalty of the match and he also converted Ben White's try. The remainder of Scotland's points came from a penalty try.
- Marcus Smith scored all of England's points, with four penalties and a try in a sparkling performance on his Six Nations debut.
- England have lost their last three opening matches, the same as in the rest of the Six Nations era.
- England have not won on the opening weekend since they defeated Ireland 32-20 in Dublin, with a draw to Scotland followed by two defeats.
- Scotland have been victorious in four of their last six opening day encounters, but from 2000-16 they only won once.
- Scotland have never won their first two matches of a Championship in the Six Nations era. Last year's win over England was followed by a 20-17 loss to Wales in Cardiff.

- Scotland's 11-6 win in the corresponding fixture two years ago was their first at Twickenham since 1983. In the 18 matches at the venue between wins, Scotland had drawn two and lost 16.
- It was also England's first home defeat in the Six Nations in three years.
- England are one try away from scoring 250 tries against Scotland in test rugby.

Team notes

- England finished third in last season's Six Nations despite only winning two games – against Italy (33-0) and Wales (23-19).
- Scotland won twice, too, beating Italy 33-22 in addition to the opening round win over England, to also finish on 10 points but England had the better points difference.
- England won only five of 12 tests in 2022, losing six and drawing 25-25 with New Zealand in the Autumn Nations Series.
- Only two of these wins came at Twickenham, against Italy in the Six Nations and Japan (42-13) in the Autumn Nations Series.
- Scotland also managed only five victories in 2022, three of them at Murrayfield against England (20-17), Fiji (28-12) and Argentina (52-29). They did not win back-to-back matches.
- If England can score 15 tries in the 2023 Six Nations, they will become the first team to score 1,000 tries in the entire history of the Championship (Four/Five/Six Nations).
- Wales are the closest team to their total of 985 tries with 939.
- England have won only one of their last five tests at Twickenham – against Japan in November (D1, L4).

Player notes

- England's Marcus Smith was the top point scorer in the 2022 Championship with 71, 17 points more than France full-back Melvyn Jaminet.
- Smith is the fifth different Englishman to achieve this feat after Owen Farrell (2016 and 2019), Jonny Wilkinson (2000-01, 2003 and 2008), Toby Flood (2011), and George Ford (2015).
- Farrell is one of three players to reach 500 points in the Championship in the Six Nations era and the first Englishman. Ronan O'Gara has the most with 557, while fellow Irishman Johnny Sexton is on 531 with Farrell on 500.
- In terms of the overall Championship, Farrell is the second highest Englishman behind Jonny Wilkinson, who scored 546 between 1999 and 2011.
- Farrell's win rate as England's captain in the Six Nations (56 per cent) is the worst of any captain to have led the team 10 times or more in the competition since 2000.
- England scrum-half Ben Youngs has the joint most Player of the Match awards in the Championship (five) along with Sergio Parisse.
- Only seven players remain in the starting line-up from Eddie Jones' last test as England coach, the 27-13 loss to South Africa in November. They are: Jamie George, Kyle Sinckler, Maro Itoje, Jack van Poortvliet, Marcus Smith, Owen Farrell and Freddie Steward.
- Ollie Hassell-Collins will make his England debut on the left wing with former England U20 captain Jack Walker in line to do so from the bench as the replacement hooker.
- Veteran prop Dan Cole has been named in an England match-day 23 for the first time since the Rugby World Cup 2019 final.
- Anthony Watson is poised for his first England appearance since March 2021 after the Leicester Tigers player was named on the bench.
- Richie Gray will play his 70th test for Scotland with his fellow second-row Grant Gilchrist reaching 60 caps.
- Scotland scrum-half Ben White will make only his second test start against the country he scored a try against on debut a year ago at Murrayfield.

- Huw Jones starts a first test for Scotland since a try-scoring performance against Italy in March 2021. The centre scored braces in his first two meetings with England in 2017 and 2018.

Coach notes

- This will be Steve Borthwick's first test as a head coach, having been appointed in December following the sacking of Eddie Jones.
- Borthwick has previously served as an assistant coach under Jones for both England and Japan.
- The former England second-row will be attempting to copy his predecessor and Stuart Lancaster before him in beating Scotland in their first game in charge.
- Borthwick played in seven Six Nations during his career between 2001-10, winning the title at the first attempt.
- Borthwick's 57th and final test for England came in their 15-15 draw with Scotland at Murrayfield in the 2010 Six Nations.
- At 43 years of age, Borthwick is the youngest head coach in the competition.
- Scotland coach Gregor Townsend goes into his sixth Six Nations in charge. Their best finish in that time is third place in 2018.
- Townsend was part of the last Scotland side to win the Championship in the last year of the Five Nations in 1999, scoring a try in every match.

SIX NATIONS 2023 – SUNDAY, 5 FEBRUARY

ITALY v FRANCE – STADIO OLIMPICO, ROME – KO 16:00 (15:00 GMT)

Referee

Matthew Carley (England) PROFILE >>
Debut: 8 March, 2014 – Russia 34-18 Portugal
Tests as referee: 32
Six Nations debut: 16 March, 2019 – Italy 14-25 France
Six Nations tests as referee: 5

- Matthew Carley has referred this fixture three times in the past, twice in the Six Nations and one in the build-up to Rugby World Cup 2019.
- All three matches were won by Les Bleus.
- Carley most recently refereed Italy in their closing match of the Autumn Nations Series 2022 – a 63-21 defeat to South Africa in Genoa.
- France have won all four previous away matches when Carley has been the man in the middle – twice against Wales, including last year's 13-9 Six Nations win in Cardiff, and also twice against Italy.

Head-to-head

Played: 46 – France leads 43-3
Points for: Italy 528 / France 1,428 (avg. score 12-31)
Highest score: France 60 (60-13 on 26 March, 1967) / Italy 40 (40-32 on 22 March, 1997)
Biggest winning margin: France 47 (60-13 on 26 March, 1967) / Italy 8 (40-32 on 22 March, 1997)
** Only capped matches for both teams*

First met: 22 April, 1935 – France 44-6 Italy – Rome *(non-cap match for France)*
Last met: 6 February, 2022 – France 37-10 – Stade de France, Paris

Head-to-head notes

- The sides will meet in Pool A at Rugby World Cup 2023, the match to be played at OL Stadium in Lyon on 6 October.
- This is the third year in a row that Italy have played France on the opening weekend.
- Italy have only won 13 matches in the entire history of the Six Nations but three of those – above the round-by-round average – have come in round one.
- Italy have lost their last nine opening round games, however.
- France's 70 per cent win rate on the opening weekend is only bettered by England (74 per cent)
- Italy took the lead in last year's fixture in Paris through debutant winger Tommaso Menoncello, but France went on to win 37-10.
- Paolo Garbisi converted the try and kicked a penalty on the half-hour mark but the Azzurri were unable to score any further points thereafter.
- Gabin Villière scored a hat-trick and fellow winger Damian Penaud also touched down in addition to an early try from Anthony Jelonch as France scored 19 unanswered points in the second half.
- France only trailed for 13 minutes over the course of the 2022 Championship, in the first half of that opening match against Italy.
- France have won their last 13 meetings with Italy, dating back to a 23-18 loss in February 2013.

- The smallest margin in these 13 meetings was two points in 2016 (23-21), the largest 40 points (50-10) in 2021.
- France have won 27 of their last 29 meetings with Italy, losing in 2011 and 2013 in Rome – their only Six Nations defeats to the Azzurri.
- France's record for most tries in a match against Italy is 11 (60-13 win in Toulon, March 1967).
- That match is also France's highest tally and biggest winning margin (47) against Italy.

Team notes

- France won all 10 tests played in 2022 – the first time they have gone through a calendar year with a perfect record.
- Only two other teams have achieved the feat in the professional era – New Zealand in 2013 and England in 2016.
- Italy won five tests in 2022 – their best return since they managed six in 2007.
- France are on a record winning streak of 13 tests, having last tasted defeat on 17 July, 2021 when they lost the third and deciding test in their series with Australia 33-30 in Brisbane.
- This includes nine victories on home soil, six at the Stade de France and one each in Bordeaux, Marseille and Toulouse.
- Their previous record was 10 consecutive victories between April 1931 and October 1937.
- France's last loss on home soil was a 27-23 defeat by Scotland in the Six Nations in March 2021.
- France go into this Six Nations as defending champions having captured their first title and Grand Slam since 2010.
- It was France's fourth Grand Slam in the Six Nations era. They achieved the feat in 2002, 2004 and 2010 with titles also secured in 2006 and 2007.
- France also completed a Grand Slam in 1968, 1977, 1981, 1987, 1997 and 1998.
- Damian Penaud and Romain Ntamack joined their fathers in winning Grand Slams.
- Italy ended a record 36-match losing run in the Championship with victory over Wales in the final round of fixtures last year, but still finished bottom of the Championship for the seventh year in a row.
- Italy have now collected the wooden spoon eight times in the last nine years with Scotland keeping them off the bottom in 2015.
- Italy are on a 26-game losing run at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome dating back to a 22-15 win over Ireland on 16 March, 2013.
- The closest the Azzurri have come to victory in this losing streak was a 29-27 loss to Scotland in March 2018.
- Italy conceded 33 points in each of last year's two home games at the Stadio Olimpico (33-22 v Scotland and 33-0 v England).

Player notes

- France captain Antoine Dupont was named Guinness Six Nations Player of the Championship in 2022, having become the first Frenchman to win it in 2020.
- Dupont becomes only the third player to win it more than once after Stuart Hogg (2016, 2017) and Brian O'Driscoll (2006, 2007, 2009).
- Dupont has yet to lose a Six Nations game as captain, having taken on the armband at the start of last year's Grand Slam campaign.
- The scrum-half made his debut off the bench against Italy in the 2017 Six Nations.
- France duo Gabin Villière and Damian Penaud finished as the joint top try-scorers in the 2022 Championship alongside Ireland winger James Lowe (three).
- Ethan Dumortier will make his France debut on the left wing.
- Charles Ollivon returns to the back-row in the Six Nations for the first time since March 2021 after missing last year's Championship through injury.

- Italy full-back Ange Capuozzo was named World Rugby Men's 15s Breakthrough Player of the Year in partnership with Tudor in November.
- Italy second-row Edoardo Iachizzi, who plays his club rugby in France for Vannes, will make his debut only weeks after playing for Italy A in a training match with Romania A.
- Two other members of Italy's squad play their rugby in France – Ange Capuozzo for Stade Toulousain and replacement Pietro Ceccarelli for Brive.
- Centre Luca Morisi will play his 40th test for the Azzurri.
- The Cannone brothers, Lorenzo and Niccolò, start a test in the same pack for the third time but the first in the Six Nations.

Coach notes

- France coach Fabien Galthié's 80 per cent win rate is the joint-best of any coach in the history of the Six Nations, matching that of Clive Woodward and Stuart Lancaster during their time in charge of England.
- Galthié led France to their first Six Nations title and Grand Slam in 12 years in 2022.
- At 61 years of age, Italy's Kieran Crowley is the oldest head coach in the competition.
- With one win from five Six Nations matches (20 per cent), Crowley has the joint-best win success rate for Italy in the Championship alongside Pierre Berbizier (P10, W2, D1, L7 from 2007-08).

RUGBY EUROPE CHAMPIONSHIP 2023 – SATURDAY, 4 FEBRUARY

POOL B: ROMANIA v POLAND – STADIONUL NATIONAL ARCUL DE TRIUMF, BUCHAREST – KO 14:00 (12:00 GMT)

Related features

Everything you need to know about the men's Rugby Europe Championship 2023

Poland prepared for steep learning curve

Referee

Saba Abulashvili (Georgia)
Test debut: 29 February, 2020 – Germany 20-33 Switzerland
Tests as referee: 2

- Saba Abulashvili will make his Rugby Europe Championship debut, having previously only refereed in the second tier Trophy in 2020 and 2021.
- He becomes the third Georgian official to referee at this level after Nika Amashukeli and Shota Tevzadze.
- It will be the first time he takes charge of Romania, while he oversaw Poland's 21-16 victory over Germany in November 2021.

Head-to-head

Played: 16 – Romania leads 16-0
Points for: Romania 538 / Poland 119 (avg. score: 33-1)
Highest score: Romania 74 (74-13 on 2 May, 1998) / Poland 21 (21-38 on 5 November, 1977)
Biggest winning margin: Romania 61 (74-13 on 2 May, 1998)

First met: 21 May, 1959 – Romania 41-3 Poland – Stadionul Dinamo, Bucharest
Last met: 2 May, 1998 – Romania 74-13 Poland – Bucharest

Head-to-head notes

- This is the first test between the sides in nearly 25 years, since Romania won 74-13 in Bucharest in May 1998.
- Winger Lucian Colceriu scored four and centre Gabriel Brezoianu got a hat-trick back in that victory as the Oaks crossed for 12 tries.
- Mihai Vioreanu (2), Petru Mitu, Adrian Girbu and Constantin Dragnea were the Oaks' other try-scorers.
- Poland's solitary try was scored by replacement Marek Janulewicz.
- The closest Poland have come to victory is a 6-0 loss in the second meeting between the teams in 1960.

Team notes

- Romania won the title the first time the competition changed its name from the European Nations Cup Division 1A to the Rugby Europe Championship in 2017.
- They have not won it since but have been runners-up to Georgia in the last two years.
- Last year's second-place finish secured them a place at Rugby World Cup 2023 as Europe 2. They will face defending champions South Africa, Ireland, Scotland and Tonga in Pool B.

- The last time Poland played at an equivalent level to this was when they finished third in the old FIRA tournament in 1996-97.
- Poland earned their place after finishing runners-up to Belgium in the second tier Rugby Europe Trophy last season.
- Poland won four of their five games with their only defeat coming against the champions.
- Romania have lost their last two home tests (against Samoa and Uruguay) and haven't lost three in a row on home soil since 2018-19, when beaten by the USA, Uruguay and Georgia.
- The 22-0 reverse against Samoa was the first time Romania had failed to score in a test since they were beaten 42-0 by Scotland at Rugby World Cup 2007 (a run of 135 matches)
- Romania are one try away from bringing up their century against Poland.

Player notes

- Loose forward Mihai Macovei became the fifth Romanian player to win 100 caps for his country in Romania's last match, a 22-0 home defeat to Samoa.
- Florin Vlaicu (129 caps), Catalin Fercu (109), Valentin Calafeteanu and Florin Surugiu (both 100) are the others, the latter having reached his personal milestone only a week earlier.
- Second-row Andrei Mahu will make his test debut for Romania. He played 21 tests for Moldova between 2011-19 before switching to Romania under the birthright transfer process.
- Ironically, Mahu made his Moldova debut against Poland in a 17-17 draw in November 2011.
- Two of Romania's replacement front rows are set for their test debuts off the bench in prop Thomas Cretin and hooker Robert Irimescu, the latter playing for Romania A in a training match against Italy A last month.
- Alin Conache is a third replacement in line for his test debut for the Oaks against Poland.
- Number eight Piotr Zeszutek returns from injury to captain Poland. Zeszutek, a former triallist with London-based Harlequins, sat out Poland's last two tests.
- Poland have named 18-year-old Jake Wisniewski at loose-head prop, the teenager one of four uncapped players in the starting line-up in Dominik Morycki, Peter Hudson Kowalewicz and Robert Wojtowicz.
- Dominik Mohyja and Arthur Klis are also poised for first test appearances off the bench, the former coming in after the uncapped Jakub Burek was injured in the captain's run.

Coach notes

- Oaks head coach Andy Robinson stepped down as head coach of the Oaks in December after a run of just two wins in eight tests in 2022.
- Romanian Eugen Apjok has taken over from Robinson on an interim basis.
- Christian Hitt has been Poland's head coach since April 2021 and has won five of his six tests in charge of the team.
- Hitt will be assisted by fellow Welshman and former Wales internationals in Morgan Stoddart and Bradley Davies, while hooker Scott Baldwin will be involved remotely following his Six Nations call-up by Wales.

POOL B: PORTUGAL v BELGIUM – CAR RUGBY DO JAMOR, LISBON – KO 19:00 GMT

Related features

Everything you need to know about the men's Rugby Europe Championship 2023

Samuel Marques kicks Portugal to Rugby World Cup 2023

"The whole of Portugal is counting on you!"

Referee

Hollie Davidson (Scotland) PROFILE >>
Test debut: 9 November 2018 – England 57-5 USA
Tests as referee: 26 (23 women's, three men's)

- Hollie Davidson will take charge of a match in the Rugby Europe Championship for the first time, having previously overseen a match in Conference 1 South in 2019.
- She follows in the footsteps of Joy Neville, who refereed Spain's 16-14 win over Russia in the competition in 2019.
- The Rugby World Cup 2021 final referee will officiate Portugal for the second time in Lisbon, having been in the middle for their 38-31 loss to Italy last July.
- That match saw Davidson become the first female referee to officiate a men's Six Nations team in a test. She was supported by an all-female team of officials.
- Davidson enjoyed a 2022 to remember, refereeing both the Commonwealth Games and Rugby World Cup Sevens finals as well as the RWC 2021 final in New Zealand.
- Davidson is only the second official to referee Rugby World Cup finals in both sevens and 15s, the other being Craig Joubert (RWC 2011 and RWC Sevens 2005)

Head-to-head

Played: 15 – Portugal leads 10-3 with two draws
Points for: Portugal 233 / Belgium 181 (avg. score 16-12)
Highest score: Portugal 29 (29-18 on 16 Match, 1996) / Belgium 29 (29-18 on 20 May, 2017)
Biggest winning margin: Portugal 12 (24-12 on 5 May, 1990) / Belgium 11 (29-18 on 20 May, 2017)

First met: 24 April, 1966 – Belgium 3-3 Portugal – Brussels
Last met: 1 February, 2020 – Portugal 23-17 Belgium – Estadio Universitario, Lisbon

Head-to-head notes

- This is the first time the sides will have met since Portugal won 23-17 in 2020.
- Manuel Cardoso Pinto and Jose Vareta scored Portugal's tries in the victory with Dany Antunes converting both and kicking three penalties.
- The scores had been tied at 17-17 before Antunes kicked two penalties in the final 15 minutes at the Estadio Universitario in Lisbon.
- Alun Williams converted Thomas de Molder's try and kicked a penalty with Belgium also being awarded a first-half penalty try.
- That match was also refereed by a Scottish official in Sam Grove-White.
- Portugal have won five of their last six meetings with Belgium, the exception being a 29-18 loss in the Rugby Europe Championship play-off in Brussels in May 2017. Belgium's victory consigned Portugal to another year in the Rugby Europe Trophy.
- Only three players from that 2017 victory remain in the Belgium match-day 23 in Thomas Dienst, Thomas de Molder and Jens Torfs.

- Portugal have won six previous home encounters with Belgium and only lost one – 13-7 in December 1987.
- Neither team has scored 30 points or more in any of the previous meetings.
- The biggest margin of victory is only 12 points – Portugal winning 24-12 in 1990.
- The highest aggregate match score is just 47 points (achieved three times, in 1996, 2016 and 2017).

Team notes

- Portugal began last season's Rugby Europe Championship with a 25-25 draw away to Georgia, ending the Lelos' 20-match winning streak in the competition in the process.
- Os Lobos won two games – 59-3 against the Netherlands and were also awarded the points from their cancelled game against Russia.
- As the side ranked third in the Rugby Europe Championship across 2021 and 2022, Portugal took up the region's place at the Final Qualification Tournament for Rugby World Cup 2023 in Dubai in November.
- Portugal went on qualify for RWC 2023 following bonus-wins against Kenya and Hong Kong and a nail-biting draw with the USA, pipping the Eagles for the final place in France on points difference.
- Portugal will play Wales, Australia, Fiji and Georgia in Pool C at what is their second Rugby World Cup, having made their debut in France back in 2007.
- Belgium won the Rugby Europe Trophy in 2021-22, winning four of their five games. The Black Devils' only loss was 22-18 away to Switzerland.
- The expansion and restructure of the Rugby Europe Championship to an eight-team competition sees Belgium return to the top tier for the first time since they were relegated after losing a play-off to Netherlands in May 2021.

Player notes

- Samuel Marques was Portugal's hero in the RWC 2023 Final Qualification Tournament, his penalty with the final kick of the game securing the draw that took Os Lobos to France.
- Winger Raffaele Storti scored three tries in the Final Qualification Tournament and has scored 13 tries in 18 tests.
- While these players are missing against Belgium, centre José Lima will have a milestone to celebrate with his 50th test for Portugal.
- Replacement prop Pierre Fernandes, who turned 21 next month, is poised for his test debut for Portugal.
- Winger Victor André and full-back Jordan Gott will both make their debuts for Belgium.
- Four players in Belgium's starting line-up were born this century with centre Florian Remue the youngest at only 19.
- Captain Thomas Dienst, by contrast, is the oldest player in the squad at 36 and the only player born before 1990.

Coach notes

- Patrice Lagisquet contests his fourth Rugby Europe Championship in charge of Portugal, having been appointed in 2019.
- His first taste of the competition was a 23-17 win against Belgium in February 2020.
- Lagisquet has guided Portugal to their first Rugby World Cup for 16 years.
- This will be Mike Ford's first match as Belgium coach, having been appointed in January.
- Ford has previously coached Germany in the Rugby Europe Championship in 2019, including a 29-22 loss to Belgium in Brussels

RUGBY EUROPE CHAMPIONSHIP 2023 – SUNDAY, 5 FEBRUARY

POOL A: GEORGIA v GERMANY – AVCHALA STADIUM, TBILISI – KO 13:00 (09:00 GMT)

Related features

Everything you need to know about the men's Rugby Europe Championship 2023

Referee

Cristan Serban (Romania)
Test debut: 14 May, 2017 – Montenegro 20-32 Slovakia
Tests as referee: 5

- Cristian Serban takes charge of his third match in the Rugby Europe Championship, having overseen a match in each of the 2019 and 2020 editions.
- Georgia ran out 78-6 winners over Belgium in February 2020 when they last had Serban in the middle.
- This is the first time that the Romanian official will referee Germany.

Head-to-head

Played: 8 – Georgia leads 8-0
Points for: Georgia 428 / Germany 35 (avg. score 54-5)
Highest score: Georgia 77 (77-3 on 6 February, 2010) / Germany 8 (8-64 on 7 February, 2015)
Biggest winning margin: Georgia 74 (77-3 on 6 February, 2010)

First met: 15 October, 1995 – Georgia 14-3 Germany – National Stadium, Tbilisi
Last met: 10 March, 2019 – Georgia 52-3 Germany – AIA Arena, Kutaisi

Head-to-head notes

- This is their first meeting since March 2019 when Georgia won 52-3 in Kutaisi.
- Georgia have scored 50 points or more in their last six meetings with Germany.
- Germany have failed to score a try against Georgia in their last three encounters and have gone 315 minutes since they last breached the Lelos' line.
- Germany have never managed to reach double figures on the scoreboard against Georgia.

Team notes

- Georgia have won the last five Rugby Europe Championship titles and have won every title at this level since 2011 bar one, in 2017 when Romania temporarily ended their monopoly.
- Germany are playing in the Rugby Europe Championship for the first time since they were relegated in 2019.
- Georgia qualified for Rugby World Cup 2023 as Europe 1 and will take on Wales, Australia, Fiji and Portugal in Pool C.
- The closest Germany came to Rugby World Cup qualification was when they reached the Repechage for the 2019 tournament but lost out to Canada.
- Georgia's unbeaten run in the Rugby Europe Championship stands at a record 23 matches (W22, D1), having won 20 in a row before beginning the 2022 tournament with a 25-25 draw with Portugal.
- The Lelos last tasted defeat in the Championship on 19 March, 2017, losing 8-7 to Romania in Bucharest.

- Georgia are unbeaten at home in their last 46 matches in the Rugby Europe Championship dating back to a 19-14 defeat to Portugal in February 2004.
- The Lelos have won 64 of their last 75 home games against all opposition, a win return of 85 per cent.
- Georgia won seven and drew one of their nine tests in 2022, losing only to Samoa (20-19) in Tbilisi in November.
- This run included Georgia's first victories over a Six Nations team, beating Italy 28-19 in Batumi in July before edging Wales 13-12 in Cardiff in the Autumn Nations Series.
- Germany played only two tests in 2022, winning both on home soil against Belgium (33-26) and Switzerland (34-25).
- Germany's last victory away from home was a 46-16 triumph over Lithuania in Siauliai in October 2021.

Player notes

- Lasha Malaguradze is set to win his 100th cap after nearly three years out of the team, having last played in a 39-24 win over Portugal in March 2020.
- Malaguradze made his debut for Georgia against Portugal in February 2008 and will become the Lelos' fifth test centurion after David Kacharava (122), Merab Kvirikashvili (115), Alexander Todua (102) and Giorgi Chkhaidze (100).
- Georgia's Tedo Abzhandadze scored 105 points in 2022 from his nine test starts at fly-half. Only Emiliano Boffelli (Argentina) from the leading nations scored more than him in the calendar year.
- Georgia will be without captain Merab Sharikadze for their first two matches of the Championship as he is suspended. Beka Saginadze will captain the Lelos for the first time.
- Georgia have named three uncapped players in their match-day squad with winger Otar Lashkhi to start and Sergo Abramishvili and Tengiz Zamtaradze among the replacements.
- Fly-half Luka Matkava will start for the first time after two appearances off the bench, the last against Wales when he kicked the winning penalty late on in Cardiff.
- Five players are poised to make their test debuts for Germany, three in the starting line-up in centre Sebastian Rodwell, hooker Andrew Reintges and second-row Michel Himmer, along with Kilian Bendjaballah and Christian Bottomley off the bench.

Coach notes

- Since Levan Maisashvili replaced Milton Haig as Georgia's head coach following RWC 2019, he has guided the Lelos to three Rugby Europe Championship titles as well as historic wins over Italy and Wales.
- Georgia have not lost a Rugby Europe Championship match played under Maisashvili (W13, D1)
- Former national team player Mark Kuhlmann has been Germany head coach since September 2020.
- He has a 50 per cent win record with two wins and two defeats in the Rugby Europe Trophy to his name.
- Kehoma Brenner (forwards) and Lars Eckert (backs) will assist him in the Rugby Europe Championship

POOL A: SPAIN v NETHERLANDS – ESTADIO NACIONAL UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE, MADRID – KO 12:45 (11:45 GMT)

Related features

Everything you need to know about the men's Rugby Europe Championship 2023

Lyn Jones: Netherlands can 'do a Chile' and reach future Rugby World Cups

Referee

Paulo Duarte (Portugal) PROFILE >>
Test debut: 20 April, 2013 – Bosnia and Herzegovina 19-15 Finland
Tests as referee: 9 (at 23 May, 2022)

- Paulo Duarte referees in the Rugby Europe Championship for the second time. He took charge of two matches involving Georgia in 2021.
- He takes charge of Spain for the first time in a test match, having overseen the Netherlands once before, in their 54-12 victory over the Ukraine in November 2016
- Duarte returns to 15s action after refereeing in the Hamilton and Sydney rounds of the HSBC World Rugby Sevens Series last month.

Head-to-head

Played: 15 – Spain leads 14-0 with one draw
Points for: Spain 461 / Netherlands 114 (avg. score: 30-7)
Highest score: Spain 63 (63-3 on 6 April, 2002) / Netherlands 15 (15-29 on 29 October, 1989)
Biggest winning margin: Spain 60 (63-3 on 6 April, 2002)

First met: 23 April, 1967 – Spain 14-5 Netherlands – Amsterdam
Last met: 5 February, 2022 – Spain 43-0 Netherlands – Estadio Nacional Universidad Complutense, Madrid

Head-to-head notes

- Spain ran out 43-0 winners when the sides last met at this venue a year ago.
- Seven different players scored Spain's tries in the win: Asier Usarraga, Marco Pinto and Jordi Jorba in the first half, followed by Alvar Gimeno, Manuel Ordas, Gauthier Minguillon and Santiago Ovejero in the second.
- Manuel Ordas kicked three conversions and Mathieu Belie added the extras to their final try.
- The Netherlands have conceded 95 unanswered points against Spain since Daan van der Avoird's try, converted by Marc Mistou, in the fourth minute of a 52-7 loss in Amsterdam in December 2021.
- Spain are 39 points away from reaching the 500-point milestone against the Netherlands.
- Spain prevented the Netherlands from scoring in the last encounter for the first time in the 55-year history of the fixture.
- Spain's record 63-3 win over the Netherlands in 2002 is Los Leones' seventh biggest win of all time.

Team notes

- Spain won six out of eight tests played in 2022, including their first four fixtures in the Rugby Europe Championship.

- Spain scored 23 tries in last season's competition, at an average of 4.6 per game.
- Los Leones ended the year with a 34-15 victory against Namibia in Madrid.
- Los Leones' only defeats in 2022 came against Georgia (49-15, away) and against Tonga (40-6, home).
- The Netherlands lost all four games played in the 2022 Rugby Europe Championship, conceding 212 points and scoring only 25.
- The Netherlands played two tests following the conclusion of the Rugby Europe Championship, losing 30-7 at home to Zimbabwe and then 37-25 to Canada. Both matches took place in Amsterdam.

Player notes

- Spain prop Jon Zabala captains Los Leones, having first been handed the armband in the defeat to Tonga last November.
- The Netherlands have also opted for a prop as captain in Hugo Langelaan.
- Like Zabala, Langelaan's only previous experience of captaining his country was last November, in a home defeat to Canada.
- Spain have a number of uncapped players in their match-day squad with Estanislao Bay the only one named in the starting line-up, the scrum-half having gone through the birthright transfer process to switch from Argentina.
- Raphael Nieto, Lucas Santamaria, Alberto Carmona and Ike Irusta could all join him as test debutants off the bench, a number of them having played for Los Leones against the Barbarians last November.
- Reinhardt Fortuin, from the Cheetahs in South Africa, is a fly-half with Super Rugby experience and is in line to make his debut for the Netherlands off the bench.
- The wider Netherlands squad for the 2023 Championship is certainly eclectic with players from seven different countries spread across 21 clubs selected by Lyn Jones.

Coach notes

- Santiago Santos is set to lead his country into a 10th Rugby Europe Championship having taken up his most recent role at the end of 2013.
- The Netherlands go into the Rugby Europe Championship with a new man at the helm in Lyn Jones. Jones succeeded Zane Gardiner in November 2022.