

Ukraine calls for Australian reinforcements as it launches bid to take on the world



By [Rob Harris](#), Sydney Morning Herald, September 16, 2024

London: Having shown its fight and grit on the battlefield, Ukraine is now turning its attention to the sports field. And it has called on Australia for reinforcements.

Several Australian footballers of Ukrainian heritage will for the first time team up with Ukraine-based players, including serving soldiers, for the nation's team at next month's European qualifiers for the 2026 Rugby League World Cup.



Ukrainian players Jonah Ngaronoa and Tom Mencinsky. *Credit: Louise Kennerley*

The first Ukrainian league club, Legion XIII, was formed by students in 2007 and played in the Russian championship, before a four-team Ukrainian championship was founded in 2009. The next year, that number increased to six clubs.

Before Moscow's invasion in February 2022, there were 10 clubs, 29 teams and 500 players, including seniors and juniors, playing rugby league across the country.

More than 60 players – including some in the national team – are thought to have contributed to the war effort, either as a member of the army or Territorial Defence Force. Despite this, the team – courtesy of several overseas players of Ukrainian heritage – jumped from 28th to 20th in the IRL World rankings last year having defeated Greece twice in Athens.

Coached by Brit Dan Beardshaw and managed by Australian Matt Girvan, the team's six Australian members were selected after an extensive trial process, including a series of matches against other heritage teams.

“When the war started, as a longtime rugby league volunteer married to a Ukrainian, I thought to myself: ‘What can I do to contribute to standing with Ukraine?’ That’s when we started identifying players with Ukrainian heritage and organising the heritage team together with the Ukrainian Rugby League Federation,” Girvan said.

“We were amazed by the turnout, enthusiasm and commitment. Over 40 players from NSW, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia have participated, and we’ve ultimately landed on six from Brisbane, Canberra, Sydney and Newcastle to go to Europe and team up with the Ukrainian-based players,” Girvan said.

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To qualify for the Ukrainian national team, Tom Mencinsky, 28, from Sydney, successfully made the transition to league after a lifetime playing rugby union, including for Northern Suburbs. All four of his grandparents were refugees during World War II and then migrated to Australia.

“It’s a massive privilege to be selected to represent my grandparents and my Ukrainian heritage. But it’s even more significant to me during wartime because it shows how Australia is in solidarity with Ukraine in the fight for democracy,” Mencinsky said.

Also in the squad is Jonah Ngaronoa, a Cronulla Sharks junior, who now plays in the Ron Massey Cup with the Glebe Dirty Reds. He played the 2023 season with the Sydney Roosters in the NSW Cup.



Dan Beardshaw (centre) the Ukrainian national team coach with players Tom Mencinsky (left) and Jonah Ngaronoa. *Credit: Louise Kennerley*

Their efforts have won the praise and encouragement of some of league's biggest names, with Penrith's Nathan Cleary and Canberra Raider Hudson Young – both with Ukraine heritage – sending messages of support to the country and the team.

Ukraine's first match will be a Test against the Czech Republic, followed by their first World Cup qualifier fixture on October 22 against host nation France in Carcassonne. They could then play either Serbia or Wales in a further match the following week in Perpignan, France.

Artur Martyrosian, a serving soldier in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, is president of the Ukrainian Rugby League Federation. He said teaming up with heritage players was a huge morale boost.

"It's not only great for those of us in the growing rugby league community in Ukraine. It also says to Ukrainians more broadly that Australians are on their side, and that makes a great deal of difference during this terrible war by Russia against us," Martyrosian said.

The Australians are fundraising to be able to join their teammates, some of whom serve in the military in Ukraine's defence against Russia, for the fixtures, and have now launched a [GoFundMe page with a target of \\$30,000](#).