

Bolton sisters on 2017 Women's Rugby World Cup squad

By Bill Rea and Jake Courtepatte

Canada's senior women's head coach Francois Ratier has named a 28-player roster for the 2017 Women's Rugby World Cup to be held in Ireland next month, and there are two members from Bolton.

The squad features 18 returnees from Canada's 2014 squad that won silver including captain Kelly Russell as well as her sister Laura.

"I would say our capacity to respond to challenges is the greatest strength of this squad," Ratier said. "We have been hard on players in New Zealand and during the Can-Am to make sure they were not in the team just to wear the jersey but to perform in every game."

"They have responded well and we are expecting the same during this tough World Cup," Ratier added.

Laura, 28, was on the team in 2014, having been a member since 2011, and Kelly, 30, has been a member since 2007.

They both got their start with Toronto Nomads, and then with Cowichan Rugby Football Club of Vancouver Island.

The 2014 tournament saw Canada take the silver behind England.

"We're hoping to do one better," Kelly commented.

"I think what has changed going into this World Cup is knowing what we are going into," Laura observed. "2014 was the first World Cup for most who were on that team, with all the returning players we have, we are coming into this World Cup with an understanding of how it works and being more experienced team in general."

Laura thinks the Canadian squad has a "good chance" of bringing home the title.

"We have been moving around the top three since the last World Cup, and the commitment and dedication our whole team including coaching and support staff has to us is amazing," she said.

Rugby is something of a family tradition for the Russells.

"Our dad played when we were growing up," Kelly commented, recalling they used to attend his games when they were kids. She started playing when she was in Grade 10 at Humberview Secondary School.

"As soon as I got to Humberview in Grade 9, I joined up," Laura said.

She added there are a lot of appealing aspects to the sport, pointing out competitors have to be fit and smart.

"There's just a big love for the game," Kelly added.

Rugby is still a relatively new sport for women. Kelly said the first World Cup for women was held in 1991. "It's one of Canada's fastest growing women's sports," she observed.

The sisters are currently based in B.C. Laura works at Shawnigan Lake School on Vancouver island in the office, but she also coaches rugby and helps out at the boarding house.

Kelly is a residential facility assistant at Brentwood College School, also on Vancouver Island, and coaches rugby and works with students on strength and conditioning.

'We're rivals,' Laura said, referring to the two schools' rugby teams.

There's been considerable preparation for the coming tournament.

Laura said they took part in a tournament in Ireland in November, as well as a Can-Am series in April. And they just got back from a tune-up tournament in New Zealand.

'We've had a lot of prep this year,' she remarked.

The squad selected shows very little turnover from Canada's Can-Am Series and International Women's Rugby Series (IWRS) earlier this year.

'We want to keep some continuity in our work and it's important for players to know each other on and off the field,' Ratier said. 'We also have a non-travelling list of players who know our plans and culture.'

Canada beat the U.S. twice in March, winning 39-5 and 37-10 before heading to New Zealand for the IWRS.

Canada finished third in the IRWS after a 28-16 loss to the Black Ferns, a 27-20 defeat to England and a resounding 45-5 win over Australia.

Canada currently ranks third in the world. In Ireland, they will face second-ranked New Zealand, 10th-ranked Wales and 23rd-ranked Hong Kong. All three pool games will take place at Billings Park UCD in Dublin.

'First we need to get through the pool,' Ratier said. 'With this tournament format, there is no room for mistakes.'

'We will take it one game at a time and we will see where we are at the end, but right now our entire focus is on the game against Hong Kong,' he added.

The team will be leaving for Ireland July 26. Canada faces Hong Kong Aug. 9, Wales Aug. 13 and New Zealand Aug. 17.

The tournament features three pools of four. The three pool winners advance to the semi-finals along with the best second place team.



Kelly Russell



Laura Russell

All three of Canada's pool games as well as the two semi-finals and final, will be shown live on TSN.