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Special FIRA-AER AGM in Las Palmas

EDITO



Photo Assemblée Générale Las Palmas

THE FIRA-AER OF FUTURE IS BORN IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

The 86th FIRA-AER Annual General Meeting will go down in the history books. For the first time in its history the association brought together the three entities which make up the organization, i.e. the National Technical Directors, General Secretaries and Chairmen for a "proper" conference in every sense of the word.

The genius behind this idea was Chairman Jean-Claude Baqué whose credentials as a player, educator, administrator, regional, national and international manager are well known. Baqué is no average Chairman and true to form he skipped lunch in order to kick off the National Technical Director's meeting. At the meeting he posed the all-important question "Why is this change necessary?", to which he suggested the following answer:

"We need to put an end to fragmentation. We need to group together so that measures can be implemented collectively, quickly and directly by any of the three decision-making bodies. Why start with the sports sector? Because without it the other two would have no purpose and it equally provides a very specific road map for us to follow. You need to draw up your plans of action for next season so that you can discuss them with your General Secretaries and Chairmen. They should include any related financial concerns. You should explore all areas (sporting, administrative and policy-related) so that when we finish today we can be confident that clear and definitive decisions have been made, especially in relation to competition timetables." In the presence of the IRB Director of Development Morgan Buckley and representatives from across the Channel, the "Boss of Europe" didn't mince his words. "I haven't changed", he announced rather impetuously before continuing his forthright address which left no room for diplomacy. In his opening address to the General Secretaries he laid his cards on the table: "Last year your discussions with the National Technical Directors were worthwhile. This year, however, you will have to be more dynamic, specific and focused and more importantly this meeting should result in improved relations. At the very least we need to establish direct contacts in order to get to know and appreciate one another better"

To the Chairmen who were not present at the summary meeting, he made it clear that their role was to "contribute to an already very productive debate"

To conclude my introduction (and before getting into the details of the work carried out in the chapters below) it is worth reminding ourselves again of the significance of this 86th AGM in the Canary Islands. It was a truly historic event in the history of FIRA-AER imbued with a real sense of sporting spirit.

Jean-Claude Baqué was so conscious of this that in his closing speech at the final diner, having thanked the participants for their full participation in all areas, he announced with great emotion:

"You have just created the FIRA-AER of the future".

HENRI GATINEAU



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The NTD's crusade to increase player numbers



The first knights to start their crusade were the National Technical Directors. Led by Jean-Claude Baqué who came straight from the airport to the meeting room, and bolstered by the duo Michel Arpaillange and Douglas Langley, the 25 participants, broken up into four working groups with a spokesperson each, took on the mammoth task of addressing the burning question: "How can we increase player numbers?"

Heading up the section on competitions was Michel Arpaillange who explained the new format for the U18 European Championship which involves three groups of eight and is aimed at ensuring more equally matched games. The Elite group with the six main nations as well as the best two from FIRA-AER; Group A with countries from FIRA-AER 3 and 4 (Romania, Spain, Russia, Sweden, Lithuania, Czech Republic); Group B comprising Poland, Ukraine, Netherlands, Serbia, Switzerland, Hungary, Luxembourg and Latvia. A division C may also be created later (Moldova, Denmark, Bulgaria, Croatia, Austria, Bosnia, Israel, etc.).

At a later stage the four best European teams will be selected and every effort will be made to prepare them for participation at the next level. In response to the argument that it is not a good idea to have too many competitions for players of this age Jean-Claude Baqué suggested that "taking part in competitions does not mean the end of training. On the contrary, competitions provide an opportunity to assess and evaluate the work which has been done. Young players need to get used to competitions like the players from the Southern Hemisphere"

The U19 Championship will take place from 29 October to 6 November in Romania. The plan for 2012 involves camps for 16 to 17 year olds in the U18, U19 and U20 competitions. The Women's sector meeting was kicked off by Douglas Langley. It reviewed reports and plans for 2012 (XV and VII), coaching conferences on Sevens Rugby in Amsterdam from 10 to 13 November and training for coaches, match officials, players, trainers, referees and doctors.

France and Spain presented their education models in several categories and based on these the different groups addressed the question "What is your union doing?". Each spokesperson gave a presentation.

The main theme of the conference was how to increase the number of players. Michel Arpaillange compared the population of each country with the number of people adept at playing Rugby. He instructed those countries with low player-numbers to think about creating a development strategy while keeping in mind that quantity should not compromise quality, and to draw up a recruitment plan. To highlight the extent of the progress which needs to be made in this area he quoted the following statistic: out of 1,387,373 players identified globally, 1,319,381 come from the Six Nations and 122,668 from FIRA-AER. Jean-Claude Baqué cautioned however that "we need to be careful not to confuse number of members with number of players" and suggested that certain countries should

"draw inspiration from the French Pass system which allows us to take all players into account, not just those who are members of clubs."

One participant questioned why the IRB does not initiate a project to make Rugby more popular by simplifying the rules.

The first half of the meeting concluded with the preparation of a document by each group entitled "How to increase the number of players. Arguments and Strategies".

Creation of a Sevens Youth Competition for boys and girls

The second part of the meeting began with a review of all XV's Rugby competitions culminating in discussions, commentaries, critiques and proposals. These were always constructive and always kept the issue of finance in mind. The main theme was the creation of a Sevens Rugby Competition for young players (boys and girls). Jean-Claude Baqué's view was to "agree in principle to a competition for players between 16 and 18 years of age sponsored by the Société Générale. "Seven's Rugby is a very specific discipline and therefore we need to train a maximum number of young people as quickly as possible", he suggested. Michel Arpaillange suggested that "we should explore and reflect on this issue and come up with a proposal at the AGM in December".

Jean-Claude Baqué warned:

"We must be aware that it can be more difficult to plan when dealing with the numerous FIRA-AER member-countries located in different climatic conditions and that this can impact on continuity from year to year. The Six Nations plan their events four years in advance whereas currently our big-ticket events are organised two years in advance. This is the maximum possible at present."

In order to decide on what was the best approach and to make an informed choice all competitions were put up for discussion. A vote on each competition was taken at the end of the debate. A question mark was raised over the U20 Championship and the possibility of dropping it was discussed. Following this each group gave a presentation of its assessments, conclusions and constructive proposals. Belgium explained how it had increased its number of players by 15% per year (25% following the World Cup) over the past ten years.

Jean-Claude Baqué, acting as both participant and observer at the meeting, was impressed: "This is extremely encouraging. It is great to see all of these young people oozing intelligence, enthusiasm, passion and good will".



The "Boss" pays tribute to IRB development

Morgan Buckley, General Director of development at the IRB, kept a close eye on proceedings. Having presented the IRB strategic plan to the National Technical Directors and revealing that Rugby has gained 19% in new markets, that the number of players has increased by 18% since the last World Cup (33% in Africa, 22% in South America and 19% in Asia), that Rugby is now the 3rd most popular sport in the USA and that the 98 IRB member-unions generated 5.5 million players (this statistic refers to members only), he went on to review all the methods which would be used by the major nations, as well as the USA, Mexico and Brazil, to develop Rugby, and he urged the FIRA-AER nations to let their ideas be known. "What are you doing to hold on to players? Have you any new initiatives?"

Following this he thanked his audience in French and paid tribute to the "quality of your work in developing Rugby in Europe" adding that "our cultures may be different but we are always ready to listen to your suggestions and to be flexible".

The National Technical Directors were expected to complete their work in this area during Buckley's second address at the AGM plenary session. At this they learned that:

"The World Cup 2015 is already under way in collaboration with the RFU but that in relation to the Olympic Games it will be the International Olympic Committee and not the IRB who will decide the qualification process. The number of participants has been irrevocably fixed at 12. The IRB is investing in 98 unions. 99 applications for aid for a huge number of projects have been received. We have changed our administration process in order to facilitate the allocation of our financial aid. We have identified the areas in which we will be investing. We will no longer be investing in certain areas, youth Rugby in particular, and we will be limiting the finance of some travel expenses for national teams. We need to take a more radical approach. No financial aid will be received before January 1 2012. We will require unions to provide a statement of their accounts and member-numbers (pre adolescents, adolescents, seniors). We need to justify our existence in the sporting world and to ensure the longevity and good health of our sport while not neglecting our school children, referees and managers. The initial data that we have collated is positive and we have a clearer understanding of where our money is going"

The Romanian Octavian Morariu gave his response to this declaration:

"The smaller nations are embracing Rugby especially since it has been admitted to the Olympic Games. We will apply for Rugby funding to help us out but we are not going to beg for it!"

Outstanding jointly-compiled strategic plan



The collective working session with the Chairmen was described by Jean-Claude Baqué: "As a key page for the future". A page that strategically includes two crucial years: 2015 (World Cup) and 2016 (Olympic Games.) As all nations (with the exceptions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Estonia) have added their contributions to the structure it is, according to the Chairman of FIRA-AER who chaired the whole of the meeting: "an outstanding joint operation. An improvement in the continuity issuing from 37 nations. The financial resources pump has been primed. It is now about planning. By speeding up communications (which are already better) with the VI Nations".

The effective presence of the Chairmen helped to enrich an already highly productive discussion; the three critical cells in the lives of the unions are working in direct contact and these exchanges

are an effective means of gathering information.

Michel Arpaillange introduced the working themes. Douglas Langley presented the IRB strategic plan which runs up to 2020. Michel reviewed that of FIRA-AER to identify the financial solutions that will allow the initiatives to become reality; he noted that everything that had been planned had been achieved (administrative staff; amended byelaws; new U17 competition; reorganisation of the work of the IRB Development Officers; appointment of Technical Directors; TV rights negotiations; changes to the formats of various competitions; collaboration with the VI Nations in terms of coaching, Sevens, Women's rugby, with Europe and its sporting institutions). For the five working groups set up, the following guidelines were defined: 1° Use the World Cup - 2° Bring in the general public - 3° Make the most of the international appeal to develop the women's sector - 4° Improve awareness of European competitions - 5° Fix the dates for the organisation of junior trials. Always with the objective of increasing the numbers registered in mind. By involving the VI Nations in as many competitions as possible. By defining the sectors allocated for XV and VII. By drawing up a training programme for the Commercial Directors. By extending the period of the strategic plan to 2016 and improving competitions at all levels (U13 upwards). By identifying new income sources. By promoting the game and boosting the numbers taking part. To successfully close the gap between the major nations and the others we need to find the finance: bring in TV, make use of Sevens which should enable a better use of the women's sector; include referee training in the strategic plan; be extremely rigorous and dynamic in terms of the quality of all training; prove that the development of Sevens and the management of XV are not incompatible; define and implement a marketing and commercial policy. The overall conclusion: "We need to work on long-term strategies and raise the visibility of rugby everywhere!"

For the Chairmen and General Secretaries, Michel Arpaillange reviewed the new formula for the European U18 championship as outlined in the work of the N.T.Ds. Taking the example of the exceptional Spanish organisation (with all the teams being treated in the same way, housed at the same place geographically for the training and matches). Valuable clarification by Jean-Claude Baqué: "We will select and prepare reliable FIRA-AER teams. To ensure the best possible balance within the competition".

In terms of the seniors' fixtures, meetings at the division level led to joint discussions approved by the Chairmen, to be made official by the Board of Directors.



A Communications Officer for each country

At the opening of the General Secretaries meeting and before handing over to Michel Arpaillange and Bernard Jargeac, Jean-Claude Baqué, standing in for Gilles Bizot, who was on an assignment at the Sevens Grand Prix Series in Moscow, reminded everyone of the propose of the meeting and introduced Amandine Guichard, a specialist in the sporting sector.

Michel Arpaillange highlighted this "unique opportunity to improve the administration of all competitions" He went on to state "we have gone through a difficult period following the implementation of the new competitions and the commercial strategy and policy changes (Sevens, Women's, U18). We have spent three or four months designing our manuals, which will be published in two languages next season, once the necessary corrections have been made. I urge you to make a greater effort in the administration of competitions. Everyone should make an effort to use the correct documents and to be more efficient. With technology at our disposal such as USB keys and computers, the reign of the written letter is finally over!"

Having reminded everyone that the admission of Rugby to the Olympic Games meant that Rugby was moving up the ranks in the hierarchy of sporting disciplines, Bernard Jargeac (who manages the internet site in close collaboration with an administrative team which practices four languages - English, Spain, French and Russian - and which issues press releases in French and English) went on to describe the new uses of the internet site. He also urged the General Secretaries to forward their FIRA-AER messages to all appropriate recipients.

Jean-Claude BAQUÉ: "Stunning success of a group that must maintain its values"



This enormous amount of preparatory work (a stunningly successful precedent that must now be applied for the future) was solemnly confirmed during the Congress in the presence of all representatives. Traditional translation into three languages (English, French and Russian), welcoming speech from the local Chairman, Alfonso MANDADO, thanked by Jean-Claude Baqué for the excellence of the reception amplified by the multiplication of cells.

After congratulating the three new Chairmen (Ukraine, Norway, Czech Republic) attending this 86th Annual Meeting, saluting the 2011 World Cup qualifiers (France, Scotland, England, Georgia, Romania, Italy, Ireland Russia, Wales), congratulating the European champions (Georgia, Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, Israel, Cyprus, Bosnia Herzegovina) and welcoming all the members of the family here together, the FIRA-AER Chairman began his overview of the situation: "A difficult season

in financial terms but one that turned out well thanks to the assistance of committed supporters. Thanks go to everyone for the work achieved. This is the success of a group. If you agree, the operation will be repeated. Together we will continue to train players to form the best possible teams and develop high quality rugby whilst adapting what we do to the difficult choices of the moment. Our outlook, directed towards others, must always be looking upwards... without forgetting the base from which we come but in the true spirit of comradeship that is undeniably ours. Carefully guarding this true treasure in the form of our values of friendship that will protect our rugby".

And the Chairman, to highlight a number of noteworthy successes, used the illustration of the televised retransmission of the European U18 Championship which pulled in a 'mere' 900,000 viewers for two matches.

Following the unanimous approval of the Minutes of the 4 December Board of Directors in Paris, the 5 December Annual Meeting in Paris, the 11 and 12 May Executive committee in Paris, Jean-Louis BARTHES presented the Chairman's Report.

Jean-Louis BARTHES: "FIRA-AER takes on a new dimension"

In accordance with the Chairman's wish, the Secretary General, Jean-Louis Barthès, offered a condensed Report although the sheer volume of material did not help in this task!

Whether in terms of the "general situation" (creation of a new logo and a graphic charter, the recast website, the creation of a trading company, TV retransmissions of the European U18 championship, the four 7's Grand Prix Series, the IRB Vernon PUGH trophy awarded to Jean-Claude Baqué, the new formula for the Annual Meeting, finally); or the "Sports Sector" (details of actions in the areas of training, competitions, refereeing); the "administrative Sector" (use of new technologies by Gilles BIZOT and Amandine GUICHARD for all operations, the new site and "Flash info" in two languages, new governance structure (14 member Executive Committee, 45th BoD post), procedures relating to the legal action against the Catalan Union and the affiliation request from Gibraltar; the VII rugby administrative dossier, the new trading company, involvement of FIRA-AER within European Team Sports, the 2012-2016 strategic plan), the life of the European Association is so diverse and the thirteen commissions set up on the initiative of Jean-Claude Baqué worked so hard that the General Secretary, at the end of the presentation, could only conclude with:

"FIRA-AER, the European regional association has now taken on a whole new dimension".

An overwhelming moment of emotion when he came to offer his personal thanks to the very many friends who had offered their condolences at the death of his son Philippe, Jean-Louis, his voice breaking, choked, had to bring his speech to an end, acknowledged with a thunderous and heartfelt applause.

Annual Report unanimously approved, of course!



Octavian MORARIU: "All set for the start-up of the commercial partnership"



Chair of the Elite Level Commission, Octavian Morariu, outlined the hard work accomplished since 2007 to reach the objective, at last achieved: "The creation of a trading company enabling the start of the partnership". To be recorded and formalised by the Executive Committee in September.

That is: compilation of a specifications sheet in 2008, Eurosport and Sportfive proposals, choice of Eurosport leading to a year of negotiations, the centralisation of rights with the formation of a trading company whose Articles and Memorandum were registered in Malta and working wholly for the FIRA-AER to take the interests of the affiliated nations fully into account. The first transaction was carried in July. Retransmission of the Lyon Grand Prix preceding that in Bucharest and, as of next season: the Four Grands Prix.

The corollary of this progress: a communications policy that must become even more effective with the desired creation of a "Communications Supervisor" (volunteer) position per Union.

Also worthy of note is the remarkable progress of the website (1,500 daily visitors, 3,000 a weekend and 3,500 during the European U18 championship, from around the world and an information source for the media.)

R HOURQUET: "All countries must move forwards to ensure that the refereeing gap does not de

From the inventory in terms of refereeing, where he chairs the Commission (led by Patrick ROBIN to whom he offered his thanks), René Hourquet drew the following conclusion: We can only progress through work. In the field of refereeing all countries must move forwards otherwise the gap will deepen and this runs counter to the global project of FIRA-AER.

Before this he: highlighted the construction of a database of 150 referees; stated his disappointment that thirty four countries approached had not taken part; his satisfaction that only two red cards were issued during the seventy matches refereed; his wish for the assistance of two neutrals in the form of a triplets in group 1B (favourable opinion from Jean-Claude Baqué) and a technical improvement with the sending out of more match DVDs; offered a summary of all those officiating at VII and XV; congratulated Romania for its work in terms of training and thanked everyone for their contributions to the bi or trilingual coaching and who were, as volunteers, trainers, managers, referees, U16/17 camp coordinators and Competition Directors. He also reported that the changes to the laws were being closely followed so that the latest amendments could be released in real-time.

Sevens: Scotland integrated in 2012

The VII Rugby Commission strategic plan presented by its Chairman: Howard THOMAS as a joint strategy with the Elite Level Commission (a card to be played in the commercial operations) led to the following declaration: "I am convinced that our actions will inspire other Regional Associations and that we will play a role in the qualifications for the Olympic Games.

The European work is carried out in close collaboration with the IRB. Scotland requested its incorporation into the twelve participants in the 2012 event for which the host Unions will have to pay the cost of organising the tournaments which reflect the targets of the "World Series" and raised interest of television bodies with whom the negotiations were extremely delicate to the point that they only came to fruition thanks to the huge effort of conciliation on the part of Jean-Claude Baqué who managed to obtain the decisive compensatory support of Société Générale".

Jean-Claude Baqué was realistic in calling for patience: "Let's wait for the outcome of the analysis we will be undertaking during the next Executive Committee meeting. We have completed the hardest part. I need to raise this issue with the VI Nations". A position shared by Michel Arpaillange: "The truth comes from the field of play. The Eurosport technicians were enthusiastic about the quality of the spectacle. Let's be patient. The situation will quickly evolve in our favour".

The Problem of the twinning of the Final in Odense at the same time as the 2012 Summer Congress (possibility of 6 and 7 July) needs to be resolved before 1st August.

Pierre CAMOU's two hats

The former FIRA-AER Treasurer and Current Chairman of the Fédération Française de Rugby had the tough task of replacing IRB Chairman Bernard LAPASSET, detained in Italy for the World U20 Competition. With the abilities we know well, he was perfectly adept at combining the two philosophies.

"This is, for the former European manager that I am, an extremely novel and complex exercise. My natural instinct is not to mince words. Bernard would have said that it is always a pleasure to compliment the oldest of the Regional Associations in terms of its experience, its capacity for work. I would say the same because I firmly believe it. Some people believe that there is a problem with the coexistence of the development of VII and the culture of XV. I can tell you that this is not the case and I would suggest that those with this fear draw on the New Zealand example, eloquent proof of a complete success".

Concerning economic resources, Pierre CAMOU mentioned the conference that had the aim of determining whether it was possible to increase the financial resources of the IRB beyond the World Cup alone. He welcomed the world governing body's decision to refuse the use of its reserve funds to bail out the major nations in order to bolster the development of rugby and he concluded with:

"The major nations believe that they could use the money they collect. This is not how we see it. But you should not expect everything to come from the IRB. Help yourselves!"



JM EPALZA: "The current balance is in deficit but financial equilibrium is guaranteed for 2 Ye



Introductory statement from José Marie Epalza, the FIRA-AER Treasurer: "These accounts were closed on 30 June".

An audit will be carried out in September-October and the definitive figures will be released in December. We currently have a deficit of €300,000 because we have disbursed €200,000 more than in 2010 and we received €100,000 less. Finally our cash position should be in balance over the two year accounting period thanks to the management savings and the financial support from France (€75,000) and the VI Nations (€15,000)".

Answering a question from Finland concerning the possibility of increased financial support, José Maria EPALZA said that it was unlikely given the current climate, but Jean-Claude Baqué promised to examine ways of providing better support for the outer nations. And the Chairman of FIRA-AER

went on: "We are in a new period with two full time employees, new competitions to manage, a financial investment in Eurosport (with the possibility of a return). There are grounds for hoping to have increased resources in the future".

A realistic observation from the former Treasurer, Pierre CAMOU: "FIRA-AER spent €400,000 in youth competitions which the IRB does not cover. Without our own resources, FIRA-AER will no longer be able support some competitions".

Jean-Claude BAQUÉ: "A highly memorable 86th Congress"



Led by Michel Arpaillange the final touch was made to the fixtures. One problem, between Finland and Luxembourg, remained unresolvable because of the absence of Cyprus. As an exception, Russia was authorised to play matches at the end of the season on the grounds of climatic conditions but without this be established as a precedent because, once the World Cup qualifications get underway, the timetable simply has to be complied with.

Jean-Claude Baqué then started the happiest part of the agenda: the handing out of awards. He then presented, with a detailed and affectionate Chairman's commentary, the:

§ Gold Medal: José MORENO (Spain) and Vystcheslav KALYTENKO (Ukraine).

§ Silver Medal: Tullio ROSOLEN (Italy), Henri GATINEAU (France), Jorge RODRIGUEZ

(Spain), Gérard KEMPS (Netherlands).

§ Bronze Medal: Milos KOSTIC (Serbia) Jonathan DANCE (England), Howard THOMAS (Russia), George NIJARADZE (Georgia), Palémia FIELS (Finland), Martin DAVIES (Wales).

On this high note, Jean-Claude Baqué ended: "A Congress that will remain forever in my mind because it was exceptional in its conception, its realisation, the wealth and scale of your involvement".

Pell-mell



ØExposure to minimum risk. The Chairman of the Medical Commission, Dr Jacques MOMBET was happy that over the 125 to 130 encounters between young players, the exposure to risk was minimised relative to the playing time. The injury report revealed, among the seniors, problems with knees.

Drug testing: the examples of Portugal and Serbia. These were the only nations to keep FIRA-AER informed. It is recommended that other nations imitate them.

A document on cerebral concussion was published by the IRB. It related to on the field diagnosis. Doctor Mombet recommended that all union obtain this because this is crucial in managing

concussion.

Project for the creation of an Ethics Committee. Proposal by Jean-Claude Baqué, following an incident involving a lack of respect for a national anthem. The aim: to maintain the respect for human rights and to combat racism.

Turkey on standby. It now has its own Union.

Iceland admitted in December. This file is complete. The Liechtenstein file is due to be examined during the same year-end Annual Meeting.

The Gibraltar application examined by the IRB. Its admission has been requested. Proceedings with regard to the Catalan Union are going through Appeal Hearings.

The Minor States O.G. organised in 2013. This has importance given the inclusion of rugby in the Olympic Games.



Danish sporting Gala Dinner. Proposal made to twin, on 6 and 7 July, the Summer Annual Meeting and the Final of the VII Competition in the setting of Denmark's superb Odense stadium (20,000 seats, official boxes). The decision needs to be taken before 1st August.

Five replacements possible for VII. In his contribution, the FIRA-AER representative on the IRB, Raul MARTINS, presented apologies on behalf of David CARRIGY, absent; noted the measure for the immediate leaving the field of play in the event of a K.O.; and the proposal for the possibility of five replacements in Sevens.

O.G. qualifications. Six Regional Associations issued a request to the IRB to play a part in the qualifications for the Olympic Games. Decision in New Zealand in October.

Archie FERGUSON 45th member of the Board of Directors. By 130 votes against 68 for Gilbert CELLI (San Marino) and 60 for Dragan VUKSANOVIC (Serbia) Scotland's Archie FERGUSSON, absent because of the Scottish Union's Annual Meeting, was elected to the 45th seat on the Board of Directors.

In Memoriam. In his Annual Report, Jean-Louis Barthès referred to the memory of the former Italian Union Chairman and FIRA-AER Vice Chairman: Maurizio MONDELLI.

Applications. Candidate nations for the organisation of the 2013 European U18 championship should make themselves known as soon as possible.

Closed. The FIRA-AER Paris offices will be closed from 13 to 21 August.

