



## RUGBY IS OUR GAME

This is the slogan of the Georgian national rugby team. When they take to the field at the Land Rover-sponsored Rugby World Cup 2015, they will have a substantial reason for their boast – and that reason is lelo burti

WORDS NATHANIEL HANDY  
PHOTOGRAPHY JORDI PERDIGÓ



**MERAB SHARIKADZE**  
**Position:** Centre  
**Club:** Aurillac  
**International debut:** versus Spain, 21 February 2012  
**International caps:** 28  
**Career highlight:** Georgia 16-15 Samoa, Tbilisi, 23 November 2013

“The idea of lelo burti is that one man cannot carry the ball alone. He’s got to have his teammates to help him. They are one team and they have to work as one team. The game is in our blood, it is the reason why people in Georgia play rugby,” says Merab Sharikadze, the 21-year-old centre who is emerging as one of the nation’s finest backs. “It’s physical, and while rugby has limits and rules, with lelo burti as many men can participate as physically able. There are no written rules, but there are unspoken rules. You can’t punch an opponent on purpose.”

Lelo burti [literally translated as ‘field ball’] can trace its roots back to the 12th century, where it appears in an epic poem in which the heroes play it. Yet this anarchic game – pitting the men of rural Georgian villages against one another in a contest that draws comparison with the Shrovetide events that have survived in England – is not totally lawless. It is overseen by a man of the cloth, and is played on Easter Sunday to mark one of the holiest days in the Georgian Orthodox calendar.

“A priest throws the ball up into the air and the game starts,” explains Merab, who first encountered lelo burti in →

the village of Shukhuti in western Georgia. "It's impressive to watch. You can see unbelievable power working there. The men of the village form two teams and the main idea is to bring the ball from the town centre to one of two river creeks that run on either side of the town. Whoever puts the ball into the water is declared the winner by the priest."

While this may sound like an obscure folk sport, in fact it holds a far more central position in Georgian identity. "It's extremely popular among the Georgian armed forces who hold an annual Lelo Burti Premiership alongside Rugby Sevens," Merab explains. "It is also played in schools throughout western Georgia. A standardised version of the game emerged in the early 20th century, played on either a rugby or football pitch over two 30-minute halves. Up to 15 players per side then work to get the ball over the opposition's try or goal line."

Something in the historic strength of lelo burti imbues the Georgian rugby team with a confidence that belies the fact that they are comparative newcomers to the world stage. Only independent of the Soviet Union since 1991, they didn't appear at a World Cup final until the 21st century and remain an anomaly in a region not known for its rugby. Yet lelo burti gives them a sense of cultural ownership of this sport.

Georgia's national rugby team is nicknamed the Lelos and the Georgian word for a try in rugby is a lelo. It is as if this game from far away England has been subsumed into the historic story of lelo burti, becoming a distinctly Georgian national game. The more you hear about the communal energy of lelo burti, the more it begins to mingle with that of rugby.

"There is not much technique in lelo burti, but there is a big spirit," says Merab. "The lelo ball weighs 16kg, so it's hard to carry it. On the eve of the game, the leather ball is filled with grass, sawdust and also red wine to make it even heavier. Then it is sealed tight."

When the ball is finally taken into the river and the game is finished, the whole village comes together and drinks. The revelry highlights the fact that at the heart of this apparently rough and adversarial game is the importance of community. "This is what we take from lelo burti: alone you are nothing," says Merab. "They will smash you. In rugby, it's the same. Alone you can't do anything – unless you have your 14 friends. This is the heart of the game." □



From top: community is at the heart of lelo burti; a Georgian Orthodox priest throws the ball into the air to start the game

## LELO BURTI VS RUGBY

Full contact sport —	— Full contact sport
First recorded 1100s —	— First recorded 1845
Unlimited able bodied men —	— 15 players
16kg ball of grass, sawdust and red wine —	— 410-460g air-filled ball of leather, rubber or synthetics (and, originally, pig's bladder)
The whole village between two creeks —	— 144m x 70m grass pitch
1 Georgian Orthodox priest —	— 1 referee and 2 touch judges
Until the ball is in either team's creek —	— 80 minutes
Post-match drinking party —	— Post-match drinking party