Can 7 aside Rugby Improve Australian Rugby?

Since the 1990s Australia's rugby teams have had a relatively high success rate, with the Wallabies ranking in the top 3 international teams regularly and our Super Rugby Franchises winning 3 Super Rugby Championships (equal to South Africa).

The successes of the Wallabies and their Australian Rugby franchises could easily lead someone to believing that rugby in Australia is one of the most popular sports and has a high level of player participation.

However, things aren't, as they seem. Rugby in Australia is located in, arguably the most competitive organized sport market in the world. Rugby Union was ranked only the 9th highest participated organized sport in Australia in 2012 (according to the ABS (2012a) Survey of Children's Participation in Culture and Leisure Activities, Australia, 2012 (CPCLA) (cat. no. 4901.0), with only 4% of children playing the sport, well behind Soccer at 21.7%, Australian Football League (AFL) at 14.9% and Rugby League on 7.5%.

In fact Australia has as little as 86,952 players participating in the game, while America has grown to 81,678 participants (according to The Economic Impact Report On Global Rugby: Strategic and Emerging Market report). Compare that to England 2,549,196 and South Africa (632,184), Australia ranks well behind it’s international competitors in player participation. Which shows that despite the participation numbers Australia has punched well above it’s weight.

When looking towards the future can Rugby sustain its position in this very competitive organized sport market? I believe that Australian Rugby is at a cross road in which it has a choice of continuing on the same road it is travelling on or to look for ways to reinvent itself and increase the player participation rate, especially in the juniors.

7 aside Rugby could be the answer, not only for increasing the player participation and enjoyment but also improving the players individual skill development.

So what does Rugby have to do to improve and retain its player participation numbers in Australia?

The good news is that we don’t have to look too far for some good examples of sports that have evolved or innovated their sport to improve the player interest and participation as well as increasing their player skill levels.

Cricket is probably the example of a sport that successfully reinvented itself using modified rules or format to attract new players and improve their player’s individual skill levels. Since the introduction of One Day Cricket and now Twenty20 Cricket player numbers and interest has sky rocketed. More importantly the interest in the Test Match format has returned.
Cricket in Australia has faced similar issues to Rugby, in which the parent interest and in turn the player interest had begun to fade. Games were considered too long and boring, while parents complained of having less time to “waste” on the weekends and during the week. Kids were getting more impatient, not wanting to stand in the field for the entire day.

When One Day matches were introduced in the late 70s/early 80s the old school cricket world believed it would result in the death of the true original game, test match cricket. However it proved to be a great success, returning players to cricket in droves. At the turn of the century cricket faced yet again a drop in interest and again was willing to take a gamble on another modified form of the game by introducing Twenty20 cricket, again there were cries of “death to the game”, however once again the sport has flourished.

The new rules of T20 have increased the player interest in batting and bowling as well as reducing the length of the game. Now parents are more likely to take the child down to the field knowing it will be only a couple of hours out of their weekend. Most importantly young players are returning to the fields with the aim to bat and bowl better in a shorter game.

Brazil has successfully used Futsal for years as a substitute for full field football purely because of the lack of space. Futsal is a modified version of the full field Soccer using smaller fields and 5 man teams. Not only has it taken off in Brazil, it has now spread around the world.

Ironically there have been many studies into why Brazilian Football is so skillful and a lot of the success is attributed to the Futsal game. It is fast and requires good ball skills and reaction time to negotiate players in a smaller field. All of which lead to a better Football player on the larger fields.

Another sport in Australia that has risen to one of the leading junior sports is AFL. AFL was mostly a Victorian State sport, which grew to other states in the 80s and 90s. The major factor behind its success has been the emphasis has it placed on junior participation. For a sport that has little existence in the international market it holds an impressive growth of 9% every year and now controls 14.9% of the youth sport market. Not bad considering it virtually wasn’t played outside of Victoria until the 80s.

Rugby on the other hand is growing at only 4% a year and faces the challenges Cricket has successfully fought off. Interest in the 15 man game is stalling and the game clearly needs a new lease of life to return junior players to the game and in turn help bolster the player ranks for the future success of the Wallabies and their Super Franchises.

This leads to the question, could 7 aside Rugby help innovate and revitalize Rugby In Australia?

Firstly lets look at the issues that Rugby faces in the Australian sports market:

- The other winter codes are governed by easier rules/laws, making it easier to understand for both the player and spectator

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• They are all easier to coach with less technical components such as the scrum, line out and of course the breakdown or tackle contest
• They generally are perceived as less combatant, Rugby League being an exception
• The other codes are considered faster, less governed or freer and more fun to play and to watch

These 4 issues also have an impact on the perception and marketability of the sport. Television is likely to promote a sport that the viewers will happily watch and generally that is something they will understand with less stoppages. Secondly parents and especially mums are more likely to allow their children to play a sport if they believe there is a less likelihood of injury. Finally schools and most importantly Primary Schools are more likely to adopt a sport that is easy to coach, perceived as safe and easy to adjudicate.

When you look at the benefits of 7 aside Rugby it provides a good alternative to the other 3 winter codes in Australia (League, AFL and Soccer), ticking all of the above issues.

Benefits of 7 aside Rugby:

• It's a fast game with fewer stoppages
• It has greater player involvement
• The length of the game is shorter, allowing more games to be played in a shorter period of time
• It's easy to watch and understand for a spectators
• It is far easier to coach, requiring fewer technical aspects such as the breakdown and set piece
• It can be modified to play in smaller fields
• Its far easier to ref (especially for primary school teachers)
• Requires smaller teams numbers, which helps clubs with lower player numbers – this leads to more teams and less travelling searching for a team to play
• It requires higher individual skill level and competency (less players to cover mistakes)
• It is considered more fun and less inhibited

However simply being more marketable and easy to coach or referee isn’t the only advantage, it requires a lot of individual skill development to play the game successfully.

The Economic Impact Report on Global Rugby: Strategic and Emerging Market suggests that rugby in general has grown 19% since the 2007 Rugby World Cup in France. 15 aside rugby is still the pulpit of rugby and The Rugby World Cup the Holy Grail, however 7 aside Rugby has been attributed for introducing new markets to the sport, especially as it now is an Olympic sport.

If Rugby is going to survive and grow in the competitive organised sport market it must adapt and evolve like Cricket and Soccer using the modified games to improve the player skill levels for the good of the game in it's...
entirety. The larger the nursery the greater chance the national team will continue to succeed.

**So can 7 aside Rugby improve rugby players for the 15 aside game? And can it bring back the interest in the 15 man aside game?**

Lets have a look at the skills required for 7 aside Rugby and then compare them to the 15 aside Rugby to get a simple snap shot of the overlapping skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>7 aside</th>
<th>15 aside</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tackle Contest</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ball carry</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evasion</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carry through &amp; into contact</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ball retention and presentation</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defensive tracking</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tackling</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean out</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength over the ball</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decision making off the ball</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support attack &amp; defence</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ball skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catch pass</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support off the ball</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kick &amp; catch</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kick &amp; chase</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter Attack</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial awareness</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running lines</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Game Components</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build Momentum through phases</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Set Piece Domination</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set Piece technicality</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restarts completion</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tbody>
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Naturally this isn’t a comprehensive list of all the skills required in both 7 aside and 15 aside Rugby, however it does serve a purpose in highlighting the advantages 7 aside Rugby can provide the 15 aside game.

The biggest hole in the skill overlap is the set piece and the direct Phase momentum building required for successful ball control in 15 aside Rugby. However it is quite clear that 7 aside Rugby could serve the purpose of introducing new players to the game, retaining them and improving their skill level.
What is the best way to use 7 aside Rugby for the better of 15 aside Rugby?

Now that it is clear that 7 aside rugby can benefit 15 aside rugby how can we integrate it into the overall rugby system or pathway?

In order for the growth and improvement of 15 aside Rugby to occur, 7 aside Rugby must be used to complement, improve and retain the player population. It has to improve player skill level, retain players in the game and help to promote them to the 15 aside game.

The biggest attribute of 7 aside rugby is that it is fast, fun and can be played almost anywhere. Therefore, the best point to start would be in the Junior Rugby domain. This is where rugby needs to start growing at a faster rate to curve the drop off rate in the 13-15 year old age group.

This is also where a lot of the skill foundations of rugby are laid, game based skill, game understanding and the enjoyment of the game. This is generally where you will attract new players and retain them.

In Australia the Junior Rugby landscape is generally split into two domains: 6-12 years is mostly club based, with most kids playing for their local club and sometimes for their school. While 13-17 years has a large shift to Private School rugby and clubs take a back seat.

The Public School system often shy away from rugby in the Primary School ages because of the perceived dangers of the scrum and tackle contest, as well as the difficulty to coach and referee the technical aspects of the game.

7 aside Rugby could be the point of introduction at this level. Moving away from playing 15 aside Rugby until the players hit a more mature age (physically and mentally) such as 13-15 years old could help to set the skill foundation and open up a larger market.

By making 7 aside Rugby the game for players under 13 years old all of the major problems that Rugby faces will be erased:

- Primary School teachers will have little trouble coaching the game because the rules are easy to understand
- Refereeing the game would not be an issue
- Field allocation will be less of a problem, if need be the game can run in a cross field format
- Small schools or clubs can enter teams where they probably wouldn’t have had it been a 15 aside game
- Gala days could be arranged to include more schools in the same location and less traveling
- It requires good individual skill levels, players will be shown up if they miss a tackle etc.
- Most importantly its fun for the kids to play
Naturally this would have a spill over effect into the Rugby Clubs with more kids playing in the schools and experiencing rugby. Club numbers would increase and more clubs would be able to enter more teams.

Rugby Clubs could play Gala matches on Friday nights, in which one club hosts an age group per week and run 7 aside games from the early afternoon into the night. This would allow parents to have the weekend off or allow the players to still pursue their other sports interests.

Each week the age groups could rotate to another club, allowing all clubs to host the Gala evening each week. Clubs would gain much-needed funds through their canteen and other channels of fundraising. Parents wouldn’t have to travel far for their kid’s sport and they can enjoy a fun local event. Most importantly the parents then have the weekend to enjoy or their kids can still play school sport.

**Size Matters**

The biggest issue facing both 7 aside and 15 aside Rugby players is size and maturation. Players mature at different ages both physically and mentally. This leaves two problems;

1. Big boys/girl Versus little boys/girls
2. Position specific allocation

Size on the playing field has been an age-old problem for most of the contact sports. Parents have shied away for fear of their little boy/girl getting hurt leaving the game short of pacey wingers and half backs. 7 aside isn’t going to solve this problem, big players will still thunder down the field dragging two or three little players. And little players will run rings around the big players leaving them feeling clumsy.

The answer is to run a weight division for all age groups. Each player weighs in at the start of the year and according to their weight they are placed in the big boy/girl (for the want of a better name) division or the smaller boys/girls division.

This allows both sizes to play a competitive level of rugby and maintain the motivation for the game. It also means that both size players learn to use their size to it’s advantages. Bigger guys use the size while having to learn the necessary skills to distribute ball and create space for support players. While the smaller players learn to play a more direct game rather than running around the outside of players.

Weight divisions and 7 aside Rugby also solve the position allocation problem. Too often players are placed into positions because they are bigger at an age or the position needed to be filled. Generally this is in the tight five. These players then stop attempting to run and play with the ball because they are coached to run straight and hard and let the backs do the “fancy stuff”. Of course this means they have to have their skill level trained up in the later years.

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Player Maturation

Generally players mature mentally and physically between 13-16 years, which would be the ideal transition age from 7 aside Rugby to 15 aside Rugby. During this time it would begin to become apparent which players will be heading into the forward pack, which players would be heading towards the back and most importantly which players are going to be in between.

The understanding of the game and its strategic challenges would start to become apparent as the players mature and coaches would have a higher success rate explaining these nuances. Slowly the 15 aside game could be explained and gradually implemented allowing the players to adapt to less space and more players.

Possibly playing 13 aside format without flankers for a couple of years will help this process. Allowing the tight five to establish their set piece skills and giving the backs a chance to learn the skills of line running and directional change without the interference of loose forwards.

What about the girls?

Another player market that hasn’t been tapped is the female Rugby market. Touch Rugby in Australia is a very popular sport amongst both men and women. Girls play a very competitive level of the game and the sport has structures that run nationally.

Touch Rugby requires a high skill level and understanding of special awareness. These are two great attributes that will serve Rugby well. 7 aside Rugby is a short step away from Touch Rugby, containing similar numbers and concepts. The level of contact is far less taxing in comparison to the 15 aside game and far less daunting to a player considering Rugby for the first time.

Proposed Player Pathway

Here is a proposed overview of how 7 aside Rugby could be introduced into the player pathway. It would require a transition from 7 aside Rugby to 13 aside Rugby and finally to 15 aside Rugby. (Academies and Franchise Academies have been added to show where possible player up skilling could occur.)

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6-13 Years Rugby

All primary aged rugby, 6-13 years, would play 7 aside rugby. Training would be on developing the player’s individual skill level and understanding of the game. Players would be introduced to the understanding of how to play an expansive, fast rugby game requiring continual support play.

Clubs would play in a gala styled program during the season, in which one club would host an age group on a Friday evening or Saturday morning. This would rotate every week allowing all clubs to have home and away games and to fundraise every week.

Each club should be able to field at least 2 teams (considering each 15 aside team has 2 teams in it) creating competitions that revolve around the local district. Club sizes would double and more teams fielded means less travel for the competition.

Further representation could come through the successful team in each district playing other successful teams from other districts all the way up to a state or possibly a national level.

All age divisions would be weight controlled with a heavy weight and bantamweight cut off. Each year players would weigh in to allow for the maturation and growth.

Primary School competitions would be structured to match the club program and a coach education system rolled out to up skill coaches.

13-15 Years

This is the transition between 7 aside and 15 aside rugby. A 13 aside game could be introduced to allow the players to adapt to the set piece and space reduction. The key focus of these years would be training the players to understand the technical aspects of set piece, building momentum and running lines.

Set piece focus would be on the tight five for the forwards and the running lines for the backs. Each player would need to understand the concept of straight running and forward momentum to create space for support players.

Field position and game understanding could be introduced. Players would be slowly identified for future positions and introduced to the position technicalities.

Competition games would move to weekends and run for the full 60-70 minutes as per the normal U19s laws. Where possible competitions would remain local, reducing travel for parents.

This is also the age group in which Private School Rugby will begin to indent on the player numbers so a mid week 7 aside competition should be maintained allowing players to continue with their club and providing a continued platform for players only interested in 7 aside rugby.

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Normal representative competitions for both 7s and 15s should be established to provide channels for talent identification. These channels should be maintained through until the under 20s age group to provide continual opportunity for players to improve themselves as they develop physically and mentally.

Finally weight divisions should move to age divisions as players start to mature into their physical stature and the nature of the 15 aside game requires players of all body shape for the differing positions on the field.

15-20 years and Seniors

At this point a full 15 aside game would be introduced and all the U19s laws adhered to. Player physical maturity would be evident and players should be gravitating to their long term position on the field.

Club and representative competitions for the club and schools should include 7 aside and 15 aside rugby alternatives, where the 7 aside alternative is run as a midweek gala format. This helps to continue the 7 aside pathway and retain players who possibly would have dropped out of the game.

Academy systems should become higher focused on players in both the 7 aside and the 15 aside format. For the long term growth of Australian rugby 7 aside and Olympic success there needs to be a true channel of choice for players.

A player who chooses to steer away from 15 aside should have the alternative to remain in the game in a 7 aside format, thus remaining in the game for life and in turn hopefully introducing his/her offspring to the game.

ARU and Franchise academy or development channels such as the Junior Gold Program and National Gold programs should remain in place and a further 7 aside program designed to breed future Olympic players established.

Conclusion

Rugby always will be a game of skill and tactic, a thinking man’s game and a game for all shapes and sizes. However, 7 aside rugby will play an important role in introducing new players to the game as well as retaining players in the game.

It has all the potential to increasing our player skill levels across all positions on the field and offers Australia the opportunity to win an Olympic Gold medal. However 7 aside Rugby must always remain an aid to 15 aside Rugby if Australian Rugby is going to reach the heights it potentially could.

I believe that Australian Rugby has no alternative but to consider 7 aside Rugby as the pathway for junior player growth and skill development. In a competitive market like Australia’s organised sports market 4% growth isn’t enough when most of the competitors are growing at double that.

7 aside Rugby holds all the keys Rugby needs to open up its full potential and revitalise the sport, returning the Wallabies back to the international leaders.

Written By Jason Grier
Sports such as Cricket and Soccer have proven that modified games can have a positive effect on the growth of the game and improve player individual skill level. It’s now time the Australian Rugby Union took a serious look at 7 aside Rugby as a junior pathway in Australia.

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