Participation vs Elite Pathways – Are we on the right track to getting the best talent playing Rugby in the crowded Winter Sports Landscape?

Currently for males, the winter market is very crowded, with opportunities aplenty for ball team sports. Rugby has an acute challenge to not only give participants an opportunity to play the game in a safe and meaningful environment, while additionally develop quality players to go on a play the game at an elite level. Ensuring that the base of the game is broad enough with good exposures to the game by many, should convert into strong talent being identified to play the game at elite levels for the future.

For female participants, currently there is great growth opportunities for expansion on a program that has been in existence for a long time. Investment into female sports is at an all-time high, highlighted by the introduction of Women’s Super Rugby and National Sevens programs in 2017. Exposure, along with funding and development in this area of the market is growing, building on a base that rugby has had for a long time.

This paper’s intention is to focus predominantly on the male game and market.

The Current Landscape for Rugby

Rugby competes head to head in winter with Football, AFL and Rugby League as the main sports codes for boys. There are competitions and exposure to the game of rugby within schools and with club programs across the country. New South Wales and Queensland dominate the numbers here though Perth, Melbourne and Canberra have significant programs. Others do exist in other states though unfortunately are not strong.

Rugby Australia has done well in getting the “Game On” program into the Sporting Schools Australia landscape, which give Primary schools the opportunity to have the sport of rugby brought to their school by well trained staff, free of charge, through grants from Sporting Schools Australia, exposing many students to our great game.

The initial introduction of this program, is designed as a long-term goal of getting primary school students an exposure to playing rugby. It is worth noting that both AFL and Football have programs set up for Primary teacher to participate in similar short programs. This program is designed to have in class tasks (undertaken by classroom teachers) that link to on field activities (undertaken by Rugby specialists).

The introduction of the Game On program has been very successful, with large numbers of schools taking up the opportunity to participate.

As stated by Georgina Robinsonin the Sydeny Morning Hearald (November 28th 2016) “Game On : Rugby Storms into the top 10 sports in Primary Schools”, “But it is the sports commission data that has rugby administrators in a rare, positive frame of mind. The five-week Game On program, implemented through the ASC’s Sporting Schools network of 5160 primary schools, has helped the code rocket up 20 places from 28th to eighth in less than a year, and blown out of the water the ARU's own participation targets.”

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This national program has had significant growth since this article was written in 2016, and has exceeded Rugby Australia’s goal in 2016 of having 50,000 students attempt the program as stated in their strategic 5 year plan as set in 2016 (Making Rugby a game for all - Rugby Australia Strategic Plan 2016-2020). In a discussion with Participation Manager Rama Chand from Queensland Rugby Union, he suggests that the growth in participation in both the Game On program and the shortened version of the sport, Sevens is the reason for Rugby’s growth.

“Queenslanders participation in Game On and Deadly 7s programs has leapt by 45 per cent, new nationally released statistics show. Throughout Queensland, 15,375 people participated in the Game On and Deadly 7s programs in 2017 – an increase of 10,430 people from 2016 “

Rugby participation has boomed across Australia showing a 112 per cent increase in just 24 months. Game On kicked off Australia-wide at the beginning of 2015 and had 26,469 students signed up in just 12 months. Two years on, that number has more than doubled with a staggering 56,101 kids taking to the pitch – and 46 per cent are female.

It is worth noting that this Game On program is not gender specific, with both boys and girls playing the game. This is an excellent ideal, as this program has little contact and focuses on skill development meaning the differentiation between boys and girls is nominal. A by-product of this exposure though schools is the hope of picking up regular playing players for winter club competitions.

While these growth numbers of school students being exposed to rugby is within the school PDHPE environment, it will be a challenge for administrators to convert these numbers into regular playing participants, at this age within the club rugby market. Linking these two will be the next challenge, the assumption is that most participants, enjoyed themselves in the program, they participated under the instruction of their teachers. Teachers decide to participate in this program, where students are “forced into the program” as the teacher has enrolled them into the activity. Volunteering or choosing to play regular rugby is going to be the challenge.

In addition to the introduction of the Game On program, Rugby Australia has introduced a “National Schools Strategy” to assist with the growth of the game and leverage off the successes of the Game On program. This strategy has been developed to “Build a national plan for the game at school’s level for boys and girls that recognises, supports, grows and capitalises on the significant impact school’s rugby has on the Australian rugby landscape; whilst recognising and appreciating the independence of schools within the Australian rugby system.”

After surveying schools, nationally about concerns for the game, this school’s strategy has developed focus areas to ensure that the game maintains its status within the crowded market of winter sports. The AFL have been particularly strong in this area, offering support for coaches, equipment and grounds to get the game going in the school market, posing a massive threat to schools rugby, in particular to those peripheral schools that are struggling to keeping rugby viable. By surveying schools and listening to their responses, it gives Rugby Lachlan White

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Australia a focus, with safety, level and appropriate competitions key areas for implementation. Coach Accreditation and coach compliance are areas which schools have returned as key areas for help from Rugby Australia.

In response, Rugby Australia has actioned this feedback and developed and increased in the workforce that can assist in the delivery of coach accreditation with two recent recruitment drives and subsequent conferences to develop World Rugby Educators in 2017. Most importantly, Rugby Australia has also linked these Coaching courses for teachers to the National Curriculum, meaning that teachers will be able to undertake rugby specific teacher training as part of their required hours of professional development, ensuring their teaching compliance. This should not only help rugby coaches deliver meaningful sessions but give opportunities to keen and enthusiastic coaches to get some support for the game running in their schools, again, assisting in the ease of keeping rugby as an option for schools and maintaining talent in rugby’s pathway.

Once students are playing rugby, it is important that those who are players of talent for the game, are given opportunities to get into successful elite pathways for tracking of performance and improvements. 273000 participants played rugby in 2016 with 2017 statistics pending the release of Rugby Australia annual report.

Before looking too critically into the current representative pathways for youth Rugby players it is important to understand current systems and pathways in both NSW and Queensland. Two systems run side by side with each system given viable competitions, ensuring that there is meaningful rugby exposure for all players.

1 - Schools Rugby System (Focused on New South Wales)

Played predominantly in private schools with several state sports high schools taking the lead for state schools, with often the first exposure to Rugby coming through GAME ON program. Primary rugby is relatively limited to gala days and trail events for students. Often poorly coached with little support for meaningful competitions within state schools. Traditionally private schools being the only meaningful weekly competitions for boys and only recently, a move to introduce a u18 female version of the game taking place. State School and Catholic schools have declined in regular weekly games, due to the many social, liturgical and complex issues related to association playing weekly rugby.

NSW PSSA carnivals take place annually, with a Sydney based team selected as a shadow for a NSW Team. This team has proven to be a force, winning multiple interstate competitions, Unfortunately, no competition comes from Queensland where participation numbers are similar and similar meaningful competition are undertaken. An interstate game would be an excellent opportunity to show case and highlight u12 talent. It is worth noting that girls can participate in this competition if they make association selections.

NSW Schools has its first representative teams selected at Under 16 and then Under 18 level, with school associations hosting games/carnivals to assist in the selection of representative teams. NSW Schools provided 36/50 players for the Gen Blue u16 teams in

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The private schooling systems of GPS, CAS and ISA provide the bulk of the playing rosters for teams that compete at the National Championships. Schools in this association have access to considerable resources, with Directors of Rugby, S+C coaches, Video review, regular compulsory training and games. Essentially these schools are like small academies for Rugby, with each school developing athletes under their own system.

2- Club Rugby Landscape

Played from ages 6 to 17 across the states with numerous clubs participating in meaningful competitions. At the age of 10, the first opportunity for representative teams exist, with State Championships being held across the year. Ages 10-12 have representative “seasons” rather than a carnival weekend, which is the format for 13-17 year olds.

In a recent interviews with Andrew Hore CEO of the NSW Rugby and Andrew Hill New South Wales Participation Manager, looking at age participation rates by age group is significant. These staff members felt it is important to keep in mind sizes of participants playing games will be important, for retaining boys playing the game and get the best talent identified. (similar pattern of ages of players participating could be assumed for playing numbers across the other rugby playing states, no doubt with some slight variations occurring).

Looking below at the table, it shows the greatest numbers participate when youth are ages 9 to 14.
Looking more closely into the regions that provide the numbers listed above, there are some concerning decline in numbers in traditional stronghold areas. Subsequently, and pleasingly, there are some significant gains in regional areas, possibly linked to the mining boom in these locations.

These improvements in the numbers in regional areas may also correlate to NSW Rugby and Waratah rugby’s recent initiative “Bush to the Beach”, with engagement by high profile players from the Waratah rugby program and the desires of Andrew Hore Waratah CEO to reengage with the supporters of the game. Improving on these numbers will be important, as regional Australia has been a significant contribution to Australian Rugby, many Wallabies coming from regional areas eg David Lyons coming from Orange playing youth Country Metro Junior Competition

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Metro Junior Competition</th>
<th>2017 Players</th>
<th>Growth / Decline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Juniors</td>
<td>11382</td>
<td>-3%</td>
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Country Junior Competitions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country Junior Competitions</th>
<th>2017 Players</th>
<th>Growth / Decline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast Juniors</td>
<td>1154</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central North Juniors</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>-17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far North Coast Juniors</td>
<td>1069</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra Juniors</td>
<td>1177</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid North Coast Juniors</td>
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<td>New England Juniors</td>
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<td>Newcastle Hunter Juniors</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Plains Juniors</td>
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<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central West Juniors</td>
<td>1703</td>
<td>12%</td>
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Juniors, NSW and Australian Schools and onto the Waratahs and Wallabies. Ned Hannigan is another who has played his way through the system from the country in Wallaby colours in 2017. The “bush” is an important cog of the wheel for talent identification.

Higher representative honours are offered from these representative teams at ages 14 (NSW and Queensland Juniors) Under 15 Sydney Juniors NSW Country and then Junior Gold Cup squads, u16s Sydney and Country Juniors, NSW Juniors and now Gen Blue 16s.

NOTE: The club pathway and the school’s programs – there are about 25% of players who play in both systems which can provide a distortion to statistics

Further Representation

Development of appropriate pathways to professional rugby is essential for developing talent. Currently, for youth there are 3 National Teams selected each year, Australian 20s, Australian Schoolboys and Australian Barbarians. An u16 Merit team was chosen in 2017, though no games were played.

The reintroduction of the National Championships for u16 boys is an excellent step for identifying talent and ensuring that this talent has an opportunity to be developed earlier rather than later, and directly opposes Rugby League which has its first meaningful aged based elite competition in the Harold Mathews Cup an u16 competition.

Challenging Rugby League head on at this age group means that talented participants in Rugby have an opportunity to stay in Rugby rather than being lured across to a rival code. As rugby is a truly international game while also being a game for the whole county not just NSW and Queensland, this is real opportunity to hold onto talent. Looking at the 2017 Youth National teams, shows that athletes come from all across the country, something that is quite unique for our code.

2017 Teams and their State Representatives
Australian u20s – NSW – 4, QLD 13, WA 2, ACT 2, VIC 5, Sevens 3
Australian Schools Teams NSW 11, QLD 6, WA 1, ACT 2
Australian Barbarians - NSW 5, QLD 8, ACT 4, WA 1, VIC 2
Australian u16 Merit Team – 9 NSW, 12 QLD, 1 ACT, 1 WA

Adam Coleman (Tasmania) and Ewen McKenzie (Victoria) are Wallabies that have evolved out of non traditional rugby states, something that highlights the need for the game to maintain a foothold in these second tier states. Now WA does not have the Western Force Super Rugby team, meaningful competition is required for this state to ensure the great work that has been done previously helps keep talent being identified and developed. Maintaining the national championships for these athletes is important, highlighted by the Northern Territory winning the Division 2 championships in 2016 after being easy beats in previous years, showing return on the work done by the Rugby Australia Development Officers. The recent appointment of former Wallaby Luke Burgess to Tasmanian Rugby is another great initiative to keeping the game national.

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Threats and Trends
Rugby League and now more recently AFL, are threats to the game within the country. Pleasingly the game seems to have stopped the slide, with the emergence of the women’s game and the improvements motioned above about Game On.

Over recent time, there has been much media about players switching codes to play in the National Rugby League rather than sticking with the code they have been developed. Over the last 5 years, only 6 Australian schoolboys have left the game to go to Rugby League. Considering that Rugby League offers payments to players at younger levels to entice and retain players along with that there are 16 Professional organisations offering contracts rugby League, this low poaching rate is a great success to the Rugby program. Two of the six players were contracted to Rugby League clubs when they were selected for the Australian Schoolboys, almost negating their poaching status.

Rugby’s biggest natural competitor Rugby League, also reports similar reductions in playing numbers Phil Rothfield reports in the Sundat Telegraph on May 7, 2017 article - Rugby League’s $100m plan to stop the game dying, “According to the NSWRRL, for the 2016 season, its overall participation dropped from 40,824 in 2015 to just over 39,000.” 

……Concerning is that the “ NRL is planning an emergency $100 million rescue strategy to stop the mass exodus of junior players in western Sydney that is threatening the code’s future.
In the same article, Rothfield also reports the trend that “Soccer still blitzes the other footy codes for participants. The round-ball game has more than a million players nationally and their numbers grew by 3 per cent last year.

Male rugby union numbers are down 7 per cent but overall participation figures are slightly up on the back of a 33 per cent increase in females after the Sevens women won gold at the Rio Olympics.

Australian Rules appears to be the biggest threat to rugby league in Sydney’s west. Participation continues to rise across NSW with double-digit growth in 2016 and a strong start to the 2017 season”

This threat of massive cash injection into Western Sydney is concerning for Rugby. Western Sydney has large numbers of Polynesian cultures, where affluence is low and traditionally rugby is the game they have played. This injection could take away some of the growth that could easily occur for rugby. Coupled with this the troubles with Penrith and Parramatta Rugby clubs, a natural home for these players, spells trouble for Western Sydney.

In addition, the set-up of AFL Academies, where large numbers of participants are placed in so called elite Academies, staring at age u12, is concerning. This early identifying and tracking talent, at such a young age where youth are looking to belong can syphon off some talented players who could be more than competent players. Looking at player body shapes, the AFL has bastardised Basketball elite youth as this tall athletic player is one that they believe they can teach the game to. Encouraging large numbers into pseudo elite academies early certainly is a strategy to ensure the best athlete eventually make it to the top.

**Strategies for Survival and Growth**

Initially the game will continue with the same trend through it will be vital that the game can convert the increase of young students trialling Rugby for the first time into regular season long rugby.

Rugby can assist by informing parents about some of the great aspects of rugby that are often not spoken about. Olympic Sport and values, International game, an inclusive game for all body types, cultures and races, it’s global appeal and opportunity, and respect for the game is bigger than its players and officials (ie Respect Rugby in NSW). Given modern parents, that are proving to be over cautious to parenting when related to risk taking for their children, a controlled measured and informed decision making process to involve their children into the game will be imperative. In a recent interview with James Godfrey from NSW Rugby, he is considering capitalising and collecting together some of the great work done by predecessors and ensuring rugby participation numbers are maintained.
Rugby needs to promote itself as a game where boys become men and in doing so learn about more than just the game. Football has such a poor culture when it comes to referee abuse, compared to Rugby which insists “you never talk back to a referee”, a value that should be promoted to parents when choosing sports for their children.

Promotion of these values to parents who are making decisions for their children, either after a Game On or similar state based inclusivity pathway programs, will see the broader base of the game grow: recent successes from Game On need to be capitalised. An increase in player numbers at the base of the game will no doubt improve the numbers of talented participants available to choose for elite youth pathways in the long term.

The Private School systems in NSW and Queensland have highly competitive weekly competitions where teams within their associations have the ability to provide opportunities to develop rugby students alongside their education and value systems that already exist. As these schools are set up very well Rugby Australia has an opportunity to have many small academies to develop elite youth.

Highlighted earlier, a shrinking base of players in both codes is proving that the market place for elite level athletes is strong in those playing the front on collision sports, some schools are enrolling students into their school with the knowledge that athletes are contracted elsewhere ie Junior Rugby League Clubs. It is these students that Rugby has the greatest opportunity to gain, as parents are obviously keen for their children to receive an education along with developing their physical talents in preparation for adulthood. Strategies to keep these students in the game rather that going back to their League clubs is something that Rugby Australia can look at improving.

These above mentioned elite Representative teams have been an important card in retaining elite youth players. Additionally, numerous athletes have gone onto Super Rugby and 2 Wallabies have been developed. Curtis Rona from the Western Force and now NSW Waratahs has come across from the NRL and made his Wallaby debut, proving that long term, the values of an international game can lure quality athletes.
The emergence of Sevens as a genuine pathway to play professional rugby has seen some of the elite players at u18 level not continue with the fifteen-man game but rather attempt to play Sevens. This truly international Olympic sport is a great method of keeping elite youth players within the code. The recent Men’s squads competing in Dubai Sevens had several former Australian Schoolboys in its set up with some graduating directly from School to Sevens, with a few eventually gaining Super Rugby positions post-Olympic cycle and contract periods.

Evolution of these representative pathways is important; several individual sports have National level status at age based competition ie Swimming and Athletics where students are encouraged to not participate in any other sports because of their early identification. This identification gives the “Millennial youth” status, something that they desire and develops peer envy at a very early age. This peer status, that is often shared on social media, is something that rugby misses out on, as the most senior of representative teams do not appear until u16s and further, when rugby participation numbers are in the decline.

As schools are the place where large numbers of students are receiving their first experiences with rugby, it is important that quality coaching continues after programs such as Game On start. The National School’s Strategy plan for “Implementing a Schools Strategy & expanding our footprint with a focus on offerings in schools and female participation “is exactly what Rugby needs. Rugby plays a significant role in developing the game. “Schools participation impacts on the health of the game developing the current and next generation of participants (players, coaches, match officials, administrators and supporters), the cultivation of the talent pool for the future, fan attraction and engagement.” NATIONAL SCHOOLS RUGBY STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2016 - 2020 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A national Primary School competition with all states participating will improve the validity of Rugby as a sport for all, where the values of players and their coaches is a great promotional point. It will also then start talent identification and go head to head with some of the AFL Academy programs that steal talent away at such as young age in addition starting the “noise” on social media about rugby talent.

In addition, a National u14s team should be developed, for multiple reasons, none more so than identifying talent early and developing “marketing noise” when participation numbers are at their highest, hitting the most participants and parents. Long term development of talent where athletes can pilot in and out of state based programs will be important, identification of this talent earlier will assist with larger numbers of players being exposed to professional coaching. ie Trac Tahs in NSW.

Players when identified as players of interest, can be linked with independent schools, who have good facilities and programs for development of individuals. Placement of these individuals would depend on the association, the personnel within a school that could be mentors for individual students, maintaining integrity of the competition and not lop siding the competition. Individual welfare should always be considered if movement of schooling and living is required.
Funding is going to be a key issue for the community game. NSW Rugby is in the process of appointing a foundation and community initiatives manager to raise funds for community projects and a full time government relations officer, who will lobby state, local and federal governments for further funding, something CEO Hore admits NSW Rugby have done poorly in the past. He hopes these initiatives will assist in protecting the community game from the ups and downs of professional rugby in the current environment.

base is the more likely the best talent is going to be playing rugby. Pleasingly the majority of players who make it to the most elite levels in Australia in youth elite teams, stay in the game. Some slight tweaks to the representative landscape will assist with additional talent identification and giving the millennial participant some status within the game. A further challenge is keeping the ones that are on the fringe of this elite level happy. Ensuring that rugby identifies talent earlier and manages this talent through the physical growth period for adolescence will help in keeping the game healthy with strong meaningful competitions. No doubt funding for these types of initiatives are not cheap where considerable threats appear to be ready to pounce from Rugby League, AFL and Football codes.