RUGBY, MEDIA AND THE AMERICANS!

THE IMPACT ON AUSTRALIAN RUGBY

INTRODUCTION

For most of its history, rugby was a strictly amateur football code, and the sport's administrators frequently imposed bans and restrictions on players who they viewed as professional. It was not until 1995 that rugby union was declared an "open" game, and thus professionalism was sanctioned by the code's governing body, World Rugby'.

To some, this represented an undesirable and problematic challenge to the status quo in which the traditions of the game would be eroded and benefits would accrue only to a small coterie of talented players. To many others the change was inevitable and overdue.

In various countries different combinations of veiled professionalism or officially condoned *shamateurism* that lurked behind the amateur facade throughout the twentieth century. For instance, it was well known amongst New Zealand rugby players, or at least this author, that their fellow Auckland provincial rugby representatives were remunerated handsomely behind closed doors through the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. This effectively allowed them to train as semi professionals that, it could be argued, aided the run of success Auckland enjoyed through the same period as the National Provincial Champions (NPC).

The statistics reflect that in 61 challenges in the period from 1985 to 1993, Auckland were undefeated. The team itself was full of All Blacks that won six titles in the 1990s. Playing for Auckland could be considered as close as it got to being a full time professional in this era. An alternative for frustrated rugby players was either to swap

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1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rugby_football
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auckland_rugby_union_team
codes and join the rugby league profession either in Australia or Europe or play rugby in another country, again being paid ‘under the table’.

It was the emergence of Rupert Murdoch’s Super League proposals in late 1994 that presented a significant new rugby league outlet for those discontented with rugby union. The direct result was that rugby union had to move very rapidly to find its niche not only in an environment with which its sporting counterparts were already very familiar, but one in which they were jostling more aggressively than ever for profile and market share.

The process of transformation in rugby union is still moving very rapidly, and not always successfully. The Australian Rugby Championship (ARC), heralded as a great leap forward for 2007, was scrapped after one season due to heavy financial losses only to be re-birthed seven years later in 2014 and billed as the National Rugby Championship (NRC). The fate of the competition is still reliant on producing a product that attracts television audiences.

In its second year, rule changes have been introduced to encourage open fast play rewarding the scoring of try’s in an effort to reduce the amount of tactical (some would say boring) kicking options. Of course, a faster more exciting game presents new challenges and issues for its combatants.

This paper will discuss the continued importance for the game of rugby to compete for the corporate dollar and how this is inextricably linked to its ability to appeal to a global audience. To do so I examine the history of the game and hypothesise on the future marketing opportunities if it is to succeed at the professional level. I will also discuss the impact these changes may have on the individual player as well as the requirement to produce a nursery of athletes capable of delivering an entertaining and commercially viable product.

GENIESIS 1.1 ‘IN THE BEGINNING...’

Many supporters of the game they ‘play in heaven’, will tell you that its genesis was somewhere between the creation of the heaven and the earth. In fact New Zealanders and South Africans would argue the game preceded the other two events, with
religion, family, health and well being all being a secondary consideration to rugby! However, for the Australian rugby union public, games of rugby, at least of the primitive code were first played in the early to mid-19th century, and the first formal team, Sydney University Football Club being set up in 1864.¹

In 1869, Newington College was the first Australian school to play rugby in a match against the University of Sydney. From this beginning, the first metropolitan competition in Australia developed, formally beginning in 1874.

During these formative years, ‘Rugby league’ and ‘association football’ were early competitors to rugby union, but they were not the only ones. In the late 19th century, a number of "national" football codes emerged around the world, including Australian rules football (originating in Victoria), Gaelic football (Ireland), and the gridiron codes: American and Canadian football.

Rugby was even an Olympic sport. In 1900, Pierre de Coubertin, the revivor of the modern Olympics, introduced rugby union to the Summer Olympics in Paris. Coubertin had previous associations with the game, refereeing the first French domestic championship as well as France’s first international.

France, the German Empire and Great Britain all entered teams in the 1900 games France won gold defeating both opponents. The rugby event drew the largest crowd at that particular game’s.

Rugby was next played at the 1908 games in London. A Wallaby team, on tour in the United Kingdom, took part in the event, winning the gold, defeating Great Britain who were represented by a team from Cornwall.

Ironically, the United States (US) won the next event, at the 1920 Summer Olympics, defeating the French. The Americans repeated their achievement at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, again defeating France in a tournament marred by controversies surrounding the rivalry between the two teams.

Though rugby had attracted bigger crowds than the track and field events in 1924, it was dropped from next Games and has not been included since.²

In October 2009, the International Olympic Committee voted to return a form of rugby to the Olympics, with rugby sevens to be contested in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

**THE FORMING OF THE ‘GOOD OLD BOARD’**

In 1884, England had a disagreement with Scotland over a try that England had scored but that the referee disallowed citing a foul by Scotland. England argued that the referee should have played advantage and that, ‘as they made the Law’, if they said it was a try then it was a try! Not much has changed really.

In a direct response, The International Rugby Football Board\(^5\) (IRFB) was formed by Scotland, Ireland and Wales in 1886; but England refused to join, since they believed that they should have greater representation on the board because they had a greater number of clubs. They also refused to accept that the IRFB should be the recognised law maker of the game. The IRFB agreed that the member countries would not play England until the RFU agreed to join and accept that the IRFB would oversee the games between the home unions.

England finally agreed to join in 1890, six years later.

In 1930, it was agreed between the members that all future matches would be played under the laws of the IRFB. In 1997, the IRFB moved its headquarters from London to Dublin and a year later it changed its name to the International Rugby Board (IRB); in 2014, it changed its name again to the current World Rugby (WR).

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE LAW**

Changes to the laws of the game have been made at various times and this process still continues today. In 1877, the number of players was reduced from 20 to 15 a side.

Historically, no points at all were awarded for a try, the reward being to "try" to score a goal (to kick the ball over the cross bar and between the posts). Modern points scoring

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\(^5\) The world governing body for the sport renamed itself from the International Rugby Board to World Rugby (WR) effective 19 November 2014
was introduced in the late 1880s, and was uniformly accepted by the Home Nations for the 1890/91 season.

The balance in value between tries and conversions has changed greatly over the years. Until 1891, a try scored one point, a conversion two. For the next two years, tries scored two points and conversion three. In 1893, the modern pattern of tries scoring more was begun, with three points awarded for a try, two for a kick. The number of points from a try increased to four in 1971 and five in 1992.

Penalties have been worth three points since 1891 (they previously had been worth two points). The value of the drop goal was four points between 1891 and 1948, three points at all other times.

In 1958, the law governing conversions changed to today's version, which allows the kicker to place the ball and prohibits the defence from advancing toward the kicker until he begins his run-up.

In recent times we have seen changes to the laws with predominantly two objectives in mind. Safety for the players and speeding the game up, that as a result hopefully makes the game more appealing to play and entertaining to watch, ipso facto, more people will watch it!

It could be argued the two key areas that impact on the safety and speed of the game, is the setting of the scrum and kicking the ball.

Under the sub heading, Enjoyment and Entertainment located on the World Rugby website, there is direct evidence that 'The Old Board' recognises the importance of continually evolving the game.

‘The Laws provide the framework for a Game that is both enjoyable to play and entertaining to watch. If, on occasions, these objectives appear to be incompatible, enjoyment and entertainment are enhanced by enabling the players to give full rein to their skills. To achieve the correct balance, the Laws are constantly under review’.6

6 http://laws.worldrugby.org/?charter=all
A TSUNAMI ARRIVES CALLED ‘PROFESSIONALISM’

On 26 August 1995, the International Rugby Board declared rugby union an "open" game and thus removed all restrictions on payments or benefits to those connected with the game. It did this because of a committee conclusion that to do so was the only way to end the hypocrisy of shamateurism and to keep control of rugby union.

The threat to amateur rugby union was especially large in Australia where Super League was threatening to entice players to rugby league with large salaries. ‘To protect ourselves from Super League, we must take the game global, we must become professional’, declared former Wallaby Ross Turnbull, echoing most of those in southern hemisphere rugby union and many in the northern hemisphere too.\(^7\)

SANZAR was formed in 1995 by the New Zealand, Australian and South African Rugby Unions to try to counter the Super League threat. SANZAR proposed a provincial competition with teams from all three countries. This competition became the Super 12 and later the Super 14 before adopting its current identity as Super Rugby.

The SANZAR proposals also included an annual competition between each country's Test teams, the Tri Nations Series. They were eventually able to get backing for the competition from Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, with a contract totaling $US 550 million for ten years of exclusive TV and radio broadcasting rights. The deal was signed during the 1995 Rugby World Cup and revealed at a press conference on the eve of World Cup final.\(^8\)

A key benefit that professionalism brought to rugby union as a whole was the elimination of the constant defection of union players who were attracted to the money of rugby league. The rugby union authorities of the time also hoped that as players could now play in either code, in the long term most of the sponsorship and interest would gravitate away from league to the more international game of union.

The preferred body type and skill sets of players differ, especially in the play of the forwards. With access to players of different types, some more suited to one code and


some to the other, some English rugby union clubs have even formed partnerships with a rugby league club which plays in the premier rugby league competitions – the most notable example being Harlequins with London Broncos (formerly Harlequins Rugby League), and between Wigan Warriors and Saracens.

In Australia the constant flow of rugby union juniors to rugby league clubs has slowed, but Australian rugby union has failed yet to successfully promote a club or franchise league below the elite level. The introduction of the Junior Gold Cup (JGC) program for under 15 and under 17 players in 2014 has not yet yielded significant numbers to the junior ranks nor has it poached rugby league players away from the rival code in great numbers. However, time will tell.

**BIGGER, STRONGER, FASTER!**

Rugby union is now played by athletes. Large athletes! Player’s are significantly bigger, stronger and faster than the founding forefathers of the game. There is little doubt that, as the performance pressures have risen in elite rugby, so too have the strength-to-weight ratios of those who play it. Dave Reddin, the former English RFU's fitness and conditioning coach, estimated that an average forward now weighs 8kg more than his pre-professional counterpart, tipping the scales at around 108kg (17st). Backs, who typically weighed around 80kg a decade ago, are now 10kg heftier.

Predictably, these differences in bulk are down not to an accumulation of flab but of muscle. According to Reddin, an 85kg player is 30% stronger than they were in the early 1990s. And they are also faster. Pressure pads (or "load cells") inserted into tackle bags have revealed that the average top speed of a back is now 10 metres-per-second (around 22mph).\(^9\)

What all of this means, of course, is that each tackle has become akin to that which might be experienced in the collision sport of all collision sports, American Football, or the National Football League, (NFL).

\(^9\) Peta Bee, *The impact of professionalism*, 21 March 2005
The collisions that are experienced with an opponent in the NFL are said to be the reason that American Football players end their careers up to 5mm shorter than when they started. Their vertebrae become compressed through the reverberating shock through the spine that results from their repetitive encounters with fellow human tanks. Rugby players have not started shrinking yet but it might seem only a matter of time before they do. What both sports are very cognitive of is the impact head concussions can have on the long term health of players.

While professionalism may have been a catalyst for the changing stature of players and the nature of the game, it is easy to overlook the corresponding improvements in equipment, training methods, facilities, and medical care. In all of these categories we will see improvements and new benchmarks being set. At present, no one is quite sure where it will end.

**THE MARRAIGE OF SPORT AND MEDIA**

The exposure to and consumption of media products, including those concerned with sport, have increased dramatically. A study in the United Kingdom, known as the ‘Henley Centre' report went as far to suggest that people in the UK spend nine hours a day consuming media in its various forms, with television viewing occupying the equivalent of a day a week.10

Our experience of sport has become increasingly constructed and ordered through television output. Sport has become ‘big business’. It is now a well-established global industry with international organising bodies, like the International Olympic Committee (IOC), eager to promote and structure its further development.

The world of sport is a competitive one, not just in terms of which team tops the league or who wins the gold medal, but also which sports are able to attract the greatest financial resources.

The relationship with the media is central to the political economy of sport. Today, the media, primarily television, offer sport-added attractions in terms of finance from broadcasting fees and exposure to advertisers, sponsors and a wider audience. Our Australian rival codes lead the way in this regard.

In 2014, the NRL chief executive Dave Smith believed his game was in a strong position to begin making decisions about its long-term future after a record-breaking season in which television ratings, membership figures and social media activity all increased significantly. In 2015, its position is arguably even stronger, recording the highest attendance rate for the NRL finals series since they commenced in the current format.

Smith believes the NRL was able to think far ahead because of the growth achieved in the 2014 season. This was expected to lead to an even bigger broadcast deal from 2018 than the present $230 million a year agreement with Channel Nine, Fox Sports and Telstra.11

"My strong belief is that we are creating enormous value for this game like it has never had before," Smith said. "What that means is that the game is building a secure future, and that gives you the luxury of being able to sit down and plan out what you want in Australia, what you want in New Zealand, and what you might want to do internationally."

Smith went on, "across the world, premium sports like ours are growing between 10 and 15 per cent a year. The reason for that is because we have the ability to aggregate big audiences like nothing else. And the thing with premium sports is that you can't time-shift, you can't watch it tomorrow you want to watch it now. That is why sport is so valuable to media companies."

In contrast, Australian Rugby has struggled financially within this media competitive environment. Rugby Chief Executive Officer, Bill Pulver told the Financial Review he had been "pretty damn nervous, with good reason" a year ago when faced with looming budgetary issues in the sport, but said his fears have largely been allayed by

11 Brad Walter, NRL boss Dave Smith thinking big after 2014 growth.

The Daily Telegraph, December 12, 201411
the looming broadcast deal and a cost-cutting program that has found $10 million in savings out of the ARU. "Australian rugby will be in a much better shape from 2016 through to 2020. We've been through a broadcast negotiation that has typically been very tense ... and we've resolved the negotiations around who gets what share and that's been a very co-operative negotiation. I think it's been a very fair outcome for all unions. The final stage is to finalise the agreements, which I'm hopeful will be done within 60 days."

Mr Pulver also said the ARU will embark on a whole-of-game strategic plan for the next five years later in 2015. "We will put together a future fund to make sure if you get to any bumps in the road you are properly prepared. We will have money to cover the losses of the ARU, we want to fund Super Rugby properly so it's stable and then, most importantly, look at what investment monies we have for the development of the game."

The ARU had to resort to collecting a controversial participation levy from all grassroots players to help with financial issues. "What that is doing is really cementing the revenues we need for reinvestment in the community side of the game," Mr Pulver said. "It means we can invest in the state unions who can put money into growing participation rates."12

In September 2015, interim SANZAR Chief, Brendan Morris announced a broadcast deal was likely in the coming weeks with free-to-air coverage also on the agenda as rugby continues its fight for supporters against its cross-code rivals. It would fall well short of the AFL and NRL’s billion-dollar contracts, but will still provide the biggest television rights windfall since the start of Super Rugby in 1996.

Super Rugby is breaking new ground this year with teams from Japan, Argentina and a sixth South African franchise joining the competition.

"If you read the statistics, rugby is the fastest growing game in America at the moment, there's huge potential for us to look into those markets," Morris said.

International success is one of the major driving forces in rugby union's popularity in Australia as it fights the NRL and AFL for crowds and television audiences.

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12 John Stenholt, TV deal bails out Australian Rugby, The Sydney Morning herald, February 16, 2015
"It's certainly dropped off [popularity in Australia] in the last couple of years and to say it's not concerning wouldn't be right," Morris said.

"But the other sports are facing challenges as well, there's so much competition for corporate dollars, bums on seats and viewership.

"We've got to come up with innovative ways to engage fans and get Super Rugby back to being a world leader in innovation. This is our chance to re-energise our fans, come up with some excitement and rebrand our competition."

**BEWARE THE WORLD CHAMPIONS!**

No not the New Zealand All Blacks. The Americans, who are pretty much world champions in every sport. Well at least those that they invented or play solely in America. Very few people associate rugby with the United States. The national team has not done much on the international stage and there is no national professional league to speak of. But as the fastest-growing sport in their country, things could quickly change.

Considering that a decade ago, rugby in the US hardly existed, the sport is now flexing its muscles. Data from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association shows that the number of rugby players in the United States doubled between 2008 and 2013, reaching almost 1.2 million. This, according to the same data, makes rugby the fastest-growing sport in the United States.¹³

Not only are participants on the rise, but tournaments and structures are now available to those who want to play competitively. In rugby sevens, a Collegiate Rugby Championship has been organised in partnership with NBC Sports every year since 2010, and the HSBC World Sevens Series has played in Las Vegas every year since 2004/05. Attendance for the latter has mushroomed, from 15,800 in 2004 to 75,800 last March.

¹³ Roxane Coche, Why rugby’s growth in the US could change the global game Posted in Guest Blogs, 24 September 2015
US rugby is also launching its own professional league; the National Rugby Football League (NRFL) will launch in 2017, with an exhibition series starting next year.

Internationally, the US has been a constant figure in world rugby, missing only one World Cup ten years ago. As the international standard of play has improved, so have the Eagles. The triumph of the rugby sevens team in the London Sevens at Twickenham last year proves it.

USA Rugby chief executive Nigel Melville says that initiatives targeting the youth market were introduced as early as 2008. In order to make parents understand the game, which is widely perceived in the US as a violent sport played with no protective gear, USA Rugby had six to 12-year-olds play a non-contact version called Rookie Rugby (known as touch rugby in Australia).

Since 2008, Melville says, “more than two million kids (yes that’s right 2 million!) have been through the programme across 43 state rugby organisations.” This, he explains, “has created great momentum for the sport” as those first children have now grown up to play in high school and college. Even though there is “still a long way to go,” Melville is confident that these programmes “will keep developing with more and better coaches and referees, and of course players.”

Today, USA Rugby is focusing on commercialising the sport. For that purpose, a new commercial entity, Rugby International Marketing (RIM) was created. Melville explains that this “‘for-profit’ company will grow commercial activities to fund the game, and improve the visibility of the sport on TV and on a new digital channel, Over the Top.”

Melville’s objectives for the sport are clear: keep growing, increase its visibility and earn revenue. And toward these goals, USA Rugby can count on one of the sport’s wealthiest national boards: the RFU has become a minority shareholder and strategic partner in RIM.

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14 Roxane Coche, Why rugby’s growth in the US could change the global game Posted in Guest Blogs, 24 September 2015
American Sports scientist, Dr John Sullivan an NFL expert visiting Australia recently suggested the NRL and rugby union should start scouting for talent in the US college system.¹⁵

On the back of two-time Dally M medallist Jarryd Hayne making the transition to the San Francisco 49ers, he believes Australia can reverse the trend by identifying elite talent in the US.

“First of all most historians of sport in North America and Australia probably don’t realise that American football came from rugby. So why couldn’t you convert someone? It is absolutely doable.”

“The NRL and the AFL are going to find more and more that’s it’s going to be easy to convert American college athletes.”¹⁶ Sullivan suggests the American football players who are tight ends and wide receivers would be able to convert more easily than others.

**CONCLUSION**

It appears ‘The Good Old Board’, or at least the latest version recognises the need to be progressive. You will find on the ‘World Rugby’ website as part of its charter, the following:

‘Rugby has fully embraced the professional era, but has retained the ethos and traditions of the recreational Game. In an age in which many traditional sporting qualities are being diluted or even challenged, Rugby is rightly proud of its

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ability to retain high standards of sportsmanship, ethical behaviour and fair play.\textsuperscript{17}

The beauty of the game is that it will continue to attract players of all shapes and sizes for various reasons to the amateur ranks. However, at the elite level, the game must be further prepared to change in-order to attract and stimulate a global market. To achieve this ‘The Old Board’ must be prepared to embrace innovative rule changes to the game, tempered with the safety and longevity concerns that will come with making the game faster and physically tougher for players.

As identified, perhaps one of the greatest opportunities and indeed threats, albeit to the continued southern hemisphere world domination of rugby, is perhaps embracing and cultivating the ‘Americans’. With a first world population of over 318 million people in 2014, compared to Australia of approximately 24 million, it could be argued that for every ten elite athletes Australia could produce to play rugby, America could produce over one hundred.

The increasing popularity of the game together with the advances made in coaching will see the US not only advance further its national sevens standing, but also its ranking in the 15 aside version. The athletic nursery is already there!

Even more impressive is the statistics and marketing potential derived from the televised sporting events. The NBC’s record audience for a live telecast of Super Bowl XLIX currently stands as the country’s most watched single television broadcast, with 114.4 million viewers. The broadcast also reached a current all-time high of 168-million viewership mark in several portions at the conclusion of the February 2015 Super Bowl telecast.\textsuperscript{18} These statistics from an advertising perspective are staggering.

It has been no surprise to see recently both the New Zealand All Blacks and Australia play test matches against the US on their home soil. Perhaps the next step is their inclusion in a revamped Test Match Rugby or Super 17 competition to include the US

\textsuperscript{17} http://laws.worldrugby.org/?charter=all

\textsuperscript{18} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_watched_television_broadcasts
enabling the competition to tap into the audience and potential television rights only the Americans can generate.

So, whether seeking an opportunity as a player, coach, talent scout (recruiting) or as a country seeking a wider audience and greater sponsorship, it appears we are witnessing the awakening of a sleeping giant in the form of the Americans. Exciting times lay ahead.