LOOKING WITHIN: WHY COUNTRY RUGBY IS A TRUE VALUE PROPOSITION

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to highlight the importance of country rugby within Australia and the importance of Country rugby players.

Having coached NSW Country Colts and the NSW Country Cockatoos over the past seven years. I have found that players possess skills and talent to proceed to the next level. Country rugby around Australia is a major talent pool that is still unmasked. With a better focus on improving their transition, Country Rugby could be an even greater source of quality professional rugby players throughout Australia. It has been overlooked by many city premier clubs who seem to look overseas rather than within.

Country rugby players are defined as those who play outside the capital city competitions, from larger regional areas to remote country towns.

Since rugby became professional, the pathway for progression for Country players from Club to State and ultimately International rugby has changed dramatically. Where once it was possible for Country players to make it big in perhaps just a few years, it is generally recognised as being impossible today, however Country rugby still has a major role to play in the supply of players to modern professional rugby.

Many Country players do leave their towns and properties to attend school in the capital cities and from there make their way into pathways and representative teams and progress into Premier Rugby. Others head to the city to attend University or to give their rugby career a shot after finishing school. While some do adapt to life in the city, many return to their home towns, unable to adapt to the major lifestyle changes faced with city life while pursuing their rugby dream.

It has been proven over a sustained period there are Premier Grade, NRC, Super Rugby and even Wallaby standard players out in the country. With a greater focus on improving their transition, Country Rugby could be an even greater source of quality professional rugby players throughout Australia.

In 2017, 39% of Australian Super Rugby players were of Country origin. This was similar with the women where 34% of the Australian Wallaroo’s World Cup squad are or were originally from regional areas.
NSW Country Rugby is the largest provincial pool of players in the southern hemisphere, with many current Super Rugby and Wallabies coming from this region. In NSW Country Rugby, registered players have increased 1.6%. A total of 37,987 players in 2017. This is a significant achievement considering the current narrative of the game and the $500k reduction in funding from the ARU to community rugby in 2017.

Over the years we have seen Super rugby, Wallaroo’s and Wallaby players come from the Country and with more Country rugby players than ever before filtering through shows the strength and untapped market of players in Country Australia.

In 2014 the National Rugby Championships (NRC) was re-launched to help bridge the gap from club rugby to Super rugby. Throughout this competition the two Country sides (QLD Country and NSW Country Eagles) have proven to be a success, with the Eagles semi finalists in 2014 and Runner-up in 2016, while Queensland Country won the competition in 2017. While not all players within these teams are true country players, they do provide a strong link through providing players, coaching staff, sponsors and hosting home games. This support from regional areas for ‘their’ teams is an indication of Rugby’s place in the Country community.

We are finding more of the talented country players moving to the city competitions to try and make premier grade teams, NRC and Super rugby teams as they feel that they cannot make it from country rugby areas anymore. In previous years there were a lot of country players fielding for their teams in home town competitions and still succeeding to Super and Wallaby levels.

2. RELEVANT FACTORS AND PLAYER FEEDBACK

Rugby within country regions is more than just the game, it’s a lifeline - to those who play it, participate within the club, spectators and officials within running the game. Country rugby brings people and towns together which is sometimes the only other face to face contact with other towns each week as they live in remote areas.

Rugby engenders a sense of community no matter where you play but this sense of belonging is bigger in the country. The true spirit of rugby is played in all country regions across Australia. Country rugby’s point of difference is lifestyle.

As highlighted earlier, modern players now need to transition to the city in order to pursue a professional rugby career. Many are picked up at schoolboy level and progress through the RA (formerly ARU) pathway systems now in place, or via school scholarships or Club based University incentive programs.

The reality is that Country players face tempestuous circumstances coming from country towns to the premier grades. Through a series of interviews, three Country players have provided their comments highlighting some of their personal challengers:

**Player One** – Premier grade rugby, Super Rugby – Wallaby
**Player Two** – Premier grade rugby, former NSW Country Colts
**Player Three** – Premier grade rugby – Colt player, former NSW Country Colts

1. **SELF-BELIEF** – Am I good enough because I am from a small country town not the big city? I play in a representative side within the country but do I have what the city premier clubs requires?
From the players I spoke to the answer is YES, they are. They never had the opportunity to test themselves or be seen on a larger stage.

Player One
- I always wanted to become a professional rugby player. To hopefully represent my state.

Player Two
- Over the years I have found myself believing in my own ability after good direction from club coaches.

Player Three
- I had to challenge myself. I was on top where I came from but if I didn’t give it a go I would regret later in life.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES – Will I be able to cope with lifestyle issues of moving to the city (Concrete jungle, Noise, Population density, Traffic, Cost of Living)?

Country rugby players who move to the city based competitions face challenges that are foreign to them. They call it “Concrete Rugby”. To land in a new location surrounded by high rise buildings and millions of people, it’s hard for them to adjust. Non stop traffic, queuing for hours just to get a few suburbs away is unnatural for them as well as the constant noise, the cost of city living, the lottery winning of a parking spot. Anecdotally, many players return back to their country towns with in the first year. Approximately 55 – 60 percent.

Player One
- Balance is the key to success when transitioning to the city. Players need to work, find accommodation, possibly study and be embraced by the club.
Work - This needs to be in an area that will interest the player whilst not impacting on his ability to perform. You don't want all your players working at the same place. Otherwise players are spending too much time thinking/talking about footy. Particularly if you house them together as is often the case except with colts who maybe be studying etc.
Study - Important for the club to offer this to country blokes.
For those from the land sometime in the city is a great opportunity to get a trade before going back to the farm. Each club should have a person who can help organise tertiary education. This is important around work/life/footy balance also.

Player Two
- During football season it's very hard to get back home but in the off season I tend to get back there maybe once a month for a weekend to just catch up with family and friends. I need it.

Player Three
- The different pace of life, the cost, I really struggled in the first half of the year.
3. **SOCIAL** – Do clubs / people understand the pluses and minuses of shared living (no home cooking, washing, family/siblings, lack of family support)?

Premier clubs house players in shared accommodation and generally in a unit, work in a job provided but many of the country players find it hard with just the difference in pace of life, large distances away from family and friends. The Social aspect of country rugby is higher than in city and as I mentioned earlier, Country rugby is often a Lifeline to many players and entire towns.

**Player One**  
*Accommodation* - This is where variation could come in for the level of player you have. Paying a blokes rent can ease a lot of financial stress in cities. If the club owns a house this is a valuable asset for looking after country blokes.

**Player Two**  
- Absolutely loved it, but was hard affording rent at the start without a job, luckily I had saved enough money to support myself.

**Player Three**  
- I ended up chasing and finding my own jobs that worked around football and paid the bills which was very difficult. I was also offered a room in a house full of other new players which I didn't take up as I moved with my partner so we found our own place.  
Show the options available to young players and help them prepare the things they need for example Resume’s and Rental applications. And most of all actually assist them.

4. **INTENSITY** – Are the struggles of Country players irrelevant when they get to the city?

The speed and intensity of the game is consistently much higher in the city, but so too is the training. Country players are definitely up to the challenge, but will take some time to adjust to the increased physical and mental workload associated with higher intensity games and training, particularly when it comes to backing it up week in, week out. In Country regions weather is a major part of their lives and has an effect on rugby clubs.

It’s common for Country players to travel greater distances, 3 or even 4 hours each way for a game. In the Western Plains competition from NSW Country rugby, they had a referee this year travel over 5200 km to referee games within its zone.

**Player One**  
- Pace and professionalism. City clubs have more resources and more men willing to prioritise rugby. Country men have to worry more about work, family etc.

**Player Two**  
- Knowledge of rugby was greater, most of the boys played rugby throughout school.

**Player Three**  
- Completely different professionalism, completely different standard and a completely different spirit. It is a no nonsense attitude to trainings and games.
5. **COACHING/COMPETITION** – Are the different levels in City and Country rugby too different?

The heart of coaches regardless, of being in the city or Country, is the same. However, there are some differences: the vast available playing stock within city clubs, the ability to have advice, help, courses, and depth of city competitions.

Competitions in the Country will vary from 4 to 12 clubs in senior Country zones. Many teams in juniors and seniors are coached by parents willing to give it a go and help their beloved club, son or daughter. Opportunities of advancing their coaching talents are limited, or aren’t pursued or they feel are out of their reach from the country town they live in.

Each weekend, Saturday and/or Sunday, parents travel massive distances in the country, just to give their child an opportunity to play a game of rugby. Many travel more than 2 to 3 hours each way: that’s like saying a team from Sydney has to play in Canberra or vice versa or even in Bathurst or a Brisbane team travelling to Maryborough just to play a game of rugby, while many city teams are annoyed if they travel more than 30 minutes.

There are a lot more courses for coaches within cities, because of the larger population and resources.

- In the city the competition is 5x better. Knowledge of rugby was greater, most of the boys played rugby throughout school completely, different professionalism, completely different standard and a completely different spirit.
  
  **Player One**
  
  - Faster in the city. Level of physicality in big country games is similar. Coaching is much more professional in the city. Not as cruisey as the country.
  
  - The rugby standard and coaching standard is outrageously different. Coaching back home is done for the fun of it, the love and the game, the community and for the social life. The rugby and coaching in Sydney is done also for the love of the game, some of the lower grades for the social and fun but most of all it’s done to progress, get your name out there, prove a point and showcase what you have in the hope to succeed. This makes for serious competition, completely different intensity, completely different professionalism, completely different standard and a completely different spirit.

3. **OTHER RESULTS FROM QUESTIONS ASKED TO PLAYERS**

- All chasing dreams of making it, all were disappointed they had to go to premier clubs to do so
- All players would recommend the opportunity
- What clubs offered was only half met with jobs and accommodation
- 1 player was picked up through school boy system in Super franchise pathways
- All players found the speed of the game in the city doubled but loved the speed
- Trainings and coaching were better structured and more intense
- Wasn’t as physical as country rugby but more skilled
- Clubs were all welcoming to all players
- All struggled financially
- The players returning home struggled to readjust to the speed and skill of the game but improved country clubs focus and skill set by taking back what they had learnt
- Country coaches - there are a few just as good as professional coaches but generally below city coaches
- All players would return and play back in the country
- Shared accommodation of more than 3 players was a big NO
- Your word as a club is stronger than a written contract.

4. OVERSEAS PLAYERS

Many city clubs chase players from OVERSEAS where there are visa issues, cost of plane tickets, language barriers, arrival costs and transport, loss of international players to other poaching clubs or more money at league or as many competitions do, having point systems with overseas players (a minimal per team) yet there is a massive market of talented, well hardened players from within our own country. They are a valid option to overseas players. You will normally find that country players put their hand up - not out.

5. OPTIONS FOR PREMIER CLUBS

Country rugby players moving to the city based clubs is a positive result, yet it hurts Country clubs who struggle to even raise the minimum players to participate each week.

Options to lure Country players for Premier city clubs:

- To set up academies in different country zones targeting country players, eg a Sydney club has an academy in Central West of NSW targeting players from 17 to 25, up skilling them, placing them on strength and conditioning programs allowing them to come to the city and to apply their skills.
  
  You will find if you place Country players on a program, strength and conditioning and mixed with skill based drills the growth of the player will be outstanding as many have never gone through a specific program to influence their rugby. Country players are hardened from playing men while still in late teens, more so than city based players.

In country rugby, many young colt players back up into second and first grade against that old hard head in a scrum or across the field and if you take that player to the city he will already be able to take that big hit and bounce back up.

- Have ‘Sister Clubs’ within different country areas, players sent both ways for different opportunities.

- Affiliate with the country representative teams as a selection process of player talent coming through.

- Premier clubs should attend the Country championships to scout for players.

- Premier clubs should attend Country V Country fixtures.

- Establish a ‘City Mum’ or Club Welfare Officer to assist player transition and help them adapt to city life by showing how to do a resume, go on and use public transport, shop for groceries, work, training, etc. Be there to talk to. Establish a surrogate family for Country players.

- Player secondment: send premier players out to train in off season to regional areas or play in Country rugby for a season. The premier based player will also offer a different outlook on rugby with ideas and training methods, all you have to do is take yourself out of your comfort zone and the rewards will outweigh every doubt immensely.
6. COUNTRY COACHES

I have talked about the players moving to premier clubs. This part is about coaches moving to premier clubs from the country.

There are a lot of quality coaches who have passed all their ARU levels in rugby, coaching country towns or Country representative teams.

Country coaches offer a difference in their coaching approach: most have stronger player / coach bonds due to location and social factors. Although coaches are well rehearsed in game knowledge, they are a huge influence on players remaining within our sport.

It is probably harder for coaches to transition to Premier club coaching due to many reasons. Generally they are older with families who are at school and it’s hard for them to relocate everything and everybody out of school, current jobs, university, pets, farms etc to chase their rugby dream. Most already have a well paid and supporting job or come from a working on land background.

They have opportunities to coach local, zone and state Country representative teams but what’s next? I have spoken about pathways for players but it is harder as a coach. Yes there are NRC Country teams, however both train out of city based areas. This is where having a ‘Sister Club’ or development club pathway in country areas is of enormous benefit to all, not only finding players but coaches, managers, physio’s, doctors etc.

Premier clubs employing Country coaches will be a benefit to the clubs progress, all they need to do is look outside the square.

7. SUMMARY

In my opinion, country players are late developers due to lack of opportunity, distance, and schooling, size of country towns, perceptual factors, weather, sociology, and economic factors and so on. Many country players don’t really hit their mark of their playing ability till they reach between the ages of 22 – 27 years of age. They have missed pathways, development teams but they have an enormous ability to reach the top level. They just need an opportunity and clubs willing to put in.

In summary, as I have said within this paper, Country players will:

* Be a better more viable option than overseas players
* Grow your club or Franchise
* With the right coaching based structure be as skilled as existing city players
* Put their hand up not out
* Hardened and ready for the contest of Premier rugby.

And most of all I recommend that Australian rugby LOOK WITHIN Country Australia, for the next value proposition.