THE PACIFIC ISLAND RUGBY PLAYER

INTRODUCTION

My interest in writing this assignment has come about through my involvement with a lot of Pacific Island players who have moved to Australia to pursue rugby careers.

Pacific Island players see rugby as a means not just of individual advancement but as a potential source of financial security for themselves, their families and their wider communities in the Pacific Islands and their adopted countries.

“Pacific Islanders which include, Fijians, Tongans, Samoans and Cook Islanders have become the most prodigious and prevalent ethnic group of rugby sports migrants globally. They have become, exquisite products and prime commodities as they are now a major force in the leading competitions, world wide.” (Peter Horton, Pacific islanders in Global Rugby, 2012)

Taking into consideration the above statements, I will endeavour to develop strategies and suggestions on how we as rugby coaches and club administrators can support Pacific Island rugby players within our clubs, to ensure that we get the best out of our players and provide the best opportunities for the Pacific Island players to pursue professional rugby careers and future success in life after rugby.

THE INFLUENCE OF PACIFIC ISLANDERS ON RUGBY UNION

If we were to look at the past Rugby World Cup and the influence of the Pacific Islanders on this competition, we can see that the performances these players whoever they played for, was an impressive promotion for Pacific Island rugby. There were eight players of Pacific Island heritage in the Australian team; ten Pacific Islanders and five Maori in the winning All Blacks team; seven in the USA team; three in the Japanese team one in the English team and one in the Welsh team. There were 120 players at the World Cup who were either born in the Islands or considered themselves Pacific Islanders. That’s 20 per cent of all the players drawn from three tiny island nations, whose combined population is barely a million. These are clear examples of the migration pattern of rugby playing Pacific Islanders, moving from their island homes to core rugby playing countries.

Pacific Island players are seeing rugby as lucrative and for some the only way for social and financial advancement. Countries that support and provide these opportunities for Pacific Island players will continue to have a growing Pacific Island presence in their teams.

The importance of developing this relationship is pointed out in the NZRFU strategic plan, where they have acknowledged that they are making unprecedented efforts to engage the Pacific Island community and protecting players of Pacific Island origins as one of their goals between now and 2016.
WHY ARE COACHES SELECTING PACIFIC ISLAND PLAYERS?

Pacific Islanders are the fastest growing population in rugby.

Four reasons these players are gaining selection into leading rugby competitions are Genetics, Skill level, Attitude and Team culture.

Genetics: Genetically the pacific islanders are built to be very good rugby players, they are big, fit and they have big hands that allow them to grip the ball.

Skill level: They have tremendous hand eye coordination.

Attitude: Pacific islanders are built for combat they have a warrior spirit within.

Team: Pacific islanders love the camaraderie of the team; they love to be around players and are willing to do whatever ever it takes to help the team win. They promote family values within the team and the club.

WHEN DID PACIFIC ISLANDERS BECOME AN INFLUENCE IN WORLD RUGBY?

From an article by Gregor Paul, (A plunder in the Pacific, 2013) where he believes that the Rugby World Cup in 1991 was the beginning of the Pacific uprising. Western Samoa burst onto the scene and left everyone, particularly the northern hemisphere, in a near state of shock with their level of physicality and aggression. Tackling had been a relatively passive business up until then and suddenly the Samoans had shifted the parameters. Players were destructive, explosive defenders who launched into the contact and hit in the mid-riff. It was breathtaking, combative in a way no one had seen and when it was relentless, the way it was in that campaign, it became seriously effective.

The Samoans were highly competitive and very explosive athletes. The type of rugby Samoa played – high impact, high tempo, high skills – was the type of rugby that held serious interest to coaches all around the world.

PROFESSIONALISM

“The impact of Pacific islanders on the shape of rugby, how it was played, and in some ways the culture of the game, has accelerated with its professionalism in 1995.” (Peter Horton, Pacific islanders in Global Rugby, 2012)

Pacific Island players became hot commodities. Players were offered sports scholarships to private schools in Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Players received jobs through the rugby clubs, boots clothing and financial support. Rugby provided very real pathways to life changing opportunities, educational and sporting.

The shift from amateur rugby to professional rugby gave Pacific Island players the opportunity to migrate in search of employment, educational opportunities, better housing and better ethnic and church communities.
The Pacific Island families viewed rugby as a viable avenue for the men to gain future financial security not only for themselves but for their families.

GATHERING INFORMATION

There are many obligations placed on our Pacific Island players. It is important to have an understanding of what they have been taught. I have decided to look at three important aspects of a Pacific Islanders' life.

THE FAMILY

The family is the most important concept of Pacific Island life. Family does not only include, mother, father and siblings but also extended family and communities as well. Extended families are a source of certainty and comfort. All adults provide a role in parenting children. Children learn about their place in society as they are integrated into the family's traditions and history. Children learn about lifelong attachment and responsibility.

Players are not only expected to be successful for their families but also provide financially as well. It is a common perception that the family has sacrificed a lot for their children to succeed so this is to be repaid to the family either through financial or social advancement within the community. Life revolves around the house and the children are expected to stick close by to run errands and look after the elders and take care of the children.

English will not be the only spoken language at home.

THE CHURCH

Church, prayer and God play a significant role in the success of a player. The world of church is closely linked to the family and to culture. Players will acknowledge prayer through team huddling in prayer, visible religious tattoos, scriptural references or quotes, ritual hand motions/gestures (the sign of the cross on ones body or pointing to the sky with the index finger) and references to God or a supreme being during media interviews.

THE CULTURE

Food plays a prominent role in the everyday lives of Pacific Islanders. Food is seen as a symbol of integration of social groups. Eating together is a symbol of social cohesion and wellbeing. Food offering is important there should be enough food available for those that usually eat together as well as enough for any visitors. Music is an important part of Polynesian culture; the Polynesian players enjoy music and dance. Music is interwoven into all aspects of social gatherings within the culture. Tattooing was once widespread throughout Polynesia. It was carried out as a “rite of passage” to mark the transition to adulthood and as a mark of courage and status. The pain of traditional tattooing was an important part of the cultural practice. Although modern ones have largely replaced the traditional tattooing
practices, there is a revival going on across the Pacific as many Pacific islanders get tattoos as a mark of cultural identity.

Pacific Islanders are very “shy” and this response may be perceived as a complete refusal to communicate. This may arise as a fear that others will laugh at misfortunes.

WHAT THE PLAYERS SAY?

Now that we have an understanding of what it means to be a Pacific Islander and what obligations these players bring to our rugby clubs, I decided to gather information from those that are directly involved in the system. I made contact with five prominent Pacific Island rugby players and asked five questions relating to being a Pacific Islander and its importance in rugby. Although I have not included all responses in this paper I have used quotes from these questions.

Question 1. What do you expect in terms of support from a rugby club/professional club.

Question 2. What support were you given growing up away from your country and playing rugby?

Question 3. How would you promote your culture to your rugby mates?

Question 4. What is important to you as a Pacific Islander/Polynesian?

Question 5. When you represented your country, how did it feel to be Pacific Islander/Polynesian playing for the national side?

STRATEGIES AND SUGGESTIONS

The underlying concept of these strategies and suggestions is that coaches and administrators are there to integrate not assimilate.

If clubs can create a safe environment through Family, Church and Culture they will have very successful programs.

THE FAMILY

Creating a family environment will be one of the most important strategies when retaining and recruiting Pacific Island players.

Pacific Island players stated that:

"My Family were my biggest supporters and still are to this day the countless car trips to take me to training and games in the earlier part of my life was a huge contribution to why I was able to make rugby my full time employment."

"Family is my biggest driving force for me to succeed so it’s important that with
every action or decision I make I have them in the back of my mind.”

By creating an environment where players feel safe and are able to acknowledge the importance of their families will help you to gain respect from the Pacific Island players. They will give you more commitment, as you have become part of their family.

Strategies could include:
- Family days.
- Visiting families.
- Pronouncing names properly.
- Finding out about players backgrounds, upbringing and families.
- Interact with families.
- Interacting with all players.
- Giving players opportunities to acknowledge and be proud of their families.
- Celebrate family successes.

THE CHURCH.

Creating an environment where players believe their religion and spirituality is protected is important. They feel safe that there religion is part of their beliefs and that they have the right to acknowledge their spirituality in sport and in life away from sport.

A player acknowledged that he is comfortable with his religion and stated that:

“Religion is important to me, my belief is that at least one day of the week I should focus on the spiritual side of my life it provides a balance in my life.”

“Sometimes it is very hard not to play on Sundays but I trust in my faith.”

“I feel comfortable in the team environment but it would be good if players are aware of my beliefs and why I choose these beliefs.”

It is important that player’s religion is acknowledged and there is a respect for their beliefs.

Strategies could include:
- Visit churches with fellow players.
- Attend church functions with players.
- Prayer time.
- Be aware of the different religions within the team.
- Opportunity to attend church as a team.
- Chaplain within the club.
- Respect player’s choice of beliefs.
- Players are aware and respect other player’s beliefs. (Example: non-drinkers).
• Respect players pre-game plan.

THE CULTURE

The Pacific Island player will always acknowledge their culture. If Pacific Islanders feel comfortable in the environment and believe that the environment gives them an opportunity to express their culture they will be a lot happier. Having a person of contact will help players feel comfortable and relaxed then they can get on with playing rugby.

“I think having a support network of the actual culture the individual might be. Maori, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian. This will help these players settle in to a new environment. Because the Pacific Islander mentality is normally humble and quiet it could be seen or passed off as a little lazy, or withdrawn and then ultimately feeling out of place.”

“Young up and comers of Islander backgrounds and more traditional upbringings are expected to support their families even though they might not be making much money themselves”.

“Being of both Maori and Cook Islander descent I think a simple cultural day fundraiser, Waitangi Day, are good ways to get the other people in touch with our proud cultures, have traditional food, waiata and kapa haka.”

Strategies could include.

• Cultural days.
• Provide Cultural advisors within the club.
• Provide socializing opportunities which include, Hangi, Kava Sessions, singing, kapa haka, music and dancing.
• Communicate as a team.
• Be proud of your culture within the team.
• Provide financial advice.
• Provide educational opportunities, give players an opportunity to improve their education.
• Players live with players or families of similar cultural backgrounds.
• Understand the different cultures within the team.
• Provide players with opportunities to learn about cultures within the team.
• Help players interact with other team members.

In conclusion I believe that the enjoyment of rugby must not be forgotten. I understand the professional environment, the expectations that are placed on our Pacific Island players and the importance of success for the club can sometimes take players away from the reason they play rugby. And that is ENJOYMENT.