

Rugby Union in Australia – Embracing our strengths for a prosperous future

Snapshot in Time

At the time of writing, 20th November 2023, the following events have recently occurred at the peak of the Australian Rugby landscape:

- *Dave Rennie was sacked 9 months out from the 2023 RWC and replaced with Eddie Jones*
- *Phil Waugh became CEO of Rugby Australia*
- *Australia did not make the quarter finals of 2023 RWC after losing two Wales and Fiji in the pool stages*
- *Hamish McLennan was forcibly removed by the state governing bodies (except NSW and Victoria) and has been replaced as Chairman of the Board of Rugby Australia by Daniel Herbert*

Following a turbulent 12 months for the Wallabies and Rugby Australia, emotions, ideas, and strong opinions are at an all-time high. “Public opinion” has rugby on life support in Australia and many stakeholders are scrambling for answers to shape the direction of the game. No doubt some alterations are required, but a slightly deeper look into the landscape gives great cause of optimism.

The intention of this opinion piece is to encourage us to delve into the strengths that make Australian Rugby Union unique and explore the necessary steps to overcome existing challenges responsibly and sustainably, ensuring a future where the sport continues to thrive at all levels.

Strengths to be embraced:

1. Strong participation numbers and lifelong engagement
2. Global game

1. Strong participation numbers and lifelong engagement

At the grassroots level, the heart of any sport beats in unison with the enthusiasm of its participants. Rugby Union in Australia boasts impressive junior and senior participation numbers with 104,346 registered players in 2023, for an 8.1% increase on the previous year.

These numbers, and the entrenched culture of rugby union across many schools and clubs with over 100 years of history, serve as a testament to the sport's popularity but also as a breeding ground for future talents and success.

Inclusivity and accessibility are a core strength of rugby union, as it is truly a sport for everyone, regardless of size, body shape, age, ethnicity, gender, or capabilities. Rugby celebrates diversity and offers a place for participants of all backgrounds to come together, united by a shared love for the game.

Rugby Australia and the governing bodies are constantly exploring and implementing initiatives such as targeted outreach programs, diversity training and education, and the

creation of more playing opportunities that ensures the sport remains a welcoming and diverse community and increases accessibility for all.

The desires and needs of these many loyal and new stakeholders are crucial to the future of the game, including an emphasis on holistic development, enjoyment, and **“age and stage”** appropriate opportunities at ALL levels of the game, not purely a focus on the professional game.

2. Global Game

World Rugby has 132 members with 114 full member unions and 18 associate member unions, meaning you can find a rugby club in roughly two thirds of countries across the world.

Tens of thousands of people per year utilise the global rugby network by using it as a vehicle for playing, traveling, working opportunities in other countries, or through connecting with a rugby club when relocating which sees them instantly obtain a new social and professional network. The positive impact these connections have is immeasurable and is certainly powerful and comforting as people transition into their new surrounds.

These opportunities exist at all levels of the game, from social and participatory right through to professional and elite, which is a wonderful aspect of the game.

Areas potentially requiring attention.

1. Rugby ecosystem alignment
2. Competition with other codes and sports
3. Reality check for young players

1. Rugby ecosystem alignment

One of the key challenges facing Australian Rugby Union is the need for a cohesive system that aligns each level of the game and ensures collaboration and cooperation above and below. Currently, there are a lot of very positive things happening at all levels of the game, however a lot of operating in silos rather than a focus on the code itself and “greater good”.

To address this, a holistic approach that considers the entire rugby ecosystem is essential, where decisions at every level are made with the overall benefit of Australian Rugby Union in mind, not just the national or professional teams.

This involves aligning the goals of local clubs, schools, pathways and representative teams, and the national side. Shared resources, collaborative coaching programs, and a unified vision can bridge the existing gaps, ensuring that every player and stakeholder, regardless of their level, is contributing to the growth and success of the sport.

2. “Competition” with other codes and sports

The battle for supremacy in the Australian sporting landscape is fierce, with Rugby Union contending against the dominance of Football, Rugby League, and Australian Rules Football in the football codes, along with other popular sports. Each code has its unique strengths and fan base, and the competition for participants and attention is an ongoing challenge.

To navigate this competition effectively, we need to focus on what sets us apart as a sport and ensure **OUR** people always feel valued, heard, and connected with our direction. Concentrating on our considerable strengths as a code, some of which are identified above, and internalising our attention to continually improve and enrich the experiences for our committed stakeholders is critical to our evolution.

Jostling with codes or sports that have amplified resourcing capabilities and a whole different landscape is irresponsible and fraught with danger. Sure, there is a chance that we will “lose” some talented players to other codes, but by trusting the quality of our unique landscape and always looking to enhance the rugby experience for our core stakeholders that have been committed to the code for generations will remain and new, curious punters will arrive.

3. Reality check for young players

During most player’s careers, and potentially at multiple stages along the way, the idea of being a professional rugby player and earning a living from the game materialises, however this is rarely the initial motivation for involvement and certainly not a realistic outcome for the vast majority.

2023 registration stats show that there were 29,437 adult male and 5,681 female players in Australia. Considering the Women’s game is currently amateur and assuming each of the five super rugby teams contracted 40 male players, **approximately 0.67% of eligible Australian rugby players achieved professional status in 2023**. Whilst a great ambition to have, it is unrealistic for most.

Although paradoxical, it could be argued that the ambition for elitism and professionalism is ultimately what sets up many young players for perceived failure, disappointment, and a premature end to their involvement in rugby. A quick bit of market research from a sample of current players who were asked the following question “why do you play rugby”, yielded the following responses:

13-year-old player – I like playing rugby because it gives me joy

15-year-old player – It is fun and competitive, and gives you mates and skills

16-year-old player – I play rugby to prove to myself that I’m strong and powerful. It gives me a feeling of being tough and I love playing a team sport, which is different from my usual individual sports. Rugby is giving me the chance to learn a new sport and meet new friends.

23-year-old player – I play rugby because it allows me to make friends and work with these friends towards a common goal of succeeding in a very elegant and complex sport

25-year-old professional player – I play rugby because I have always loved sport with my mates and fight to try and win every game I play. Rugby has given me mates for life and the ability to put all my hard work into something trying to get results for me and my teammates.

There's a common thread of friendship, fun, and achievement through the responses, and it is interesting to note that the professional player's answer also included these components, rather than money, fame, travel opportunities etc, which he also receives.

This suggests that the reason people commence rugby, and the vast majority continue to be involved is **NOT** because of professional or elite rugby, rather the life experiences, friendships, and enjoyment they get out of it. Therefore, the ongoing focus for the code needs to be on these components, rather than purely on how to "fix" or promote the professional game.

History suggests that if the grassroots of the game is strong, connected, aligned and stakeholders feel valued and believe in the system and the code, the professional end of the game inevitably thrives. However, if the "cart before the horse" approach of focusing much of the attention on the pointy end of the code occurs, it could become troublesome very quickly!

Conclusion

Australian Rugby Union stands at a crossroads, armed with unique strengths and facing formidable challenges. The sport's strong foundation in junior and senior participation, coupled with its inclusive nature and vast global opportunities, provides a robust platform for growth.

To secure a thriving future, Australian Rugby Union must address issues of system alignment by adopting a "greater good" strategy that connects every level of the game, ignore the cross code/sport battle for playing talent, and ensure its young participants a) have access to enjoyable and meaningful experiences, and b) understand there is far more to rugby than just being a professional!

In embracing and evolving its extremely strong foundations, Australian Rugby Union has the potential to not only withstand the challenges but also to flourish.