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The Growth and Challenges within Women's rugby

Level 4

December 2023

Introduction

I have been involved in Women's rugby now for up coming my 7th season. It has been one of the most worthwhile journeys of my life. This journey has led me to winning the Coach of the Year award in WA in 2022 through starting new teams, coaching junior teams, and starting a whole new competition for girls in Perth. These rewarding moments have caused me to receive feedback from people in the community in regard to the way the game has changed their lives, and in the process, mine too. This paper discusses past and present growth and challenge that the sport faces.

I have only been involved in this community for the last 7 years, yet every day I am still learning more about how I can help this area grow and succeed. One of the pieces of advice I initially got was to understand the history of the game not just locally, but across the world.

Rugby has witnessed a remarkable transformation in recent years as women's participation has surged worldwide. Australia has been part of this revolution, fostering the growth of women's rugby tracking behind the likes of England, France and New Zealand when it comes to full time professionalism.

Historically, rugby has been perceived as a male-dominated sport, with limited opportunities for female athletes. However, a shift in the late 20th century caused women's rugby to gain recognition and acceptance. In Australia, the formalisation of women's rugby can be traced back to the establishment of the Australian Women's Rugby Union (AWRU) in 1994. This marked a pivotal moment in the country's sporting history, laying the foundation for the start of women's rugby in Australia. Since being established, growth of the game has been evident all across the world. BBC sport has recognised that it is the fastest growing women's sport in the UK which really speaks volumes on how the game has developed so quickly over the last 20 years.

The visibility of women's rugby has significantly increased over the years, thanks to enhancement in media coverage. Major tournaments, such as the Women's Rugby World Cup and the inclusion of women's rugby sevens in the Olympics, have brought the sport into the limelight. This increased exposure has not only attracted more women to the game but has also inspired a new generation of players.

The sports commitment to developing women's rugby has played a crucial role in its growth. Increased investment in infrastructure, coaching, and grassroots programs has created a more inclusive environment for female players. The establishment of regional academies and women's rugby development officers has further facilitated the identification and nurturing of talent.

The success of women's rugby was evident in 2022 with the women's World Cup which took place in New Zealand. Record crowds and amazing contests shot the game to new heights and expanded new audiences. This cup has been instrumental in promoting the sport. These international competitions have not only instilled pride to the county and the participating audience but has also garnered support from fans and sponsors. The country's team's success has served as a catalyst for motivating aspiring female players to pursue rugby as a viable and rewarding career.

There has been a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sports. As gender stereotypes are starting to break down, more girls are feeling encouraged to

participate in these sports. This cultural shift is reflected in the increasing number of female players across all age groups, from juniors to seniors.

“In January 2019, every member of the *England Women's* rugby team received full time contracts for the new season, making them the **first women's rugby team in the world to go fully professional.**”(Champions rugby UK). This has now been followed by other Unions, notably New Zealand and France showing their commitment to the growth of rugby.

Statistics

There has certainly been a shift in the growth in the game in recent years and this can be demonstrated by the following statistics: (World Rugby, 2023)

- Participation increases by 11 per cent to 8.4 million in 2023 as the sport continues to experience accelerated growth after the global pandemic
- 57 per cent of players in the post-COVID-19 era are pre-teen, 24 per cent of them girls
- Almost a quarter of total participants are female with a strategic focus on growth
- World Rugby and Unions implement lowered tackle height in the community game
- World Rugby is investing £575 million in the development of the sport between 2020-23

The 2023 figures paint a positive picture for community rugby with the sport now played by 8.46 million players across 132 national member unions, an increase of 11 per cent on 2022 levels. Emerging rugby nations and women and girls are the major drivers of new growth for the game. Within my own state of WA alone registered players stood at around 75. Since then, numbers have increased across the women's game by over 200% which shows real promise for the growth of local talent in Western Australia.

Benefits

One of the key areas which has enlightened me to selling the game within the women's community has been the benefits it can provide. Some of these are more relevant in today's society, with the influences social media is having on people's day to day mindset and perceptions of themselves and life. But some of these benefits certainly can influence people to help improve mind, body and soul. These include:

- **Physical fitness:** Rugby union is a highly physical sport that requires strength, endurance, and agility. Playing rugby can help women improve their cardiovascular fitness, build muscle strength, and enhance overall physical fitness.
- **Teamwork and camaraderie:** Rugby union is a team sport that promotes teamwork, cooperation, and camaraderie among players. Women who play rugby can develop strong bonds with their teammates, learn to work together towards a common goal, and foster a sense of belonging and community.
- **Mental resilience:** Rugby union is a tough and challenging sport that requires mental resilience and toughness. Women playing rugby can develop mental strength, learn to push through physical and mental barriers, and develop a strong sense of determination and perseverance.
- **Leadership skills:** Rugby union provides opportunities for women to develop leadership skills. Being a part of a rugby team allows women to take on leadership roles, learn to make decisions under pressure, and develop effective communication and decision-making skills.

- Empowerment and confidence: Playing rugby can empower women and boost their self-confidence. The physical and mental challenges of the sport can help women overcome self-doubt, build self-esteem, and feel empowered both on and off the field.
- Social integration and inclusivity: Rugby union promotes inclusivity and provides a platform for women from diverse backgrounds to come together and participate in a common sport. It allows women to break social barriers, challenge stereotypes, and promote gender equality and diversity.
- Skill development: Rugby union involves various skills such as passing, tackling, kicking, and strategic thinking. Women playing rugby can develop these skills and improve their physical coordination, spatial awareness, and tactical thinking abilities.
- Opportunities for personal growth: Women playing rugby union have opportunities for personal growth and development. They can set goals, work on improving their skills, and strive for personal achievements, which can contribute to personal growth and self-fulfilment.

Overall, women playing rugby union can experience numerous physical, mental, and social benefits, contributing to their overall well-being and personal development.

Current Challenges

Despite the progress, gender disparities persist in women's rugby. Issues such as pay inequity, fewer sponsorship opportunities, and limited exposure compared to their male counterparts remain significant challenges. Addressing these disparities requires a concerted effort from governing bodies, sponsors, and the broader community. In recent months a letter was sent to Australian Rugby Union by representatives of the women's game in Australia asking for greater support moving forward for the Wallaroos helping address the gap between the current team and the professional teams around the world. The letter made the point how the Australia men's team are in current negotiations for one rugby league players for what accounted to several million dollars whereas the money could be better spent in development of the women's games in multiple areas.

While there has been investment in women's rugby infrastructure, challenges still exist, particularly at the grassroots level. Limited facilities, unequal access to resources, and disparities in coaching and development programs can hinder the growth of women's rugby. Addressing these issues is crucial for nurturing talent and ensuring a sustainable future for the sport.

Years of cultural stereotypes about gender roles in sports can pose huge obstacles to the growth of women's rugby. Overcoming preconceived notions about the physicality of the sport and promoting inclusivity through education is essential for breaking down these cultural barriers.

Despite improvements in media coverage, women's rugby often struggles to garner the same level of attention as men's rugby. Enhancing visibility and promotion of women's competitions, both at the domestic and international levels, is vital for sustaining interest and attracting sponsors.

Moving forward

Based on the above challenges there needs to be realisation that in order for women's game to succeed, proper planning needs to be established with a clear road map for the development of the women's game. The XV competition which took place with the top Tier one women's team was again a huge success and needs to be built upon.

The increased visibility of women's rugby through media coverage, broadcasting of matches, and online streaming platforms will continue to raise awareness and generate interest in the sport. Continued efforts to promote and broadcast women's rugby at both domestic and international levels will contribute to its growth.

Investing in grassroots programs and initiatives is crucial for developing a strong foundation for women's rugby. Establishing youth programs, school leagues, and community clubs will provide opportunities for young girls to participate in the sport from an early age and nurture their skills and passion for rugby.

Providing equal opportunities and support for women's rugby is essential for its growth and success. This includes offering equal funding, resources, and facilities for women's teams, as well as equal access to coaching, training, and development programs.

Collaborating with national and international rugby bodies, such as World Rugby and national rugby unions, can help promote and support women's rugby. This can involve the development of strategic plans, policies, and initiatives that prioritize the growth and development of the women's game.

Increased sponsorship and investment in women's rugby can provide financial support for the sport's growth. Corporate sponsors, brands, and investors can contribute to the development of women's rugby by providing funding for competitions, marketing campaigns, and player development programs.

The presence of strong role models and representation of women in rugby is crucial for inspiring and motivating young girls to take up the sport. Celebrating the achievements and success of women rugby players through media coverage, awards, and recognition will help attract more girls to the sport and encourage their continued participation. It was obvious to see the effects that Ruby Tui had on the Silver Ferns during last year's World cup and the power of this was also obvious to see in the recent Soccer World cup and led to sell out stadiums across the country wherever the Australian women's team played.

The expansion and development of international competitions, such as the Women's Six Nations, Rugby World Cup, Super W competition, and regional tournaments, provide a platform for women's teams to showcase their skills and compete at the highest level. The continuation and growth of these competitions will contribute to the overall development and success of women's rugby.

By focusing on these areas, women's rugby can continue to grow and thrive, attracting more participants, fans, and support, establishing itself as a successful and popular sport in the future.

Conclusion

As part of this process, I wanted to get a view from one of the an ex Wallaroo and prominent player in the game who will remain anonymous for the purposes of this essay. I asked her what she felt she needs to improve, particularly for the game here in Australia for it to continue to be successful. She provided the following insights:

Equality: Facilities need to be better we have a makeshift tiny change room at force. (If you go to most successful premier XV club's women have their own dedicated change room and individual lockers etc. They are also given kit to feel a part of the club as soon as they arrive.

Coaching staff need to be better and S & C coverage and planning is also vital. When every season the biggest learnings from the Super W review is we need to be fitter and stronger! How are the players in the program being looked after in this area? From the top more urgency to be organised and prepared for the season ahead with kit, staff, funding etc.

More exposure: We have to be seen. You can't be what you can't see! There are no photos of women on the walls on and I would argue the same case for club houses. And we need to market the female game better, more media exposure. With more exposure of Super W players and teams and wallaroos you will see more females enter rugby at club level which will boost talent pool and make it more competitive and successful at all levels

More funding and financial backing What's stopping teams going full time if the money is available?

Don't compare the male and female game. We are different for a reason we will never be the same. We will never be as strong or fast as the men. It is a different brand of rugby, we need to appreciate both equally. 6. Super W needs to be a longer season. 2 rounds or bring in new teams ASAP.

All points made above show that there is long way to go for this game. However, the opportunity for all talent is very exciting, with the right planning and exposure, this great game can grow into a sport taken just as seriously as the men's game.