

National Competition

Australia has won two Rugby World Cups in 1991 and 1999 and lost the 2003 final to England. It has won Bledisloe Cups, been number one and made millions of dollars from Rugby World Cup 2003 and yet the one last major hurdle for Australian Rugby is a National Rugby Competition.

Most of the major sports in Australia have a national competition including some of the so-called second tier sports. Sports such as netball, basketball, hockey and now a new National Football (soccer) League to join the National Rugby League and the Australian Football League have national competitions. Why not rugby union? The competition would not just be for player development or even player drain, but also provide greater opportunities for coaches looking to make a career from rugby.

The Current Situation

In Australia at the moment we have Australia, Australia A (who play very rarely) and four teams in the Super 14 competition. The next level is the Sydney, Brisbane and A.C.T competitions and on from there to sub districts etc. The main Sydney competition has 12 teams, Brisbane has 10 and Canberra has seven with players selected from these competitions going on to Super Fourteen and higher. These competitions are providing a path for players to

improve, but there are not many positions or paths for coaches who would like to go further. Most Super 14 teams have a head coach, two assistants and a defensive coach which in itself is a specialised position.

That is a total of 16 positions in the four Australian teams.

There are currently some good Australian coaches overseas in charge or assisting with some of the top teams including Michael Foley at Bath, Steve Meehan at Stade Francais and Scott Johnson with the Welsh National team. Sean Hedger is in Japan, Matt Williams has just finished with Scotland and Anthony Eddy has just started as head coach of Worcester. There are also a host of coaches here in Australia who are not even using their coaching skills which is a waste of a lot of talent.

The Benefits

One benefit is keeping those coaches currently overseas in the country, while also giving an opportunity to those in Australia who are not currently able to ply their trade. With a national competition there would be more teams, hence more positions to fill and the standard of rugby in Australia would have a larger nursery of players capable of making the step up to international football.

A national competition would give coaches a career path to follow, and one day they might reach the pinnacle of Australian head coach. The Western Force just employed John Mitchell, a New Zealander with a great record, but surely Australia has coaching talent that would have been just as good an option and who could one day be Australian coach. More top-level Australian coaches would also lead to greater competition for the Australian job. This

would hopefully ensure that Australia was always in capable hands.

The National competition would provide Australian Rugby with a perfect platform to assess each coach's credentials for any further step up the ladder.

Rugby needs to keep on the front foot in terms of product for the public. Rugby can struggle in among the larger codes and with soccer finally getting their act together. They are now in a strong position to capitalise on Australian Rugby's inability to make a statement in the market place. Relying on the Wallabies and the Super 14 to encourage children to take up or even watch rugby when there are other sports which are on national television most of the winter is going to have ramifications. These include a drop in numbers both playing and watching at the grass roots level. This would have a disastrous effect on rugby in Australia in the years to come. A National Competition will provide rugby with a vehicle to attract and keep children and their parents involved and committed to rugby and also attract the corporate dollar.

Problems

One of the major problems with starting a National Competition is the resistance of clubs in their respective competitions to agree to the concept as they fear they may not be included. This is valid and I will discuss my solution to this problem later.

Some would say that the club competitions are running fine and "why fix what's not broken". You just have to look back at the A.C.T Brumbies and the success they have had with players that were not selected in their own states. These players found their

path blocked because of a lack of opportunities in their States and so moved to the Brumbies who have since gone on to become the dominant force in Australian Rugby. The response to that may lie in the structure and change of the National French Competition. A few years ago they had two pools of twelve teams. Each pool played the others in their pool; the top six of both pools would then play off in a finals type series. The quality of games was good but not great and the French National team was reflecting that quality. A decision was reached to cull the number of premier teams to twenty, then to sixteen and now fourteen teams make up the premier division. This has culled a lot of the weaker players and coaches out of premier competition and now the quality is being seen by the clubs, Toulouse won the European Cup last year, and by the national team. (DON'T UNDERSTAND LAST FEW WORDS)

Money may be seen as a problem but I suggest that the money that Australian rugby has in the bank from the 2003 World Cup and the monies generated from internationals and sponsors would be more than enough to help get a national competition off the ground. Another avenue that could be of great benefit and also reduce the financial burden on the Australian Rugby Union is an investment from private owners into teams (some teams in rugby league have private investors). Maybe even a hybrid system of the current situation in Australia where the Union runs the teams and in the English premiership where most of the teams are owned privately. Each team would have their own individual sponsors to help fund the team. In Japan corporations own the teams.

The payment of players is escalating some would say out of control. The players don't have to earn the world and I am certain many of the players in state competitions would jump at the chance to play professionally.

A Solution

A solution (radical as it may be) is the ARU would take control of rugby in Australia and form a franchise-style National competition. Five from Sydney, three from Brisbane (even the Gold Coast) and one from ACT could be the basis of the teams. Numbers can be adjusted accordingly. Each state's competitions would run as normal while the National competition runs similarly to the NPC in New Zealand where the coaches and players have a stepping stone to Super 14 and which is just a constant production line of quality players and coaches.

The players would come from Super 14 players not involved in Tests (surely Australia does not need all the players) and from club competitions. The competition would be financed from television rights, ARU, team sponsors and as I have mentioned previously, private owners. On the last point, the union between owners and ARU is another area that would need to be controlled and common ground reached. We should try to get away from the attitude of; "it will never work" etc, to one of anything is possible if you want it to happen.

The benefits of a national competition in relation to coaches come in the form of regular matches for a season similar to the State competitions but as I have mentioned previously, they will have to cope with regular travel. The intensity of the competition will

enhance their ability to cope with the rigors of such a competition. It will give the numerous coaches around Australia an ability to stay in Australia. There are many good coaches who have left for greener pastures overseas due to the lack of positions for them here. There lacks a pathway for these people.

This competition is not just for increasing the number of players of a high enough standard and improvement of players for the benefit of Australian rugby, it is also for a much needed tier in the coaching path. Numbers of people wanting to become or recommence a career in coaching are increasing with the development of rugby around the world. Opportunities are plentiful to make coaching a career in countries such as England, France and the Celtic nations. Also, there are opportunities in the second tier of rugby nations such as Italy, Japan and the USA. Why is it not possible to have that here in our own country? The majority of countries have a national competition. Why not here? It's all well and good to keep up the production-line of Australian players which, if we are honest, is small to say the least but what about the personnel and expertise to keep this line of quality players continuing.

Players outside Super 14 could be restricted to \$60,000. Younger players may be even less. The idea is that players would love to be full-time rugby professionals but that should not guarantee them a wage over \$100,000. If they can fulfil their potential they are rewarded with a Super 14 contract which then has the monetary reward. Maybe even a marque player from overseas.

The ladder of progression for coaches would be as follows:

AUSTRALIA

Test matches etc as normal

SUPER 14 – (4 teams)

Super 14 played as usual

NATIONAL COMPETITION (8 to 10 teams)

Played after Super 14

STATE COMPETITIONS

Played as normal

Club teams feed the national competition teams who then feed to Super 14 and so on. An example would be:

Brothers, North's and GPS would feed Brisbane North (obviously you would come up with a brand name like North side Knucklers for corporate and public identity etc). Players from Brisbane North would feed Super 14.

More importantly it gives coaches in Australia a path to follow gaining experience as they go and ending up as professional coaches, coaching professional players and improving the playing stocks for Australia. Is that not what the objective is: a winning Wallaby Team?

Summary

The need for something in place for Australian Rugby, the players and the coaches is long overdue. Just recently the Australian Provincial Championship was announced which is great news if you are coaching or playing in a Super 14 side. These teams will invariably play each other three times a season in their usual style. Players and coaches become so familiar with each others styles it negates that style of play. We need to expand our thinking so we have a professional national competition expanding the base of players and coaches for Australia.

There are a lot of passionate, talented people in Australian Rugby who are lost due to the inability to work fulltime and put the necessary time into rugby. A National Competition could give these people the opportunity to coach or play professionally and in the process give Australian Rugby a stronger base to push forward to become Number One again. That's what it is all about, isn't it?