

Performance Coach Program 2023

Learning & Development Task #7 – Written Assignment

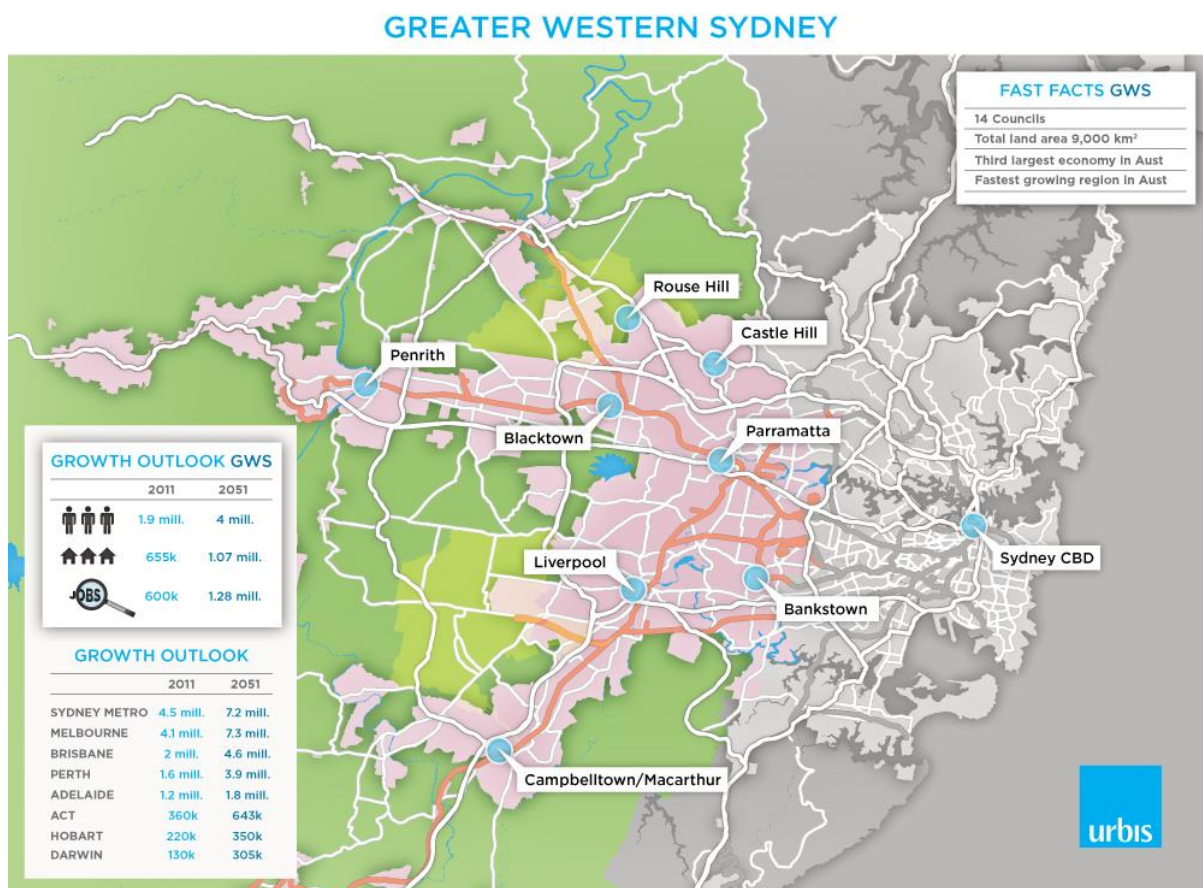
“An ideal development model for rugby union in  
Greater Western Sydney”

David Telfer

## Overview

For the purpose of this paper we will focus on 13 local government areas (LGAs) which comprise Greater Western Sydney being:

- Blacktown
- Blue Mountains
- Camden
- Campbelltown
- Canterbury-Bankstown
- Cumberland
- Fairfield
- Hawkesbury
- Hills
- Liverpool
- Parramatta
- Penrith
- Wollondilly



From the above graphic (1) – Urbis – a company which states they have one simple goal – to shape cities and communities for a better future. You can see the population growth which is forecast to hit 4 million people by 2051.

In terms of rugby union in Greater Western Sydney there are three premier rugby district clubs:

- Eastwood
- Two Blues
- Penrith Emus

Note that we haven't included West Harbour as they fall inside the City of Canada Bay council.

Eastwood and Two Blues compete in the Shute Shield (NSW) whilst Penrith Emus have been competing in the John I Dent Cup (ACT) for the past two seasons (NB- as of Friday 24 November 2023 Penrith have been removed from the John I Dent Cup after being removed from the Shute Shield in 2018 and 2021). Each premier rugby club has junior village clubs which feed into the premier district clubs:

- Eastwood – Dural, Northern Barbarians, Central Eastwood, Ryde, North Rocks
- Two Blues – Blacktown, Norwest, Hills, Dundas Valley, Hawkesbury Valley
- Penrith – Penrith RSL, Western Raptors, Blue Mountains, Luddenham

Beneath premier rugby there are the following clubs in Suburban rugby:

- Blue Mountains – Division 1
- Hills – Division 2
- Hawkesbury Valley – Division 2
- Merrylands – Division 4
- Redfield Old Boys – Division 4
- Western Raptors – Division 4
- Renegades – Division 4
- Blacktown – Division 5
- Canterbury – Division 5
- Kings – Division 5

## **Background**

Now specifically onto rugby union in Greater Western Sydney. Our flagship side for rugby union in Greater Western Sydney is the NSW Waratahs. They are based at David Phillips Field which is 61km from Nepean Rugby Park (Penrith Emus home ground), 28km from Eric Tweedale Stadium (Two Blues home ground), and 26km from TG Millner (Eastwood home ground). The closest Western Sydney got to a professional rugby union sporting team to call their own was a proposed Western Sydney Club in the World Series Rugby competition which was to be coached by the current NSW Waratahs Head Coach – Darren Coleman (2).

At this current moment in time if you are a boy or girl growing up in Greater Western Sydney the only local options for rugby union are to play for your village club or participate in an academy training style program.

For a player selected into an NSW Waratahs program this is a drive that the player would be taking anywhere from 2-5 times a week for an extended period of time – a factor which has been a barrier for some. It is this that motivated me to write this paper on this topic as we need to ensure that every child in Greater Western Sydney knows that rugby union is accessible to them and that there is a long-term plan. This has been a constant problem with conversations going back as far as the early-2000s as to how we should approach Western Sydney.

In preparing this paper I thought there was no better person to interview than Dave Dennis. Dave made the decision to leave Penrith in 2003 to join Sydney University and is quoted as saying the following in 2018 after Penrith were kicked out of the Shute Shield for the first time:

*“The whole thing has been a slow decline, I made the decision to leave in 2003 to try and improve because I felt that it wasn’t the best environment for me to develop my rugby. But when I was playing in 2003 there was enough there to be positive and be motivated to try and develop the game out there (Scott Johnson was one of the coaches).*

*Since then it’s been a slow, steady decline into now somewhat non existence, which is terribly sad for all the people in Western Sydney who love the game and want to see it prosper out there. You think of what could actually have been done there with a long term strategic plan in that time and it’s obviously gone the other way.*

*The reality is nothing’s been done there in terms of the long term strategic plan to grow the game. It’s always seemed to be a short-term fix, a bit of patchwork and hopefully you get by through the Shute Shield this year and see how they go next year, rather than getting the primary schools involved, getting connections with the local university, all these sort of things in an area with some enriching people, who are wanting to play sport and the demographic.” (3)*

Unfortunately the reality is that since this article in 2018 there has been little done in terms of aligning our approach to rugby union in Greater Western Sydney. Lets do a quick case study to highlight the discrepancies between two 17 year old male players who both had a goal of making the NSW Waratahs Under 18s:

#### Player 1

- Attended school at local government high school
- Joined local academy training style program (Western Sydney Academy of Sport Rugby Union program)
- Applied for dispensation to play colts – initially rejected and told to play Sydney Junior Club competition

#### Player 2

- Attends school at local private school (received scholarship)
- Trains and plays rugby for the entire school year with off-season rugby program

Both players are from the same LGA and are the same age. However Player 2 was fortunate to receive an opportunity at a local private school and with that came the ability to train on-field 3 times/week as well as be in the gym doing a structured weights program 2-3 times/week. Player 1 on the other hand was told to go join a village club where they train 1 time/week and don't have strength & conditioning staff.

As a code we need to recognise we are not doing nearly enough for the aspirational players in Greater Western Sydney. In the 2022 NRL Grand-Final we had the Parramatta Eels play the Penrith Panthers. It was this that led to discussions between myself and the NSW Waratahs to run an off-season academy program called the NSW Waratahs Western Zone Academy. The thought process behind this was that there were numerous families who were unable to get into NSW Waratahs HQ and that the only way we will potentially compete in the West is with the NSW Waratahs brand.

In terms of junior playing numbers in Greater Western Sydney our numbers have gone from just over 2600 registered junior players to just over 2000 in the space of 5 years, however have remained steady in the last 12 months. In comparison Penrith Panthers Juniors has 24 registered clubs with over 12,000 registered juniors.

## **Proposal**

Now that we have a greater understanding of the current landscape of rugby union in Greater Western Sydney I thought it was important to connect with some influential figures involved in Rugby Union in Western Sydney being:

- Dave Dennis – NSW Waratahs premiership winning captain – Penrith Emu
- Sam Wykes – NSW Waratahs & Western Force – Eastwood/West Harbour
- Bernard Tuaimau – SJRU Western Zone

Having discussed rugby union with the above stakeholders in great detail it was agreed that for rugby union to have a genuine presence in Greater Western Sydney that it would be based on the outline below:

- 3 full-time staff – General Manager, Head of Academy, Development Officer
- Based out of a facility in Greater Western Sydney

The below would require a rethink as to how money is spent which can be seen by the comparison of spending in community participation (4):

- Rugby Union – 3.59% of overall expenditure
- Rugby League – 8.2% of overall expenditure
- AFL – 13.7% of overall expenditure

The objectives of the above program would be based around the 3 pillars below:



### **Player Participation**

At this current moment in time there are two full-time Development Officers for the entire of metropolitan Sydney – a decrease from six back in 2013. With this proposal we would need a full-time Development Officer for Greater Western Sydney whose primary role would be to drive participation and connect village clubs with local schools. They would be able to call on the use of the casual Development Officers when running programs.

I do note that NSW Rugby has employed two Western Sydney “Rugby for Good” Project Officers with their primary focus being on recruiting schools, employing local youth coaches/mentors, and connecting the program to our Western Sydney clubs.

### **Pathways/Retention**

One of the issues that has become prevalent is retaining/keeping our players playing rugby union. The perception is that there is no pathway for a kid in Western Sydney and this is where other codes (especially rugby league) are currently having their pick of the talent in Greater Western Sydney. This goes back to the earlier thought around the current issue being that if you are fortunate enough to make an NSW Waratahs junior representative team you will need to travel into Daceyville.

This proposal would ensure we have an NSW Waratahs Academy being run out of Greater Western Sydney. Rugby Australia CEO – Phil Waugh in one of his first interviews (23 June 2023) said the below:

*“A lot of people have an affiliation with rugby, based in western Sydney, and I don’t think we capture that talent as best as we could,” he says. We are committed to setting up and working with NSW Rugby and the other member unions to deliver an academy in western Sydney and bring the best talent through and secure them for rugby, rather than losing them to rugby league.”*

## Waratahs Senior Academy Philosophy

1. To fill the NSW Waratahs with Waratahs Academy graduates.
2. To develop ‘self-regulated players’ capable of earning 50+ Waratah caps – success through self.
3. Create an environment that encourages both personal and professional growth – creating ‘unbreakable’ players and people.
4. To become the leading Rugby Academy in Australia and the FIRST choice for all NSW rugby players from the bush to the beach.

### Program Overview

4 Sessions per week- field & gym

Individualised Performance Plan

Core Skill / Tactical Knowledge / Game Sense



For the above proposal from the NSW Waratahs it states you will need to have a Head of Academy (who will act as Head Coach) who is a minimum Level 3 accreditation as well as Head of Athletic Performance with an undergraduate degree as well as being ASCA Level 2.

Having an NSW Waratahs branded Academy in Greater Western Sydney for players aged 16-20 running throughout the year would be a big drawcard for a young player in Greater Western Sydney who is looking to progress into professional rugby. This would obviously still allow for the younger programs in Under 14s, 15s & 16s to also be run in Western Sydney at the same times as they are being held in Daceyville.

### **Player & Coach (Club) Development**

From my time working in community rugby as a Development Officer from 2011-2014 it was widely stated that one of the main reasons players didn’t come back to rugby union was because they didn’t enjoy it and coaches didn’t have the resources to develop themselves. This would be a role that would ultimately aim to improve the club and how they operate from the board and all the way from the Under 6s up to Opens.

Ultimately however it comes to the main concept of “coaching the coaches” and upskilling the coaches at all the clubs in Greater Western Sydney. This could be done through coaches being invited to attend the NSW Waratahs Western Sydney Academy (as described above) or even through a professional development weekend each year where coaches are taken through on-field and off-field components so that they can take them to their respective clubs and thus passed onto players. Just imagine Laurie Fisher presenting on the breakdown to our coaches so that this could be passed through the next generation of rugby players.

## Location

Having spent time out in Greater Western Sydney the facility that makes the most sense to me to be based out of is Blacktown International Sports Park. The facility has just seen hundreds of millions of dollars invested into making the facility the heart of sport in Western Sydney. It is already home to other sports such as AFL, cricket, soccer, baseball & softball and has just opened a brand-new \$100 million Blacktown Exercise Sports & Technology Hub (BEST).

In terms of location it is 34km from Eastwoods home ground (once Eastwood completes move to Castle Hill it will be 21km), 20km from Two Blues home ground and 22km from Penrith's home ground. It would also be used as the home of the NSW Waratahs in Greater Western Sydney with all clubs being able to utilise the facilities. In my opinion for rugby union to prosper in Greater Western Sydney it wouldn't be recommended to be based at any of the Premier Clubs home grounds.

## Budget

The positive about the outlay of expenses is that NSW Waratahs would be able to share resources especially around marketing etc. The other costings would be approximately:

- Staffing - \$300,000
  - General Manager – Western Sydney - \$150,000
  - Head of Academy – Western Sydney - \$80,000
  - Development Officer – Western Sydney - \$70,000
- Venue Hire – Blacktown International Sports-Park

## Conclusion

In conclusion I feel like I have barely scratched the surface of this however we cannot merely sit back and wait for the next strategic plan to be implemented for 2024-2029. We, as a code, must act now. I am a firm believer in the fact that if we build it, they will come. This is seen by two positive programs being run in Western Sydney:

1. Pasifika Cup – just held in November 2023 over 3 days which included multiple cultures and 1247 boys & girls (up from 640 in 2022) aged 13-18 playing rugby union in the middle of Western Sydney (Whalan Reserve)
  - a. Of this 1247 boys and girls approximately 70% played rugby union for a club in 2023
2. NSW Waratahs Western Zone Academy – have Two Blues, Eastwood & Penrith juniors working together to provide a legitimate training program designed to set them up for the following season

The reality is that if NSW Waratahs cannot resource it then Rugby Australia must step in and take charge.



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