

Samuel Needs – Rugby AU Performance Coach: Task 7

The topic of this assignment is on Women's rugby in Australia. Throughout this paper, I'll explore a few different components including the game day experience, funding, rugby performance and storytelling relating to Women's rugby in Australia. If you've never had the opportunity of coaching women, it's one of the most full-filling experiences I've had as a coach, and something I'm extremely passionate about. Players in the Women's game in Australia remain thirsty for knowledge and are strongly motivated to keep pushing to be the best they can be despite the improving, yet many inequalities they face.

Here's a snapshot of where women's rugby is currently at in Australia:

- The boys National U15's, U16's & U19's play the same number of games as the Super W girls and are broadcast on Stan. The Jack Scott Competition is not broadcast on Stan.
- In the two Test matches against New Zealand in 2023, Australia lost 93-3 (50-0 and 42-3)
- In 2023 the MAXIMUM a Wallaroos player could earn combined with their Super W payments is \$52,000. The minimum Black Ferns contract (excluding Super Rugby Aupiki payments) is \$60,000 and ranges all the way up to \$130,000, plus they're full-time.
- Rugby Australia paid all Super W players \$4,000 in 2023, with each franchise having the discretion to pay players on top of this. In 2023, the minimum NRLW contract was \$30,000.
- Super W players and Wallaroos players (when not in National camp) train between 5 – 9pm on weeknights, after work.

Looking at the above highlights only some of the bridges that need to be built between Women's and Men's team if we're to grow the game in Australia.

Game day

Earlier in 2023 as part of the NSW Waratahs W coaching team, we played a match in New Zealand which was a curtain raiser to a Blues V Chiefs men's Super Rugby Match, and it showed a clear difference between Australia and New Zealand on how they each perceive the Women's game, and rugby in general. The facility we played at only had changerooms available for two teams, despite 4 teams playing that day. To our surprise, the men's Blues and Chiefs team weren't given the changerooms, instead they were set up in marquees at the end of the field, meaning the changerooms were for the Women's teams. During the 2022 Super W season, the NSW Waratahs played a match after the men's match at Leichardt oval which has 2 changerooms for the home team. The men's team used both home changerooms and the Women's team was in a small marquee out the back of the stadium. In another example, for the past 6 years when a Super W team travels to Canberra to play the Brumbies, the changerooms for the visiting Women's team are a 15 minute walk each way before and after the match. Despite the 50 – 70-minute finish-to-start time between the women's and men's matches, the main away changeroom at the stadium is off limits because the men's team have everything set up ready to go, two and a half hours before they kick off. In New Zealand, rugby is rugby, and it doesn't matter if it's men's or Women's, the two are of equal importance. In Australia, the men's teams are put on a pedestal and everyone else plays second fiddle.

Funding

Funding obviously plays a big part in bridging the salary gap between women and men. This year, funding was spent to fly and U15's, U16's and U19's boys around Australia for a post-season National competition that runs for the same duration as the Super W and can be watched on Stan. It's incredible to think that keeping 15-year-old schoolboys interested in rugby with a post-season competition is coming at the expense of paying our female players and only perpetuates the inequalities. The number of Women leaving to play overseas or switching codes to play NRLW is increasing every year, and it's not just related to funding, they just want to get more game time. 5 regular season games, (7 if you make the Final), and a couple of trial matches isn't enough to fill the

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appetite that these aspiring players have. That money could be better invested into Women's rugby and evolving the Super W competition to play each team home and away for example, or paying the players full-time, and eventually integrating into a Super W Pacific competition.

Rugby performance

Our Super W players are all working or studying (or both) and then come into train in the evening three times a week, the same as a Shute Shield team. A significant drawback of this approach is the amount of content and training they can get through in these small compact blocks, and the consequences of this are then amplified when these players step into the Test arena to play against a fully professional outfit. The rugby world saw the significant difference that paying players full-time has made to the Black Ferns in the past two years. Until we stop contracting girls on a single season agreement and with a less than part-time remuneration, we're going to get part-time results. Investment also needs to be made into making both the Super W and Wallaroos coaching staff full-time. At the end of the day, the more time coaches can put into their programs, the better they can develop players, perpetuating an ever-improving Super W competition which funnels up to higher quality Wallaroos performances. Once we start funding a full-time Women's program we can retain and attract the best talent (both players and coaches), leading to better performance on and off the field, leading to more interest and awareness, enticing larger investments from sponsors which is going to keep the flywheel spinning and building momentum with every cycle. See figure 1 below for a visual representation of this concept.

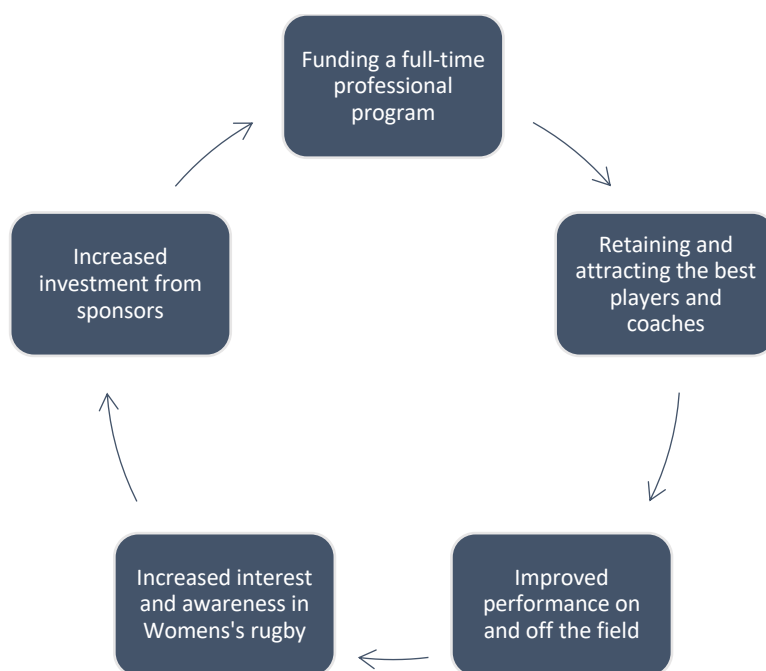


Figure 1: Flywheel of funding Women's Rugby

The question of how to get more funding isn't one that I can answer and is a question for the Super Rugby franchises and the Rugby Australia sponsorship gurus to answer. Without knowing too much about what's involved in the sponsorship process, surely there is some merit in trying to form partnerships with some of the top female Australian Founders and CEOs, if the current sponsors are only interested in sponsoring the men's program. Here are a few highly successful Australian companies headed up by females, and for some of these brands, you can already see the marketing campaigns that could follow!

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- Melanie Perkins – founder of Canva
- Janine Allis – founder of Boost Juice
- Kayla Itsines – founder of Sweat app
- Leslie Gillespie – founder of Baker's Delight
- Yenda Lee – founder of Bing Lee
- Diana Williams – founder of Fernwood Fitness
- Singh Cassidy – CEO of Xero
- Katie Page – CEO of Harvey Norman
- Shemara Wikramanayake – CEO of Macquarie Bank

In place of getting out of touch sponsors like R. M Williams who charge \$900 for a pair of boots that only 3% of the population (let alone the rugby playing population) can actually afford, we could be going after some of the bigger fish that the majority can relate to.

Telling stories

I can think of four golden examples in recent Australian rugby history of where an opportunity to inspire new generation of women's rugby players were missed, although the stories can still be told! The first being that of a brother and sister both of whom have represented Australia – Adiana and Sam Talakai. Katalina Paenga-Amosa and Brandon Paenga-Amosa both playing Super Rugby, and hopefully not too far away we'll see Katalina playing for the Wallaroos, making this another story of a sister and brother who have both played rugby for their country. Ana-lise Sio and Scot Sio, both playing Super Rugby representing Australia and Samoa at an international level. Lastly, and more recently, of Kaitlyn and Declan Leaney, who in the space of 7 days won the Jack Scott and Shute Shield Premiership with Eastern Suburbs and Randwick respectively.

Awareness and interest in the game is at an all-time low, and inspirational stories, like each of these, need to be told. They could inspire many little (or big) sisters to get involved in rugby instead of just being a token family supporter who gets driven around to watch their brother play. We've seen firsthand the positive impact that the Matilda's have had on soccer in Australia, and through telling stories and funding a fully professional program, Australian rugby can do the same.

Writing this paper has strengthened my passion and drive to be part of the change in progressing Women's Rugby in Australia to be the leader in World Rugby. Whilst there are several overlapping components mentioned above that need to be changed, I'm hopeful that we can get on par with other Tier 1 rugby nations soon, as the gap is only going to increase between those international teams who have been paying their players full-time for years now and those who are only part-time, and with Australia hosting the 2029 Women's Rugby World Cup, that's a scary thought.