

Rugby Professionalism _Greg Marr (2000) – Level 3 Major Paper

Alan Jones, coach of the all-conquering 1984 Grand Slam Wallabies and well-known media personality, advocates that "professionalism is a state of mind". In applying this comment to our beloved code, Jones claims that by adopting a professional attitude and approach to playing rugby - ie. attending training on time, performing at your best each game, mixing socially after games with supporters and team-mates, and generally behaving as an ideal role model for your club - a player is then well prepared to reap long term financial and vocational benefits and rewards for the rest of their business life.

Playing the game, Jones stressed, should be the 'give back' time from a players perspective, not an opportunity for an individual to put his hand out for some immediate gains. Jones cites examples of former players such as Steve Williams and Michael Hawker who never received money to play rugby during their respective careers but who has both since benefited immeasurably from their rugby achievements and the network of contacts established via their rugby.

Rugby at all senior levels is currently attempting to adapt to the inevitable changes produced by the introduction of professionalism. As this professional rugby model evolves it must incorporate an ethic that both preserves the games traditions and ensures its future survival, and is careful not to emulate the model of professionalism that has engulfed Rugby League. Much can be learned from both the positive and negative consequences of both the NRL and AFL models which will be discussed later.

Professional rugby has certainly produced a number of positives already.

At the top (international) level there is an established core of full time professional coaches and players. From a training viewpoint, these players' standard of fitness, strength, speed, agility and skill levels have greatly improved through a better understanding of recovery techniques, nutrition, resistance training, skill requirements, games strategies and mental preparation garnered from the swelling number of fully professional support staff. Accordingly, the standard of rugby being played has improved dramatically, the game is becoming more attractive as a spectacle, crowds are growing and hence income from gate receipts etc is increasing. The profits are allegedly being fed back into the development of the game - from grass roots level through to payment of player salaries - for which at this stage there are no comparable benchmarks. Hence, the elite players and the spectators have had a win so far. The clubs and state unions are supposed to be winners as well. But there has been little evidence to support this claim as yet.

As discussed, the elite players are now faster, fitter, stronger, more skilful and better prepared. However, because of their training and playing commitments they are unable to undertake tertiary studies or accept a meaningful vocation until their rugby career is over. It is acknowledged that there are lucrative rugby retirement pastures such as Italy, Japan and the UK for some elite players

in the twilight of their careers. But by denying the opportunity to play top level elite rugby to the trainee doctors, solicitors, dentists and others who choose an academic career, does rugby exclude itself from a talent pool of players that so competently filled the ranks before. The names John Coolican, Mark Loane, Bill Campbell, Nick Farr Jones are just a few who spring to mind.

Rugby League has always been the preferred code for the self-employed or unemployed (excluding contract payments and match fees) and accordingly rugby has been able to maintain its more up market "leather elbow patch" tradition and support base at Leagues expense. It has also managed to avoid the problems that have arisen from the more 'working class' League code.

One of the bi-products of professional sports such as Rugby League is that young players are exposed to too much money too soon, particularly more recently from the inflated salaries on offer from both sides during the ARL/Super League war and by the ARU to ward off Turnbull's World Championship Rugby and the Rugby League. Given the little education on financial planning or time management players receive, it is little wonder that they become 'accidents waiting to happen' with too much free time and money. Money is used for gambling, drinking and in many instances, illegal drug use - both recreational and performance enhancing. The Leagues' track record at present supports this claim.

The NRL clubs and player managers have to address these problems before they become much bigger. For instance, current drug testing procedures for instance have had limited effect on athletes at Olympic level and unless the much acclaimed blood testing is endorsed, they will not really be an effective option for professional footballers.

A major concern for all professional athletes is finding a suitable career alternative once their competitive days are finished - particularly if they were unable to complete suitable educational or vocational training throughout their playing career. Sure, a few are lucky enough to move on to sports coaching or management, and some even progress into the media as sports commentators. These, and those others who have reached the very pinnacle of their sport and who earned enough to provide for themselves for the rest of their lives, are well placed for the future. But what of the others?

Some AFL clubs are addressing this problem by providing private tuition and work scholarships for their younger players which complement their playing and training schedules. As the search for new talent becomes more and more competitive this is seen as a necessary step and an attractive adjunct, particularly as younger players are still influenced to some degree by parents and less by the 'in-it-for-a-quick-killing' player managers. Carlton is one club that has an excellent system set up for its players in which sponsors provide employment/vocational training opportunities for young talent as well as making time available to train.

In the United States, the college system allows each college to not only induce prospective sport stars to attend their campus with highly paid scholarships but also enables young athletes to complete their studies whilst playing what is virtually full-time professional sport for that respective college. Students not only graduate with a study degree but also with a solid grounding in what to expect from life in the full time professional sport circus.

As rugby union moves towards full time professional status at a senior level, those who are responsible for running the code must address such factors as providing opportunities to continue academic studies and post football career training in conjunction with playing representative rugby.

The NRL clubs appear to be a little more responsible for their players livelihood before the Super League war. Young players were generally offered incentive payments ie. they had to perform at a certain level or meet a series of criteria before they were eligible for increased financial rewards. Club and/or player managers also had a say in how a player invested his signing-on fees - ensuring that some was at least directed towards assets such as a house, car, shares or other investments. The Super League war resulted in ridiculously large sums of money being paid to some players as 'loyalty' payments or inducements to join either side. This led to inflated expectations of remuneration by all league players which eventually forced most clubs to seek financial support in order to continue to pay these large salaries. These clubs became then easy targets for New Limited.

Similarly, when rugby received its go ahead to move into professionalism at its highest level, a few players received inflated payments to ensure their commitment to rugby and to ward off the League predators.

The problem was there were no established guidelines, standards of best practice or benchmarks for these exorbitant one off pay outs and salaries, the players became more greedy, and the clubs suffered financially as they struggled to meet their ongoing commitment to the costs of fielding a competitive team each season.

Some clubs suffered more than others. Phil Blake, former Manly Rugby League 1st grader and now club trainer, notes that there is now a major difference in attitude between players of his era and today's 1st grade League players. With the demise of the incentive contract, players now receive large weekly payments whether they play or not, or whether the team wins or not. Phil believes many players simply decide whether they wish to play or not, depending on the opposition etc, because they get paid enough already. Drugs and gambling have also become insidious problems within this club, and others, as a result of large incomes and reduced obligations to perform or even play.

At North Sydney, the players are pampered on an almost ridiculous scale - they have an official who is the dedicated boot cleaner and (if required) spring tightener. The players, not the coach, generally

determine what training is necessary and the weekly training schedule. Their on field success/and off field dramas hardly speak volumes for this standard of practice.