

THE RUGBYDAO



**AUSTRALIAN
RUGBY
THINK TANK**

REPORT 2024

REPORT SUMMARY

IT'S NO SECRET AUSTRALIAN RUGBY IS IN TURMOIL.

With the impending 2025 Lions Tour, the 2027 Men's Rugby World Cup and the 2029 Women's Rugby World Cup, the strength and success of Rugby in Australia is vital to the health of the sport globally over the next 5 years. At The RugbyDAO we see a fragmented landscape and the need for a neutral, informed, open and positive discussion about the future of the sport in this proud rugby nation.

To address this The RugbyDAO invited members from our community who are key Australian Rugby Stakeholders to an Australian Rugby Think Tank to discuss and address the current challenges Australian Rugby faces over ninety minutes.

The goal of the think tank was to generate positive insights and pathways to innovative solutions and strategies within the remit of The RugbyDAO's core principles, purpose, and goals. Namely, to create a commercially viable, competitive and thriving technology-enabled global rugby ecosystem where community and culture are the beating heart of the rugby experience. This is about more than just who the Wallabies coach is.

This report is a summation of the outcomes of the Australian Rugby Think Tank. It is designed to be a platform for deeper investigation, conversation, recommendations, and action into the identified areas of focus and beyond. The outcome shows a clear need for a single, unified, and holistic strategy for Australian rugby to survive in the ultra-competitive Australian sports market, and set the platform to thrive in the golden decade of events that lie ahead of the sport.

As a final reminder, before we get into it, this report was created from a discussion between people who love rugby and care about its future in Australia. Everything said, recorded, and written here was done so in the spirit of the game and with an eye towards positive change and success.

THE GLOBAL RUGBYDAO COMMUNITY EXISTS TO HELP MAKE THIS HAPPEN.



INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY MATTERS

The focus of the Australian Rugby Think Tank revolved around three critical, interdependent areas impacting the sport in Australia: Grassroots, Performance Pathways, and fan engagement.

We structured the conversation like this, with dedicated time for each topic, to drive focus and continuity in the conversation and capture points of interconnected relevance. As you read through each section you will recognise the red threads of a core, passionate Australian fan base that needs a significant managerial and administrative shift in mindset and strategy to take advantage of what lies ahead and avoid disaster.

This report, as a summary of a ninety minute discussion, is by no means comprehensive in terms of the broader complexities and realities faced by rugby in Australia. However, it does raise many important points which need to be addressed, and uncovers insights and ideas we hope will be useful in sparking positive conversation, innovative thinking, collaboration and a much needed resurgence for the love of the sport of Rugby in Australia.

1. FOSTER GRASSROOTS CONNECTION:

Rebuild rugby's foundation by deeply engaging with community clubs and schools to foster a strong, inclusive, funded grassroots network.

2. DEVELOP CLEAR PERFORMANCE PATHWAYS:

Establish transparent and supportive pathways for players, coaches, and referees to nurture talent and ensure sustainable development.

3. REINVIGORATE FAN ENGAGEMENT:

Redefine the sport's identity to resonate with fans, leveraging digital innovation and focusing on building a strong community connection.

1. FOSTER GRASS ROOTS CONNECTIONS

In the context of grassroots rugby in Australia, it is widely acknowledged that the emphasis on commercial pursuits has overshadowed community development. This trend has led to substantial and continued decreases in funding from Rugby Australia at the grassroots level. Consequently, this has resulted in two significant outcomes: a marked reduction in participation and resources at the community level, and a proactive response from various organisations to innovate and foster the sport's growth independently, in the absence of central support.

A critical insight into this issue reveals that the essence of rugby's appeal lies in its grassroots nature. The initial emotional connection and sense of belonging fostered at the community, club, or school level are fundamental. This bottom-up approach to engagement is crucial, and attempts to drive the sport from the top down have resulted in a significant disconnect.

“THE TOP OF THE GAME IS TRYING TO PUSH THE WALLABIES DOWN, WHEREAS THE BOTTOM OF THE GAME REALLY JUST WANTS TO CONNECT AT A LOCAL LEVEL FOR THE VALUES THAT RUGBY LIVES BY AND OFFERS”

This gap has allowed other sports and governing bodies, such as the AFL, NRL, and, more recently, the NFL, to make inroads into traditional rugby strongholds and potential growth areas. These organisations have implemented well-funded and strategic initiatives aimed at capturing the attention and loyalty of potential rugby players, fans, and supporters.

“Rugby is under attack and it's bringing a knife to a gunfight.”

“The AFL is going into schools with an offer of 1000 balls, posts, coaches, and \$20,000 a year, who is going to knock that back?” The NFL and flag football have 500+ schools involved in their flag football program. Rugby has none of this. Under this kind of pressure Australian rugby needs a concrete community and grassroots strategy with nationally executed programs at every level.

A key enabler to the problem is rugby's class-based divisions. There is still a real and perceived cultural chasm between elite private and public school programs and a total lack of meaningfully resourced and funded indigenous programs. This is because community funding and strategy “has always been seen as an either/or, so it's either we do public or public schools we can't do both.” This means the game loses people from both along the way.

Strategically, in a bid to be more appealing and inclusive, Rugby Australia shifted away from targeting white collar nurseries to become more relevant to a wider audience which in effect diluted the proposition and alienated one of its core traditional strongholds. Resulting in an exclusive approach to inclusivity that achieved the opposite of what it was supposed to.

Public schools have almost completely fallen away from the game while the affluent, well resourced private schools, with combined budgets that result in multiple millions of dollars being poured into the game, feel a sense of a lack of appreciation and respect for their contribution. However, for what they have in terms of resources, tradition, knowledge, and experience, private schoolboy rugby is a relatively poorly executed product in a somewhat fractured political structure compared to other top-tier countries

Fixing this requires a more nuanced approach and strategy based on a deeper understanding of the holistic rugby landscape and the specific needs of each rugby culture, demographic, and region, that cuts through the current factional roadblocks.

The key concern to address in general, is the growing distance between average rugby fans and the sport's elite level, highlighting an urgent need for re-connection, re-engagement, and reunification, regardless of class. It was unanimously agreed that Rugby Australia must spearhead this initiative. However, there is a current perception that prioritising community engagement conflicts with the objectives of producing a commercially viable product that generates ticket sales, sponsorship, and broadcast rights. Most rugby people at the community level feel like the grassroots game is being sold to get corporate sponsorship that goes to the professional game and never comes back.

This paradoxical neglect and strategic failure has led to the emergence of over 300 rugby foundations, along with 135+ ongoing projects, all striving to sustainably fund a sport driven by undeniable passion and commitment. Resulting in fragmented efforts that lack a unified direction and thus effectiveness.

To address this, and reduce reliance on Rugby Australia, dedicating resources to writing and accessing government grants and the formation of an alliance of foundations under a unified banner was proposed.

This alliance would share a common purpose while maintaining the flexibility to pursue individual causes. The adoption of a unified brand and narrative, speaking with a single, consolidated voice, would enhance the appeal for government and corporate funding. This approach not only presents a more cohesive strategy but also strengthens the sport's position in the funding marketplace.

If underpinned by the latest technology such an alliance could harness the monetisable value of grassroots networks and sponsors to enable these groups to participate seamlessly in broader ecosystems. Thereby creating revolutionary commercial models for reinvestment in the sport that could free them entirely from the "hand to mouth" grant culture.

“PROFESSIONALISATION RESULTED IN A SIGNIFICANT DIVESTMENT FROM GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN THE PAST 20 YEARS. IN 2001, 13.76% OF RUGBY AUSTRALIA EXPENDITURE (A\$7.06 MILLION) RELATED TO COMMUNITY RUGBY. BY 2015, THIS HAD HIT A RECORD LOW OF 2.65% (\$2.37 MILLION). RUGBY AUSTRALIA SPENT \$4.3 MILLION (3.59%) ON COMMUNITY RUGBY IN 2019, THIS PALED IN COMPARISON TO HOW MUCH THE AFL SPENT ON GAME DEVELOPMENT (\$58.8 MILLION, OR 13.7% OF ITS OVERALL EXPENDITURE), AS WELL AS THE NRL (\$43.3 MILLION, OR 8.2% OF ITS OVERALL EXPENDITURE).”

EXTRACT FROM AN [ARTICLE & STUDY](#) BY DEAKIN UNIVERSITY'S DR HUNTER FUJAK

RUGBY FOR GOOD NSW CHANGING THE MODEL

The New South Wales Positive Rugby Foundation and its Rugby for Good program are recognised as a shining light of innovation in this space. They've taken matters into their own hands to position rugby as a force for good in the community. Rugby for Good is challenging the traditional funding model by reducing reliance on central Rugby Australia funding which has been in a constant state of decline for decades, to incorporate coteries, corporate and philanthropic donors that open the doors to health funding, regional youth funding, indigenous partnerships, multicultural funding, charity partnerships and education funding.

This drastically increases funds which help to drive participation and result in outcomes that benefit not only the sport but the communities around rugby clubs and society in general. Paired with community fundraising activities, this approach gives the foundation three pillars on which to stand as opposed to one, which does not treat grassroots and community initiatives as a priority.

Rugby for Good in NSW is challenging the traditional funding model by using rugby as a teaching platform for life skills, mental and physical fitness, social skills, and character formation using government and external charitable funding. On the understanding that rugby does not have the resources that AFL and league do it's trying to work smarter, not harder.

To give you an example, in Dubbo in 2023 they had \$2 million worth of funding new to rugby for that zone alone. From Dubbo West they went from 0.5 staff members and three casuals to six full-time and ten casuals. They went from 180 registered players who had four or more rugby involvements to 1500. And they've gone from 20 gala days to 80 and from zero holiday camps to 72 holiday camps. They've added \$2 million in funding on top of Rugby Australia funding and on top of state funding that would not have been in the game or would have gone to another sport.

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THE RUGBYDAO 



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



From a grassroots perspective, and as a business, the necessity of the approach taken by Rugby for Good exposes the fact that Rugby Australia has had its priorities completely upside down. They're focused on trying to buy the Wallets and Eyeballs of fans, to access their hearts and minds, it should be the other way around. Focused on community, the societal role of sport, and the benefits of participation in rugby. Fundamentally their strategy and approach have failed the Australian Rugby public. This was agreed upon as an abject, gross, and prolonged failure of management.

Rectifying it requires a revolutionary movement back to the core values of what rugby likes to say it is all about and delivering on them. It requires following the lead of programs like Rugby for Good with management focused on and with the ability and mandate to galvanize and reunify the entire system with well researched, resourced, and executed strategies. Fast.

There is an abundance of community knowledge, expertise, passion, and willingness with capacity that is not being harnessed. There needs to be a focused strategy and vision, and the entire rugby community needs to be involved and empowered as stakeholders in the solution. The entire future of the game in Australia is at stake and this could be the last opportunity to fix it.

1. A SINGLE NATIONALLY EXECUTED STRATEGY

2. REVOLUTIONISE THE FUNDING STRUCTURE

3. WIN THE SCHOOLS

2. DEVELOP CLEAR PERFORMANCE PATHWAYS

The conversation about performance pathways for players, coaches, and referees in rugby in Australia touches on several key themes, and challenges, and offers ideas for solutions along with a set of recommendations and initiatives.

From grassroots and the challenges of participation and funding, the next logical step was to look at how talent is developed and progressed through an effective and efficient system to ensure the highest of standards are met and the best of the talent rises to the top with the right level of support and incentive. Further, the inclusion of a more holistic approach to pathways that includes coaches and referees was discussed which exposed a host of challenges and opportunities.

“WHY WOULD PEOPLE WANT TO WALK INTO THE GAME OF RUGBY COACHING WHEN THERE IS NO JOB SECURITY?”

Coaching pathways

“Why would people want to walk into the game of rugby coaching when there is no job security?”

Before player development pathways discussions even began, it became apparent that there is perhaps a larger problem in Australian rugby in that even if we had the development pathways in place structurally for players, there wouldn't be enough quality coaches of the level required to maintain it and render it sustainable.

It was widely acknowledged that guidance, pathways, education programs, resources, and general development of Rugby coaches in Australia are simply not up to the standard required to develop and maintain a truly world-class player development program at scale.

The landscape has changed and gone are the days when we can have coaches who simply revert to what they were taught when they were kids. We can't have coaches saying “Mate just do 3 laps while we work out what's going on.” We need to give coaches at all levels access to the resources that enable them to keep the game fascinating for the next generation of young girls and boys who want to play rugby and develop coaches who want to take and develop their passion and knowledge further.

Ultimately people leave coaching because they are not supported to the point at which they feel secure or comfortable enough to base their career on being a professional rugby coach and to start or support a family. The game loses promising, young, talented, and experienced coaches because they simply cannot justify taking the risk.

Other unions are known to provide the resources, education, and pathways for coaches that make being a coach a viable career option. From quarterly conferences, mentor programs, and budgets to visit and learn from other unions, a focused structure and pathway exists. Coaches in Australia are being told they need to go overseas to prove themselves in full-time professional programs before they can be considered in Australia.

Quality coaches are victims of a substandard system which results in a lack of motivation to develop or continue for many prospective professional coaches in Australia. Reflected in the fact that, regardless of pedigree, experience, or qualifications, the next Wallabies coach will once again be a New Zealander not an Australian. The knock-on effect is that Australia's younger players and up-and-coming talent simply do not get exposed to the level of structure and coaching they should be getting. There are no doubt many qualified, highly respected, and talented Australian coaches operating in the current system but the question must be begged and addressed as to how much better could they be and do they feel rugby is a long-term career option.

How many more, better coaches could Australian rugby have? And how much better would our professional teams be if the proper coaching development pathways and resources were in place? These are critical questions to be addressed by Rugby Australia if the game is to grow and move forward.

Player Pathways

The obvious starting point is to talk about the 15's game however it was acknowledged that 7s is a key and neglected area of the game in Australia despite recent success, especially for the women's team, on the international stage.

The problem is there are generations of players out there who have been told they are "too small" for rugby, a fraction of whom have made it through to Australia's sevens programs and even fewer who have been developed further and filtered back into the 15s programs. We are increasingly seeing other countries do this very successfully, developing world-class players including the likes of Reiko Ioane, Ardie Savea, Kwagga Smith, and Cheslin Kolbe to name a few, who are all international 15s stars and household names of the game.

“OTHER UNIONS ARE KNOWN TO PROVIDE THE RESOURCES, EDUCATION AND PATHWAYS FOR COACHES THAT MAKE BEING A COACH A VIABLE CAREER OPTION”

SEVENS AS A KEY PLATFORM

It was recognised that 7s and 15s can be strategically treated as divergent, in terms of player development when it comes to specific skill sets, fitness requirements, and gameplay strategies, or convergent, as a key piece in the development and expansion of player capabilities for a more accessible, diversely experienced and well-rounded player base that provides more people with the opportunity to engage in the sport. In other words, it can be treated as a separate sport or an integrated pillar of rugby development.

In particular, development-wise, 7s offers younger players significantly more touches of the ball in less time and offers more chances to develop and hone skills than 15s does. There are also opportunities to innovate. Shifting 7s to be played on half the pitch which enables two games and 28 players to run concurrently with significantly more ball-in-hand time than a single game of 15s for every player was suggested as a potentially key format to consider for juniors and participation.

Past suggestions of such programs have fallen on deaf ears at the highest levels even though what the game needs is “more kids touching the footy more often”. Trying to field a team for 15s with reserves is significantly and increasingly harder than a squad of ten for 7s. From there, with greater engagement it can be shifted into 10s, another neglected format, and then into 15s as players and numbers develop.



WOMEN'S 7'S IS A CLEAR & PRESENT OPPORTUNITY TO DRIVE MOMENTUM, INNOVATION & GROWTH.

The key insight here is that there needs to be a staged development pathway, focused on skills, engagement, and ball-in-hand time, through early and easily accessible entry points into the fully-fledged 15s version of Rugby. Formats like 7s and tens need to be seriously considered and integrated into strategic development programs and pathways to make the sport more accessible, upskill younger players, and provide portals to multiple pathways through the rugby pyramid for talented players. At the very least 7s, and in the best case 10s as well, must be treated as a genuine version and key pillar of the game of Rugby Union in Australia moving forward.

Talent Identification, Academies & Structures

When it comes to talent identification and the structure of academies, one of the first issues recognised by the group was that selections in Junior development teams remain extremely state parochial. It was noted that the recent Australian U/16s team was made up of only New South Wales and Queensland players with one player from the ACT on the bench. Power in rugby still firmly seems to sit with these two dominant states rather than Rugby Australia and disseminated down through the ranks.

Concerning this it was acknowledged that the idea and concept of academies is great. However, the combination of parochial selections and dragging young players into academies where if they don't perform and get a contract after two years they're deemed no good at 19 years of age, is toxic. Young, talented players are corralled into these programs and coddled to believe they are the next big thing with everything at their fingertips and the next minute they have nothing and nowhere to go.

There seems to be a systemic issue and attitude in Australian rugby that if you're not in an academy you're not good enough, and even if you are and you don't quite cut it, you're still not good enough. How many young players does the game disillusion and lose like this? How many players who simply are not yet developed at the age of 19 don't get looked at, developed, or seen again because of this? The system and structure of academies and junior-level contracts need to be revamped completely. Identified talented young players need to be playing at clubs with high-quality coaches getting exposed to high levels and intensities of the game, gaining real experience and game time rather than being stuck in and then cast aside by academy structures.

This is a competition, development, and structural issue as much, if not more than it is a talent identification issue. That being said it was also recognized that there are major issues in how talent is defined, judged, objectively measured, and nurtured within the state parochial structure.

Imperative to this is the re-ignition of the community club structure as a key pillar for development and performance. More top players need to be made available to play for their local clubs if not selected or not playing in Super Rugby teams. We need to see the next David Campese of the world playing at Randwick. The John Eales and Rod McCalls playing together at Brothers, attracting and developing the next generation.

Competitions like NSW Suburban rugby need to be streamlined as feeders into more performance-focused Shute Shield teams that have perhaps only one senior 45 player squad and a Colts as opposed to 4+ teams. This streamlines and increases the quality and availability of resources down the entire pyramid instead of the disjointed structure that exists today.

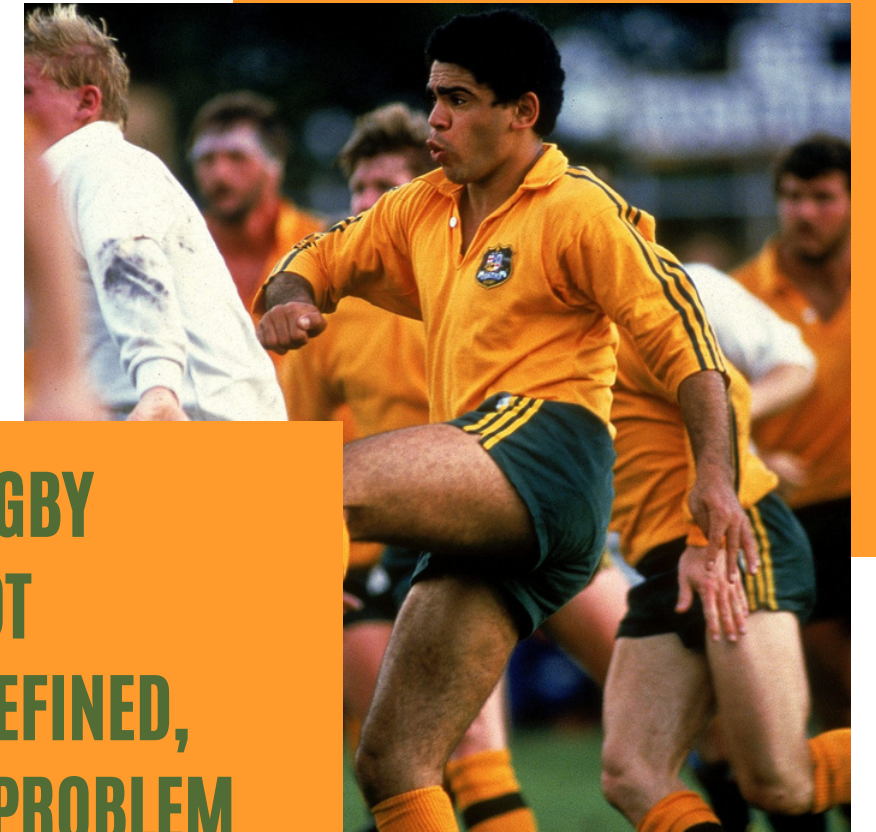
THERE SEEMS TO BE A SYSTEMIC ISSUE AND ATTITUDE IN AUSTRALIAN RUGBY THAT IF YOU'RE NOT IN AN ACADEMY YOU'RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

THE AUSTRALIAN WAY OF PLAYING

Tying both the coaching and player aspects of Rugby development in Australia together is the so-called “Australian way of playing”. As a group, it was agreed that Australia’s rugby identity, cannot currently be defined, which poses a significant problem for streamlining player and coaching development programs.

For an identity, there needs to be a defined way of playing, an ethos that reflects the values of the country, people, and game that we are as an Australian rugby public. This does not mean telling every coach how they must play the game but rather that at the pinnacle, the Wallabies, it's clear that if you ever get the chance to wear that jersey, no matter who the coach is, this is the style of game they are going to play and the ethos under which they do it. People as fans and players need to know they are going to see and experience resilience, toughness, skill, speed, and running rugby.

Whatever those values and pillars are, they need to be evident and communicated at the highest level with resources that enable it, and make it accessible and available for coaches and players to embed at every level of the game. Players, coaches, and clubs don't need to be told how to play, but they must understand that by playing a certain way, they have a better chance of getting more players into the upper echelons of the sport in Australia which is a privilege and an honour. This in turn drives broader engagement, deeper followings, and a sense of connection within rugby communities at large.



**AUSTRALIA'S RUGBY
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In times gone by, international coaches used to come to Australia to get coached and learn the Australian way of playing winning attractive rugby. The game in Australia has lost that. At the highest level, this is because in the past we had a board that managed for the game, now we have a Rugby Australia board that manages for the business. Instead of investing in grassroots, community, and entrenched programs and processes, we rely on the appointment of a new international coach to fix everything. The disconnect is obvious.

This results in a lack of continuity. Coaches aren't being coached and players aren't being properly developed, exposed, or recognised which means we don't have a style. "We don't have a board that directs a vision around what Australian rugby should be. We just hope that the next coach is going to save everything and then the dollars will come back in and then we can all be happy again."

"The importance of having clear, defined pathways where people that want to, and have the grit, to get to the top, can do so with a clear route mapped out for them cannot be overstated. Whether you're a coach, a 7s player, a 15s player or a referee, who we have neglected to talk about but are equally important, that pathway must be there. Without it, there is no rugby which unfortunately seems to be the path we are careering toward in Australia."

OUTCOMES NOT INPUTS

At this point, it became evident that most of this conversation and the recognition of the problems that abound in Australian rugby are focused on the outcomes rather than addressing the inputs that result in them.

When the system is broken, coaches appear to be poorer than they actually are. "So when we used to win, we used to look like we had good coaches. Therefore the world went and got our coaches and took them overseas. And now we don't win. We don't think we've got any good coaches. Whereas statistically, a coach's ability to influence the performance of a team is only about 3% above their existing capacity."

Ultimately success comes down to teams having cohesion and a high level of understanding between component parts of the team. In other words how many games they have played together.

When teams have low cohesion it is perceived as a lack of toughness, mongrel, attitude, and thus identity, because how they are going to play is unpredictable. The reality is these are the outcomes of poorly constructed teams from a broken system. Because this is not well understood the reaction is to change the coach at the top, bring in psychologists, and spend millions of dollars "fixing" things that in reality are outcomes, not the inputs or the root cause.

Ultimately the Australian rugby ecosystem, when it comes to formats of the game, player and coaching pathways, and a way of playing, is leaking enormous amounts of value at every point. The strategy to fixing it lies in getting more people, playing more rugby together for longer throughout the pyramid with better coaches and looking after core development nurseries.

A COACH'S ABILITY TO INFLUENCE THE PERFORMANCE OF A TEAM IS ONLY ABOUT 3% ABOVE THEIR EXISTING CAPACITY

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



This requires strong, stable, well funded, and supported rugby environments, grassroots communities, and clubs with fans and members who want to watch, follow, and support their players who excel and succeed. A broader base that feeds a stronger system of more, better prepared, familiar players into fewer elite-level teams. Australian rugby needs deep, strong local competitions that streamline talent and drive cohesion up the ranks, not the sudden stacking of new provinces on top of zero infrastructure with millions of dollars to spend on training grounds.

A key enabler to this, aside from a structural response, is data collection and analysis that enables the recognition of player relationships and cohesion at all levels. There is an opportunity for technology to help drive the efficiency and effectiveness of a new structure that puts player development back at the centre of focus. From tracking technologies becoming increasingly more accessible, useable, and useful for non-professional clubs and individual players to movements towards decentralised systems where athletes are tokenized and have full ownership of their entire performance data history, there is an opportunity for Australian rugby to reorganise, modernise and leapfrog other unions in the next decade with a future-forward and technology-based approach that is focused on creating quality inputs.

1. PATHWAYS MUST INCLUDE COACHES, PLAYERS & REFEREES

2. BUILD PARTICIPATION WITH ALTERNATE FORMATS FOR MEN & WOMEN

3. FOCUS ON ADDRESSING THE INPUTS NOT THE OUTCOMES

3. REINVIGORATE FAN ENGAGEMENT

When it comes to re-invigorating fan engagement it was previously recognised that giving local rugby clubs a greater sense of identity to live up to and pride in following their local players' development and success, drives broader engagement, deeper followings, and a sense of connection within rugby communities at large.

The pride shown by fans of European clubs and other rival international teams is not reflected by Australian crowds. From the stream of fans wearing green jerseys, beanies, and scarves in Galway making their way to Connacht's stadium on match day, to Bok Fridays where millions of people wear their Springbok jersey the day before a test and the famous "Blackouts" in New Zealand, the activation and engagement of Australian rugby fans and broad based pride in the jersey leave a lot to be desired.

"THE TOP OF THE GAME IS TRYING TO PUSH THE WALLABIES DOWN, WHEREAS THE BOTTOM OF THE GAME REALLY JUST WANTS TO CONNECT AT A LOCAL LEVEL FOR THE VALUES THAT RUGBY LIVES BY AND OFFERS"

It is through neglect and the loss of identity for fans to resonate with that this has happened. This in turn impacts the game's ability to attract sponsors and drive the commercial goals. The neglect of the grassroots, the lack of an efficient and effective development system, and the resulting impact on results at the highest level have had a huge effect on the morale of the Australian rugby public, their engagement, and thus revenue generating potential. Core fans tentatively remain but many have become disillusioned or been lost all together to more dominant and organised sports with well executed engagement and community strategies.

All of these themes point to, and circle, the importance of community. Nothing could be more important at this time than a focus on winning the hearts and minds of Australian rugby fans to reinvigorate the core, re-engage the fringe, and invite the lost and new to join. The task initially is to give them a sense of hope and provide a deeper feeling of connection to the elite players, their teams, and clubs. The game needs performance success, more superstars, and fans with more access. Commercially the game needs to make people want to go to games, get together in the pub, have a BBQ, and wear the colours of their teams as an outward symbol of support.

Breaking this down means the sport needs to refocus on defining its target fan groups and developing relevant experiences, products, services, and touchpoints that attract, build, engage, and connect a robust and sustainable community of rugby fans.

The consensus was that this again needs to be a bottom up approach. From taking inspiration from countries like South Africa, England and New Zealand, who consistently create a reason for fans to engage and buy merchandise to enabling, empowering and building a schools rugby system that highlights burgeoning talents and commercializes the cult followings they have through alumni and grassroots rivalries. Initiatives like this, paired with a strengthened ability to analyse and understand audiences and their behaviour via first party data to identify and build the number of core fans who generate the vast majority of revenue, is a transformation Australian rugby must go through immediately.

There are challenges to this that face all sports, especially in terms of reaching and serving younger generations, but rugby having atrophied over the past decades in Australia must double down on this. Younger generations are perceived as being a challenge because of shortening attention spans, a proliferation of choice, a decrease in physical activity, a preference for “bite size” content and a leaning towards following players and teams, however, all is not as it seems.

Recent reports and numbers suggest that these preferences are more akin to symptoms of neglect than desire-driven trends. Which brings us back to the theme of outcomes vs. inputs. Sport in general and rugby in particular has held on to the ageing model of pay TV, limited player access and traditional exposure based sponsorship which aligns with the habits, needs and economics of older generations and the status quo. The behaviour patterns, when it comes to the consumption of long form sport, are an outcome of the fact that younger people either can't afford where long form sport is being broadcast or they are simply not consuming media in those channels. Younger generations do consume long form content, a lot of it, but sport is simply either not accessible or packaged in a way that is appealing to them.

This paired with rugby's seemingly global inability to shower the stars of the game in the limelight in an engaging manner, leaves the sport in a precarious position as core fan bases age.

Younger generations are dominated by self expression, self control of their data, and a one-to-one relationship. There is a generation of fans, creators, and players about to come through who, commercially, are more eager and understand that they also should have more control over their individual branding and content.

Rugby Australia must capitalise on this via the emerging capabilities enabled by web3 technologies, IoT, and the growing trend towards affinity focused vertical networks, to enable players and creators to connect and engage with younger fans in more meaningful and relevant ways that open new revenue streams, business models and innovation opportunities. This requires a refocus on the players' ownership of IP, Data and image rights, and collaborating to create a more equitable ecosystem of commercial value and revenues.

THERE SEEMS TO BE A SYSTEMIC ISSUE AND ATTITUDE IN AUSTRALIAN RUGBY THAT IF YOU'RE NOT IN AN ACADEMY YOU'RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH

PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW WHO THE WALLABIES, WARATAHS, REDS AND BRUMBIES ARE

People need to know who the Wallabies, Waratahs, Reds, and Brumbies are as people, and they need to have the opportunity to understand and engage with what makes them tick. Fans need to be brought closer to the action and players need to be brought closer to rugby communities. This is how heroes that inspire generations are created, and given the technology available there has never been a better or easier time to do it. Rugby has a lot of catching up to do.

Taking a leaf out of the NFL's book, who as mentioned earlier are on the attack in Australia, rugby needs to innovate, streamline, consolidate, update, and renew its approach to creating a digital ecosystem. The NFL, and American sports in general, have built ecosystems that funnel fans off social media onto their owned and operated platforms to regain and retain their direct interface to fans on a global scale. For Rugby Australia to be commercially successful they must follow this lead and give fans of all ages the flexibility to engage with the sport, teams, and players in a manner that is relevant and of value to them. All with a primary focus on strengthening the sense of connection and belonging they feel to the game, its teams, and the players, not just making money. To circle back on a theme, money is the outcome, not the input.



KEY

RECOMMENDATIONS



Owning this interface and focusing on a sense of connection and belonging backed by a holistic grassroots to elite level system of development and performance is a winning formula that is not rocket science but requires a total mindset shift in the upper echelons of Australian rugby and its governance structure.

Ultimately rugby's identity in Australia needs to be redefined, rebuilt, and communicated based on a more modern model of digital engagement and commercialisation. A commercial system built for the age decentralisation, tokenization, and virtualized value, with a focus on engaging younger generations, first party data sets, and match day experiences that go beyond the stadium, to increase interest and engagement, develop new business models, and open new streams of revenue.

1. REBUILD IDENTITY & PRIDE IN THE JERSEY

2. MAKE THE PLAYERS THE SUPER STARS

3. OWN THE DIGITAL INTERFACE TO THE CORE FANS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE

What is abundantly clear from the dissection of think tank session is that if Australian Rugby is to change as rapidly as it needs to, it requires a Governance model that can support the design, development, and implementation of a technology enabled business model that empowers all ecosystem players and rebuilds the foundations of the sport from key principles that are fit for the 21st century.

The non-executive board, whose primary responsibility as an external and independent body is to represent the interests of stakeholders while challenging, inspiring, motivating, and supporting the executive team, owes a duty to the legion of fans who have become disenchanted with the game, to demonstrate they are serious about revolutionary and innovative change.

With this in mind, the existing Board should:

- Conduct an independent review of the current governance structure to identify weaknesses, inefficiencies, and areas for improvement.
- Engage external experts with experience in sports governance (grassroots, development pathways, fan engagement & commercialisation) and future forward technologies to provide objective insights and build viable, effective, holistic, future-proof strategies.
- Ensure diverse representation in the governance structure, including players, coaches, administrators, sponsors, and fans.
- Establish advisory committees to gather input from different stakeholders, fostering a collaborative decision-making process.
- Include individuals with a strong background in business, finance, innovation, technology and sports management on the board to provide strategic guidance.
- Implement a skills-based recruitment process for board members to ensure a well-rounded set of expertise.
- Enhance transparency by regularly communicating with stakeholders about the organisation's financial health, strategic plans, and key decisions.
- Establish clear performance metrics for the board and executive team, linking them to key organisational objectives.



THE NON-EXECUTIVE BOARD OWES A DUTY TO THE LEGION OF FANS WHO HAVE BECOME DISENCHANTED WITH THE GAME, TO DEMONSTRATE THEY ARE SERIOUS ABOUT CHANGE.

- Implement term limits for board members to bring in fresh perspectives and prevent stagnation.
- Introduce a rotation system to ensure a steady influx of new ideas and experiences within the governing body.
- Strengthen risk management processes to identify potential threats and develop mitigation strategies.
- Ensure strict compliance with legal and ethical standards, promoting a culture of integrity and responsibility.
- Foster a culture of inclusive decision-making by actively seeking input from all board members and stakeholders.
- Implement mechanisms for open and constructive debate to encourage diverse viewpoints.
- Invest in leadership development programs for board members, staff, and key stakeholders to enhance their skills and knowledge in sports governance.
- Promote ongoing education and training to keep the governance team abreast of industry trends and best practices.
- Incorporate fan representation or feedback mechanisms to ensure that the interests and opinions of the rugby community are deeply considered in decision-making.
- Tie board and executive remuneration to key performance indicators (KPIs) and the overall success of Rugby Australia.
- Regularly assess and revise governance structures based on performance evaluations and evolving organisational needs.

Implementing these changes will require a phased approach and strong commitment from all stakeholders, and regular assessments and adjustments should be made to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of a new governance model. In light of such a structural change and given the current situation there are seven fundamental requirements of the Board of Rugby Australia:

Challenge: The Board should critically evaluate the executive team's proposals, strategies, and decisions. This involves asking tough questions to ensure that all aspects of a proposal have been considered. The Board plays a vital role in risk oversight. They need to challenge management on the identification, assessment, and mitigation of risks to the business that go beyond the numbers to include societal, communal, and cultural aspects of managing the sport.

Inspire and Motivate: The Board should contribute to the development of Rugby Australia's purpose and strategy. They bring diverse experiences and insights that can inspire creative thinking and innovation. The Board needs to be involved in the oversight of executive development programs, ensuring that the leadership team is equipped to meet current and future challenges.

Independent Perspective: The Board should provide an impartial and objective viewpoint. This independence is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the decision-making process. The Board will monitor the performance of the executive team and hold them accountable for their actions. They ensure that the company is being run in the best interests of stakeholders.

Strategic Oversight: The Board should contribute to the development and oversight of deliverable strategic plans. They assess whether the executive team's actions align with the overall strategic goals of the organisation.

Ethical Leadership: The Board is responsible for upholding high ethical standards within the organisation. They should challenge any unethical behaviour and promote a culture of integrity.

The Rugby Australia Board should be instrumental in providing oversight, guidance, and support to the executive team which seems to have been lacking for some time. Their diverse skills, experiences, and independent perspectives should contribute to the effective governance and success of the organisation. The Board should apply all requirements to themselves so that they can gain the trust of the executives, staff, and all stakeholders, including fans and they should be judged on their ability to do what is best for Rugby in Australia as a whole, not just what is right for individuals or selected groups.



AUSTRALIAN RUGBY THINK TANK CONCLUSION

Rugby in Australia is at a crossroads. On the one hand, there is potential for catastrophe. Rugby is under threat and pressure from other, more organised well funded sports that are taking a strategic and methodical approach to gain and retaining market share. On the other, there is a bright future ahead. A proud rugby country on the cusp of a decade full of potential as a springboard for rapid and exponential growth off the back of global tournaments like the Lions and the Men's and Women's World Cups.

Action needs to be taken in a swift and decisive manner to re-engage with fans, reignite their passion for Australian rugby and fix a broken development system and governance structure that is not currently serving the best interest of the game. There is a desperate need to create trusted bonds, collective goals, trust, and strong processes to enable the execution of initiatives against a set of clear, meaningful ambitions. A future forward, technology enabled, and fan focused strategy that unites the hundreds of thousands of rugby fans who are still desperate to see rugby succeed in Australia.

This industry seems to have forgotten that every single cent of value in sport relies on the people who follow it feeling a true connection and sense of belonging to their game, the teams, and the players through the communities they are members of. Rugby Australia has the chance to rekindle the fire in the belly of Australian rugby fans and players and rise like a phoenix to dominate the next decade and beyond. This is a chance to break the shackles of the past two decades, become a beacon for innovation, a lighthouse for rugby communities worldwide, and a powerhouse once again in a sport whose future globally is bright, but riddled with challenges and largely self imposed roadblocks.

Based on the content of the think tank discussion everything boils down to Rugby Australia asking one simple question of every single thing they do: Is this contributing to the strengthening of the sense of connection and belonging that Australians feel towards rugby? **If the answer is no, something is wrong.**



WHAT'S NEXT?

The RugbyDAO is positioned, constructed, and able to provide a diverse wealth of global and local knowledge, experience, and expertise to Rugby Australia via a specialist advisory group in helping the board and management team achieve the recommendations, structure, and outcomes laid out in this report.

The entire rugby world wants to see a healthy game in Australia. **The RugbyDAO**, as a global community of rugby fans, enthusiasts, players, coaches, referees, executives, technologists, pundits, and more, hopes you found this report insightful and that it sparks a wave of collaboration and innovation that helps to make it so.

WE ARE HERE & READY TO HELP.



THANK YOU.

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