



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

The Rugby Football Union (RFU) is the governing body for rugby union in England. The RFU has over 2,000 clubs and 3,000 schools in membership and a playing population in excess of 2.2m. Players in rugby union are supported by a network of over 50,000 volunteers, 35,000 coaches, 15,000 referees and numerous helpers.

Rugby union is played by all sections of the community and contributes in many areas to the development of individual's talent and skills through the core values of the game.

The RFU seeks to invest all of its surplus funds into the grassroots of the game to improve the quality of rugby union, its member clubs and talent of the many hundreds of thousands of young people in our sport.

The RFU is also a founder member of the International Rugby Board (iRB), which is the world governing body of rugby union.

The game of rugby union came late to the professional arena; remaining resolutely amateur until 1995. This significant change in the game has had profound consequences for the sport – particularly managing the



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

competing demands of international teams put out by national Unions and club teams usually owned and financed by private individuals. Again the introduction of professional rugby has created financial pressures resulting in unacceptable conduct in the pursuit of winning at all cost, such as evidenced in the recent Harlequins use of imitation blood to secure an advantageous player substitution.

However, despite these, hopefully one-off incidents we, as a sport were and remain determined to learn the lessons of those sports who have had many years of experience of professionalism. We wish to ensure that we have a sport that is both fit for purpose and ready to grow to the next level of participation and spectating.

It is for these reasons that I feel privileged to be invited by the European Commission DG for Education and Culture to be speaking to you today at this Conference on Licensing Systems for Club Competitions.

We firmly endorse the view that Sport enhances social cohesion in a way that no other activity can match; that Community-level sport needs to be encouraged and supported by both the European Union and national governments. Sport is a powerful force for social good with a



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

wide range of benefits for society and health, it is unlike any other sector and needs to be treated differently in European Union law;

In particular "Participation in a team, principles such as fair-play, compliance with the rules of the game, respect for others, solidarity and discipline as well as the organisation of amateur sport based on non-profit clubs and volunteering reinforce active citizenship. Volunteering in sports organisations provides many occasions for non-formal education which need to be recognised and enhanced. Sport also provides attractive possibilities for young people's engagement and involvement in society and may have a beneficial effect in helping people steer away from delinquency."

Turning specifically to team sports like rugby the white paper says, "There are, however, new trends in the way people, particularly the young, practice sport. There is a growing tendency to practice sport individually, rather than collectively and in an organised structure, which is resulting in a declining volunteer base for amateur sport clubs."



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

Social cohesion – or the lack of it – is one of the most important political themes across Europe and is emerging in a wide range of policy initiatives.

This at first may seem to be a strange way to address the issues of licensing systems; However it is within the context of these issues that we have evolved the governance structures for professional rugby clubs playing in England.

I feel at this point it would be useful to remind you that most sports other than football operate on a completely different financial model. Certainly in rugby we rely wholly on the financial and on field success of our international game to fund both the professional and most importantly our community game. The professional game is not financially sustainable in its own right.

Consequently, it has always been our aim to ensure that the professional game is fully connected to the community game through playing and coaching programmes, spectatating and governance.



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

The basic premise of our relationship with the professional clubs is to make the national team the number one team in the world and the domestic professional league the number one domestic competition in the world. To achieve this we aim to have a long term, stable relationship with our professional clubs that provides the foundations for the dual success of the national team and the clubs themselves.

Such a relationship also has to be wide ranging and challenging to both parties with appropriate governance structures in place that enable co-operation where necessary and regulation when appropriate.

We see this relationship as being more than 'just licensing' as this brings together the key stakeholders to address a wide range of issues that affect the professional clubs, the players and those who aspire to play for them.

I would like to give you an insight into a few of the issues that we faced in developing the framework for the professional clubs and some of the answers we found to them.



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

The season structure has been an area of conflict between the club game and the international game because of the competing demands for players in a physical contact sport; along with providing sufficient, regular matches to drive financial sustainability for the clubs themselves.

To achieve a solution to this we identified the priorities within the season of the international game, European cup rugby and the domestic league. We have established a five year rolling season structure to account for the impact of the Rugby World Cup every four years. We have split the season into 'blocks' where the 'first call' on the players alternates between the national side and their club; and importantly for an every increasing impact sport including a mandatory rest period of eleven weeks for all players between seasons.

To enable this to work we have identified elite player squads for the national senior team, the A Team (the Saxons) and the U20's team. These are announced to our clubs in July, well before the season commences in September and we can only change the squad (subject to injury) in the following January. These players are also limited to a maximum of thirty two matches per season.



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

As you can see we have taken into consideration the effects of the modern game on player welfare and taken steps to minimise the long term effect on the players. Further we have also agreed a medical protocol that aims to ensure that the players in these squads are in optimal physical condition at all times. To achieve this we have established a single medical information system which is used by England and the professional Clubs with the overall responsibility for the medical management framework resting with the RFU as the Governing Body. This enables the medical teams of the national sides to monitor player fitness, injury and recovery for all members of the squad on a daily basis and is used to determine if a player is fit to play for club or country. This system is also used to determine the most optimal timing for when elective surgery can occur.

As a sport we also want to develop our understanding of injury risk management measures, what are the best diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation techniques. In doing so we also want to understand the long-term health consequences of professional rugby and what effect the coaching and refereeing practices have on both injury risk management and player burn out. This process is overseen by a 'Professional Game Board' of which more later.



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

Vitally important to the success of the national team is the development pathway to that team. This is underpinned by the structure for the A team and the U20 team to ensure continuity of provision of skilled and developed players capable of aspiring to selection for the senior national team.

We also financially support and regulate the club youth academies through an Academy Service Agreement between the RFU and the youth players club which covers individual player development programmes, including player screening, skills and training camps and match programmes, international competitions and tours. We also aim to provide for life after the playing career with the introduction of an Apprenticeship programme for young players which addresses their wider educational and social needs.

To encourage the number of England qualified home grown players we have developed an England Qualified Player compensation scheme, which is EU compliant! This does not disadvantage a club for not playing a home grown player but seeks to compensate them financially for fielding more home grown players; we hope this innovative approach



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

will ensure a steady stream of professional players qualified to play for England.

In order to support this ambition we have also established tri-partite contracts between the RFU, the Player and the Players club so there is complete clarity on the roles and responsibilities of each of the actors. This has been undertaken in consultation with the Professional Rugby Players Association.

This has meant that the clubs have had to undergo a significant change in their approach as indeed we have as the Governing Body. One the consequences of this shift has been the establishment of an agreed set of priorities, the first of which is the welfare of the player. Thereafter it may surprise you when I say that the next agreed priority is the success of the national team through a predetermined development and playing program; finally there is the protection and development of the domestic professional league for all of its stakeholders - clubs, players/coaches, supporters and partners. We have approved contracts, clear season definition, a better season structure, agreed medical protocols and commercial rights protected.



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

To achieve this unprecedented level of agreement we have also had to make a series of concessions to the clubs which limit the number of international and A Team matches that we can stage in any one season and how we deal with the British and Irish Lions Touring side on a four yearly cycle.

Further, our clubs have one of the two Directorships on the European Rugby Board – a competition which is jointly owned by the 6 National Rugby Governing Bodies, that we will only nominate the professional clubs to play in Europe and probably most importantly that the clubs will receive 100% of all income derived from the European Cup competition.

Governance of the game remains fully with the RFU and the International Rugby Board, a principle to which the clubs have bound themselves to. The Clubs own association have an agreed set of Terms of Reference with the RFU and representation on the RFU.

To oversee the day to day aspects of the governance of the professional game we have established a Professional Game Board which comprises representatives from the clubs association, the RFU and the Players Association. The RFU retains a golden vote on all issues except for



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

changing the agreement with the our clubs, the season structure and commitments to player welfare.

As I hope that I have made clear over the last ten minutes we believe that the sport of rugby union is well prepared for the many challenges that will face us; whilst we are fully aware of the concerns over control and operation of professional football clubs we would ask that the Commission proceeds with caution in its proposals. There are many different models of good practice within sport and I am sure that my colleagues from Basketball and Handball will give demonstrations of the differences; that we would reiterate that a 'one size fits all' approach will not work and has the potential to damage, possibly through unintended consequences many of the unique characteristics of our many varied sports and that we would urge the principle of subsidiarity to remain at the forefront of your thinking on this matter.

Many thanks



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION