

Rugby Football: Fascinating Sport, Exceptional History and Developments, Immense Potential for Research

There were 70 days, 10 hours, 24 minutes, and 15 seconds to go when I started work on this editorial. The clock ticking until the IRB Rugby World Cup 2015 starts will be down to about 18 days when this issue of *IJSP* dedicated to rugby football will be available.¹

Rugby football is played worldwide and looks back on a history of almost 2 centuries. The roots of the game are in the geographic center of England, in the County of Warwickshire, near the river Avon at a school named for its hometown, Rugby. In the early game of football, as played at Rugby School, the number of players was unlimited. Handling the ball was permitted; however, running toward the opposition's goal with the ball in hands was not allowed. Sometime between 1820 and 1830 a rule permitting the latter was introduced. The legend is that when at risk of losing a football match, a student, William Web Ellis, grabbed the ball with his hands and dropped it in terms of scoring a goal.² Although this story may generate some doubt, the "Web Ellis Cup" is rugby union's most prestigious trophy. It will be taken home by the winner of the upcoming IRB Rugby World Cup 2015.

In 1871 the Rugby Football Union (RFU) was founded to standardize the rules of rugby football.² In the same year, the first official international match between Scotland and England was played at Edinburgh.³ The International Rugby Football Board (IRFB) was founded by 1886 and renamed the International Rugby Board (IRB) in 1998. There had been several proposals to the IRFB for a world-cup style tournament before. However, it took until 1985 before sufficient consensus between the IRFB members was achieved under the condition that countries from outside the IRFB would also be invited to participate. In 1987, the first Rugby Union World Cup was held in Australia and New Zealand and has been held every 4 years since then.⁴

A total of 102 nations are listed in the world rugby rankings.⁵ The 20 teams in the pool of the IRB Rugby World Cup 2015 represent 6 of 7 continents; only Antarctica is missing.¹ Both observations clearly indicate that rugby union is a global sport. Nevertheless, the strength in rugby union seems to be geographically condensed, as all finals of the 7 tournaments have been played by only 5 countries—Australia (3 times), England (3 times), France (3 times), New Zealand (3 times), and South Africa (twice)—with 4 of them representing the winning teams: Australia (twice), England (once), New Zealand (twice), and South Africa (twice).

However, rugby union is far from being the only way of playing the game. As early as 1885, a fraction of the RFU broke away. The RFU strongly enforced the amateur status of players, which was a problem for the northern teams staying competitive as they recruited more working-class players. Thus, the main cause of the split-off was a dispute about payments to players. The breakoff teams, reorganized as the Northern Rugby Football Union (NRFU), introduced professionalism by 1898.⁶ While initially playing the game under more or less the same rules, in 1906 the NRFU reduced the number of players from 15 to 13 a side and introduced an orderly

play-the-ball instead of the ruck formation after a tackle.⁶ The name *rugby league* seems to have its roots in Australia, where the New South Wales Rugby Football League was founded in 1907.⁷ In 1922 the NRFU changed its name to Rugby Football League.⁸

With its first world cup in 1954, rugby league was far ahead of the schedule of rugby union. Benefitting from its amateur status, rugby union was on the Olympic program in 1900, 1908, 1920, and 1924.⁹ The Olympic featuring of rugby started again with wheelchair rugby at the Paralympics in 2000 and will be extended at Rio de Janeiro with rugby sevens in 2016. The latter shows that today's rugby not only has an outstanding wealth of history but also has developed successfully into multiple global sports events organized by different governing bodies. This code of football comprises the classics rugby union and rugby league, complemented by new developments such as wheelchair rugby, rugby sevens, rugby nines, beach rugby, touch rugby, Oz tag, and even underwater rugby.

This issue of the *IJSP* features 20 recently accepted papers thematically linked with rugby football. It reflects the variety of current research on different types of rugby football, with special respect to players' anthropometry and physical characteristics, match activity profiles, specific aspects of training, and testing equipment. On behalf of the editorial team, I hope you all enjoy this issue and the upcoming IRB Rugby World Cup 2015, which collectively should enhance the scientific interest in the fascinating field of classical and more recently developed types of rugby football.

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References

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