

GROWING THE GRASSROOTS

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Rugby union has grown to become the country's second most popular team sport, still trailing behind football but now ahead of cricket

STRENGTH OF THE UNION

The number of people regularly playing rugby has fluctuated over the past decade – but legacy plans for the World Cup could see that change to continual growth

It's an exciting year for English rugby. The Rugby World Cup in September/October will focus the public's gaze on the sport and bring thousands of overseas rugby fans to the UK. The 13 venues that will host the World Cup have been spread across 10 cities, meaning that the positive effects of hosting the event will be felt in every corner of the country. The tournament will also be used to promote the game and it is hoped the heightened exposure will bring more players to the sport at community and club level. The national governing body, Rugby Football Union (RFU), is certainly taking no chances. It's been preparing ways to create a legacy from the 42-day tournament since 2012, when it published its wide-ranging Lead Up & Legacy document. The publication outlines detailed plans and tangible targets for participation, coaching, volunteers, facilities and outreach programmes. Steve Grainger, RFU's rugby development director, says: "It's important we seize the opportunity that hosting the

World Cup brings. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity to build a future for our sport. "We set out our Lead Up & Legacy strategy in October 2012, with a number of priority areas in which to invest efforts and resources. They aim to ensure that new people are brought into the game, those that have left it are inspired to return and those involved enjoy the best possible experience of rugby. "In the past two and a half years a great deal of work has been done and significant investment made in both time and resources across the priority areas. "The next 12 months will see a surge of interest which will rejuvenate a sport which brings much more to those involved than matches and results."

GROWING PARTICIPATION

There are currently 178,800 regular rugby players (aged 16+) who play every week. According to the Active People Survey (APS) – Sport England's annual measure of participation – the figure has fluctuated in recent years. While the current number of

regular players is lower than the first APS figure of 185,600 in 2006, it is higher than the 159,900 players in 2013. This suggests that rugby as a sport has lost some of its players since the early 2000s, but is increasing in popularity again. What's encouraging for the RFU is the steady increase in the number of young people taking up the sport. In the 16 to 25-year-old age group, the number of active players has increased steadily and is now 123,000 – up from 111,000 in 2013. The RFU sees the growing of grassroots at vital and has invested heavily in improving opportunities for people to play the sport. In 2012 it made a pledge to invest £26m in grassroots rugby, with the aim of capitalising on the 2015 World Cup. The £26m has been divided among improving facilities and recruiting people – referees and coaches – as well as setting up a range of campaigns to get more people playing rugby. Targeting young players has been a priority for RFU and it launched the All Schools programme to increase the number



There has been a healthy increase in the number of youngsters regularly playing rugby in England over the past 10 years

of schools offering rugby. As part of the campaign, more than 1m young people were offered opportunities to play, with the sport being introduced to 400 non-rugby playing secondary schools between 2012 and 2015. RFU has also created a range of partnerships with commercial operators and other non-rugby entities, which have played a significant role in spreading rugby to communities. One of these has been a campaign to introduce touch rugby – a "softer" form of the game in which players do not tackle each other in a physical way – in partnership with mobile communications giant O2. Since 2012, RFU has set up more than 200 club- and 100 university-based O2 Touch Centres, which offer a range of pitch up and play activities and organised competitions.

HISTORY OF RUGBY UNION

The two codes of rugby – rugby league and union – were born out of a disagreement in the 1890s over whether players should be paid for missing work to play rugby. The clubs in favour of giving workers full compensation for wages lost due to missing work for match commitments, all in the north of England, formed the Northern Rugby Football Union (NRFU) in 1895. The move eventually led to the NRFU clubs severing their ties with the London-based Rugby Football Union (RFU), which was determined to run rugby as an amateur sport.

FACILITIES

For players and members to enjoy a quality experience and stay involved with rugby, clubs need modern facilities that appeal to those in the communities around them. RFU has been helping clubs to create better facilities, pledging an investment of £10m from 2013 to 2017 to provide modern day environments. This follows on from the setting up of the Rugby Football Foundation (RFF) in 2003. In the past decade, RFF has invested £16.7m in developing community rugby clubs. More than 240 projects have received interest-free loans worth in excess of £15.6m while around 1,000 Groundmatch grants have been made with a value of more than £5m. In all, the awards have stimulated investment in

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The NatWest RugbyForce – involving England stars such as James Haskell (right and below) – is one of RFU's leading partnership initiatives



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► projects with a total value of nearly £60m. Grassroots projects receiving funding from RFF include playing surfaces, drainage and pitch improvement projects, artificial pitches and floodlights and changing facilities. There have also been grants for rugby clubs' social spaces – seen as an important part of creating friendly, community-friendly spaces in which the sport can be played and enjoyed. With one eye on the World Cup, the aim has been to improve clubs' entrances and common and bar areas, making club houses and spaces more appealing as new players and supporters are attracted in the lead up to the big event. Lefroy Angel, chair of RFF's board of trustees, says: "The Foundation has helped

change the landscape of the game in England over the past 12 years. Our clubs are ambitious to keep developing and by improving facilities and playing surfaces they make it possible for more people of all ages to enjoy rugby. Every grant or loan – no matter what the size – makes a meaningful difference to them." The importance of having fit-for-purpose spaces in which to play rugby is highlighted by John Spencer, former England and British & Irish Lions player – and an RFU representative on the International Rugby Board. "Without modern facilities we won't continue to attract and keep young players," Spencer says. "When I began playing at 15, my club pitches were like rough pastures and the

clubhouse was a pub where we changed. "Luckily, pitches, facilities and the social scene are all unrecognisable from the early days and the game is expanding and will continue to thrive. Only by improving clubs' facilities for playing – and those in which to socialise – will we keep them at the heart of the community." As with participation campaigns, the RFU has recruited sponsors and commercial partners to help with facilities funding – through initiatives such as the NatWest RugbyForce challenge. Last year (2014), just under 500 clubs, with more than 14,500 volunteers, including 19 local MPs, took up the challenge to improve environments at their local clubs – ranging from cleaning, painting and decorating



RFU's All Schools programme has resulted in 400 schools adding rugby to their curriculum

to laying patios and even building flood defences. Project planning workshops saw 170 clubs refining their plans and support grants of £250 to £2,500 were offered to more than 300 clubs. This season NatWest RugbyForce will see a new and improved programme of free workshops nationwide, the chance of receiving financial support and World Cup-branded "Get Behind England" packs with goodies to transform clubhouses. In addition to the 340 club projects, 75 social space projects have been awarded funding – with another 150 more to come.

WORLD CUP

Utilising the World Cup and the interest it will create remains a priority for the RFU – and there's a precedent that it would be happy to replicate. After England's World Cup triumph in 2003 there was a huge increase in children playing at grassroots level. The numbers of kids playing aged seven to 12 rose by 28 per cent over the three years after the tournament in Australia, while among teenagers (aged 13-18) there was a 16 per cent increase. That was set against a 3 per cent increase in the number of adults playing rugby. RFU Chief Executive Ian Ritchie says: "It is an exciting time for the entire game in England, from the U18s playing in grassroots clubs to Stuart Lancaster's England squad running out at Twickenham and the fans tweeting messages of support."

No room for complacency should exist, however, as there's another, more recent yardstick that the RFU would do well to study. The Rugby League World Cup was held in England in 2013 and while the event itself was hailed as a success – credited with raising the profile of "the other rugby" – the number of people playing rugby league has suffered a fall since the tournament.

The RFU has initiated a number of World Cup-specific participation programmes. One of them will aim to increase the number of coaches – and in particular those who can coach at under-13 level and above. Following the 2003 World Cup win, the 7-13 age group saw big increases in participation but as players became older they were harder to keep the sport. An interactive website, created by the RFU in partnership with the youth Sport Trust and England Rugby, has also been launched to create interest and to encourage young players to find a club. The All Schools programme, which has HRH Prince Harry as its patron, has already proved successful with young players of both sexes embracing rugby. According to RFU, teachers and coaches have been impressed by the way rugby's core values – teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline and sportsmanship – have made an impact both on the pitch and in school life. Who knows what the effect will be if England win the World Cup. ●

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